

Was nuclear strategy
an attempt to
rationalise the
irrational



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The thesis I really want to put across is best summarized by the words of former US secretary of defence Robert McNamara, recalling the Cuban Missile Crisis: “ I want to say, and this is important: at the end we lucked out! It was luck that prevented nuclear war. We came that close to nuclear war at the end. Rational individuals: Kennedy was rational; Khrushchev was rational; Castro was rational. Rational individuals came that close to the total destruction of their societies.

And that danger exists today. The Major lesson of the Cuban missile crisis is this: the indefinite combination of human fallibility and nuclear weapons will destroy nations” 1. As a concept nuclear war is so irrational it isn’t worth considering as a consequence, it serves the purpose of no state or government to destroy a nation only to suffer the retaliation of a second strike. I do not believe nuclear deterrence strategy was an attempt to rationalize the irrational but to provide rational options to stop the irrational from ever occurring while still maintaining a political advantage on the global stage. The first recognizable forms of nuclear strategy emerged between World War Two and the Cold War between the USA and the Soviet Union.

The two nations had accumulated enough missiles to completely annihilate the other, Oppenheimer; ‘ the father of the atomic bomb’ likened it to “ two scorpions in a bottle each capable of killing the other, but only at the risk of his own life” 2. The US department of defence had a much less metaphoric definition; “ The prevention from action by fear of the consequences.

Deterrence is a state of mind brought about by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction”. Nuclear strategy can best be defined within major three time frames. The first being World War Two to the Cold

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War, a period of “ compellance” or “ coercive bargaining”, the second from the Cold War to the early 90’s, a period of Mutual Deterrence, where the enemy had a second strike capability and therefore caused “ Mutually Assured Destruction” on both sides, and then the third from the 90’s to present day where a combination of theories of nuclear balance of power and Anti Ballistic Missile defence is the strategic policy still used to this day³.

From the point of view of the USA, the first major superpower with a nuclear capability, the last days of WWII up to the start of the Cold War left the country in an ideal situation politically. The USA had demonstrated quite aptly Hiroshima and Nagasaki that it had the capability to inflict previously unimaginable amounts of damage, which left it in a huge advantage politically. From 1945-62 and particularly under the leadership of President Eisenhower the USA acted under the strategic doctrine of “ massive retaliation” ⁴. Former US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles became a frequent user of what is now referred to as ‘ brinkmanship’, he would purposefully threaten enemy’s of the US with nuclear destruction to avoid conflict and bring the US dangerously close to war to achieve US national goals⁴, however, to quote Sun Tzu it could be argued that “ The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting” ⁵ so under that logic, John Foster Dulles was achieving his goals without any need for violence or conflict. I believe at this point in the world’s history when only the USA had nuclear arms that it could be argued that their nuclear strategy rationalised the irrational.

As the US had no plans to actually use nuclear arms, and the rest of the world had no appropriate retaliation to them, the US was, quite rationally <https://assignbuster.com/was-nuclear-strategy-an-attempt-to-rationalise-the-irrational/>

abusing the fear of their new found power to achieve their own political objectives but I do not believe this stands true when compared to later nuclear strategies and deterrence in general. From the early 60's through to the 90's the second strike capability of the Soviet Union meant that mutual deterrence was the only rational option left to leaders. Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) forced leaders into a stalemate position, as John F Kennedy aptly stated in his inaugural address " We dare not tempt them with weakness. For only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed" 6. By targeting something the enemy valued (a ' counter-value' threat) and counter-force threats, peace was held in a delicate balance as each of the two major superpowers were deterred from war for fear of destruction7.

The fear of destruction was most definitely justified as well, in 1945 the USA only had 6 nuclear weapons, but by 1950 there were 374 spread between the USSR and USA, and by 1960, only two years before the Cuban Missile Crisis there were 22, 069 nuclear weapons around the world, owned by the USA, USSR, France, China and the UK8. It is however important to note that only two nuclear weapons have ever been used in conflict and they were the " Little Boy" and " Fat Man" bombs dropped over Japan in 1945 so the doctrine of ' MAD' does work but it is incredibly dangerous and as situations such as the Cuban Missile Crisis have proved, a combination of misunderstandings and the unwillingness of leaders to appear weak could lead to the death of hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people. In 1983 US President Reagan proposed the " Strategic Defence Initiative" as a ballistic missile defence platform, Reagan's goal was to " make nuclear

weapons impotent and obsolete” 10. At the time there were three concepts for a spaced based Ballistic missile defence system, the first was the high energy laser, the second involved 432 satellites each containing 40-50 infrared guided missiles and the third consisted of several hundred lasers placed around America, all to be fired at one mirror in space that would focus the laser onto a missile¹¹. In reality, a space based laser that could swat down ballistic missiles like flies, while a good idea was scientifically infeasible at the time but the idea did lead to huge developments in ABM's, Anti-Ballistic Missile defence systems. With the end of the Cold War in 1991 and the spread of nuclear weapons to most developed nations around the world nuclear strategy has had to adapt massively in the last 20 years.

The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) signed by the US in 1991 and brought into full effect by December 5th 1994 was the start of foreign policy of nuclear disarmament¹². By 2002 the number of warheads worldwide was cut to less than 30, 000 and the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) was signed by Bush and Putin agreeing that by 2012 there will be a 92% reduction in warheads from the 1986 peak¹³. One of the most rational realist thinkers on the issue of nuclear strategy was Henry Kissinger, having served in the army and then later as National Security Advisor and Secretary of State under both Presidents Nixon and Ford, Kissinger played a pivotal role on US cold war foreign policy and helped shape the outcome of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) of the 1970's. Kissinger's 1957 book “Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy” where Kissinger focus's on foreign policy in a “ nuclear age” and he finds that the biggest problem facing the US is the lack of security really gained by nuclear weapons and that using

the threat of 'massive retaliation' to every move made by the Soviets or any other enemy, especially when it was over something not that important to the US, e. g. Korea, then it would destroy US credibility and thus render the theory of mutual destruction useless.

