



Minimal Deterrence Makes Minimal Sense (And Here's Why)

By Mark Stout

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The nuclear and defense communities continue to wait for the release of a new and several-times-delayed Nuclear Posture Review as well as the follow-on to the START treaty which expired in December 2009 (but has been agreed to in principle by U.S. and Russian negotiators). While we are all cheered by the fact nuclear war has not broken out between Russia and the U.S. despite START's expiration--a very good, yet not at all unexpected, thing--this is perhaps an opportune time to re-examine the nuclear-weapons concept of "minimal deterrence."

Minimal deterrence, as well-described in the 2009 paper *From Counterforce to Minimal Deterrence: A New Nuclear Policy on the Path Toward Eliminating Nuclear Weapons* makes the sole mission and purpose of nuclear weapons to respond in kind following a nuclear attack (p.2). However, embracing minimal nuclear deterrence, as defined above, makes little sense. In fact, as a concept minimal deterrence is about as desirable as minimal life, minimal liberty, and the pursuit of minimal happiness.

Most clearly stated, minimal deterrence is coded academic and arms control industry language for huge, and if needed, unilateral cuts to existing U.S. nuclear deterrent forces. As the paper's title suggests, the concept *presumes* minimal deterrence (that is huge U.S. cuts) will be the first step in getting other nations to follow-the-disarming-leader as we move towards a world without nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, the concept of minimal deterrence lacks both explanatory power and credibility.

It first lacks explanatory power because it is self-evident that *preventing* war (and not just nuclear war) is superior to *responding to* a nuclear attack. Preventing war may in fact be accomplished through the ability to hold a set of adversary targets at risk so as to prevent (that is, deter) the adversary from taking action against us. As scholars Keir Lieber and Daryl Press have pointed out, adversaries facing defeat on the conventional battlefield will have powerful incentives to use their nuclear forces coercively. This is, in fact, just what NATO planned to do (if it came to that) against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. While we don't know exactly why the Soviets never attacked Western Europe--although Google is probably working on the algorithms--it does seem possible that the USSR might have been given pause at the thought of a few hundred NATO nuclear-capable aircraft, Pershing IIs, and cruise missiles wreaking havoc on the Soviet landmass.

Next, minimal deterrence lacks credibility in that it implies deterrence can be accurately measured and that it is unchanging once established at a "minimal" level. In reality, true

deterrence is dynamic and “minimal” today might mean “doesn’t deter” tomorrow. This is seen in the actions of the poster-nation for minimal deterrence, China, who is actually significantly increasing and modernizing both its nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities. Obviously Chinese national-level leadership has chosen to upwardly revise the “minimum” part of minimum deterrence, a strategy that must be assumed to be in support of Chinese goals and objectives. However, the minimal deterrence community blames the U.S. for “Chinese fears,” ignoring the fact no new U.S. nuclear systems have been brought on line since about the time *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* came to theaters. It also fails to account for the fact large numbers of U.S. nuclear weapons and delivery systems have in fact been deactivated. Certainly the modernization efforts seen in China, Russia, France, and the United Kingdom provide an argument for and evidence of the dynamic nature of deterrence.

Beyond explanatory power and credibility shortfalls, minimal deterrence ignores the fungible basic nature of deterrence. Deterrence is cumulative in that an adversary must consider the total impact of offensive (conventional and nuclear) and defensive capabilities, bound together by command and control, and enabled by intelligence. In a like manner, friends and allies who choose to align themselves under a U.S. “deterrence umbrella” will consider the totality of U.S. deterrence and not just the nuclear aspect.

Deterring nuclear attacks, while essential, is still subordinate to the overall importance of national security. The value seen across many U.S. presidential administrations regarding the U.S. nuclear weapons and delivery vehicle inventory is that these capabilities fundamentally provide ways to *sustain or enhance our national security*. So yes, while nuclear weapons systems are in place largely *to not be used*, that certainly beats their existence as mere retaliatory tools to strike an adversary once we’ve been turned into radioactive dust.

Unfortunately, minimal deterrence ignores the fact other nations have their own decision calculus which may not only be misaligned with our goals, but in fact, may be totally contrary. Arguably, the biggest problem with minimal deterrence is that its advocates make out the world as they want it to be and not as it really is. While the minimal deterist would likely argue they think the world will be more secure without nuclear weapons, the fact no world wars have occurred since their creation suggests--although it cannot be proven--otherwise. At the end of the day, we sometimes have to accept that sometimes things happen for reasons we cannot fully explain.

Still, if we can have weapons or systems that will sustain or enhance national security better than nuclear weapons, we should pursue them: there is nothing sacrosanct about a nuclear system especially if another capability can 1) neutralize it, or 2) do the job better. To paraphrase one former U.S. president, the U.S. and the USSR didn’t distrust each other because the other had nuclear weapons; instead, we had nuclear weapons because we didn’t trust one another. I will offer two pieces of professional security advice related to the general topic of deterrence: first, don’t bring a knife to a gun fight. Next, don’t bring a daisy-cutter to a nuclear war.

Mark Stout is a researcher and analyst at Air University. Mr. Stout sometimes posts at the blog [Songs of Space and Nuclear War](#). The opinions expressed here are those of the author

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