Kissinger's fundamental goal is "to translate Clausewitz's dictum that war must be subordinate to policy into the nuclear age" 14. Nuclear weapons had restricted US foreign policy aims, and as Kissinger notably said, "nuclear weapons have forced America to accept its own mortality" 15. It was the strategies of rational men such as Kissinger that kept the world safe during the cold war, the irrational end game, total destruction could not possibly be rationalised, there was no circumstance where a nation would desire it and nuclear deterrence strategy of the age, in particular after the scare of the Cuban Missile Crisis, served to humble nations and highlight the fragility and vulnerability of mankind. One interesting perspective to take is to look at the position of the Soviet Union throughout the early years of the nuclear arms race. Certainly by the 1960's Khrushchev and Soviet Russia did not want a nuclear war, but Russia successfully tested its first nuclear bomb in 1949, and there were those among the communist party who believed that nuclear victory could be achieved, it was not until 1982 when Soviet Defence Marshal Ustinov categorically excluded the possibility of a nuclear victory¹⁶.

The Soviet Unions political belief laid in spreading communism throughout the world among the proletariat, which of course couldn't be accomplished if there was total nuclear war and there were no workers left but communist ideals and Soviet Union guidelines played a large part in influencing pre-cold war and cold war Soviet nuclear strategy¹⁷ in a way that no longer affects <https://assignbuster.com/was-nuclear-strategy-an-attempt-to-rationalise-the-irrational/>

modern nuclear strategy. Modern strategy in the 'second nuclear age' while similar in many ways has several important considerations that differentiates it from the cold war approach, the three most important being the role of the state, the role of the non-state/non-governmental organization and the third being the extent to which we use the word deterrence, considering nuclear, biological and chemical weapons in a post cold-war context. Focusing first on the state, according to Colin S. Gray in his book, "The Second Nuclear Age" there are four main reasons a state would want nuclear technology, for security against a perceived external threat, for security to make gains, for domestic interests and politics and for honour/prestige on the world political map¹⁸.

All of these might be legitimate reasons, but every time another state acquires nuclear weapons it causes a risk and upsets the global balance of power, while unlikely you could never predict whether a newly armed Iran might attack an American city, an unstable or rogue nation could lead to WWII or the end of humanity as we know it. Modern nuclear strategy takes this into account, and while seemingly hypocritical it is in the best interests of all to stop more nations developing nuclear weapons, not to say however that nuclear power projects are a bad idea. The biggest fear and risk in the second nuclear age is that of non-governmental organisations, non-state actors, e. g.

terrorist groups or religious extremists getting hold of nuclear weapons. As they are not a state, the traditional rules of deterrence don't apply in the way they did in the Cold War, when you don't now who hit you, or where from, how do you strike back? If Osama Bin Laden, supported by a rogue <https://assignbuster.com/was-nuclear-strategy-an-attempt-to-rationalise-the-irrational/>

state got hold of a nuclear weapon and somehow detonated it in a major western city, there would be no fighting back. This problem is multiplied in the case of religious extremists wanting to become martyrs; taking into account the multitude of ways a non-state actor could commit mass murder, not only nuclear weapons but also conventional explosives and biological/chemical weapons. If we are to take deterrence to refer to just nuclear strategy then modern states are left with a situation where they have to keep up old cold war style deterrence with normal states, leaders must now consider the possibility of unlikely events as state leaders from newly armed nations have different fears and values to our own¹⁹. In the second nuclear age we can no longer rely solely on the merits of deterrence, as we have no frame of reference to base our decisions on, we don't know the nuclear strategy policy of Iran, China, Pakistan etc making deterrence less reliable than ever before.

Another question that needs to be raised is the justification and necessity of nuclear weapons and a nuclear weapons strategy in modern warfare.

Obviously nuclear weapons will not disappear overnight and nuclear strategy is hugely important especially in the context of the second nuclear age and states newly acquiring nuclear arms, however, in the context of the wars being fought around the globe at the moment nuclear weapons are next to irrelevant, except as a deterrent, in Afghanistan and Iraq all the fighting is done guerilla style by insurgents, many of whom pose with the local population, and in situations such as that, in modern close quarters warfare the weapon of mass destruction is less relevant than ever before, it is just a relic, required to keep the status quo. One theory I am particularly inclined to

lean towards is that of “ pax atomica”, yes, since the development of the nuclear weapon there have been many wars ranging from Vietnam through to the second gulf war but there have been no major full on clashes between major superpowers or World Wars, and that fact is because governments now know that if World War Three was to break out between major super powers, nuclear weapons would be used, and there would be second and third strike capabilities. This fear has lead to a global stalemate and a long lasting peace, which was arguably and ironically caused by nuclear weapons²⁰. Going back to my original thesis, I do not believe that nuclear strategy, i. e.

the strategy of deterrence was ever attempting to rationalize the irrational act of starting a nuclear war, but an attempt to create a rational way to avoid war and work towards the state’s interests and I believe this to still be true today. Nuclear weapons are over 60 years old and just as much a threat today as they have ever been in the wrong hands, but with modern systems of government where we have organizations such as the UN and EU I feel the biggest threat comes from the unknown and possibly irrational actions of rogue terrorists or states and in that context nuclear strategy should not try to rationalise the actions of a state leader that is irrational and instead should focus on disarmament, non-proliferation treaties with nations, and the safe guarding of current nuclear weapons.