

In what ways did
deterrence work and
fail in the cold war?



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Deterrence, a form of coercive diplomacy or the use of threat of force to achieve goals, had been of extensive use in the history of mankind.

However, the creation of the destructively powerful nuclear weapons seemed to add substance to deterrence and made it one of the core elements in international relations and security during the Cold War. Though, the question of whether nuclear deterrence worked or not still divides the politician, academia and the public opinion (Lee, 1988; Lebow and Stein, 1995). Proponents argue that nuclear deterrence did save human beings from the World War III (Record, 2004) while critics label deterrence, among other things, as a faulty, inconsistent, heavily value-laden, and immoral theory (Kennedy, 1983). Focusing on the aspect of general nuclear deterrence (not extended or immediate nuclear deterrence), this essay elaborate why the notion of the effective nuclear deterrence during the Cold War period seems not convincing by determining the factors for deterrence to work, providing alternative motives for maintaining peace rather than deterrence, and finally reviewing some actual cases of crisis.

To supporters of nuclear weapons, the strongest and most convincing piece of evidence for the successful deterrence theory is that there has been no case of resort to the use nuclear weapon since the United States dropped two nuclear bombs on the two Japanese cities of Okinawa and Hiroshima in 1945 (Berry et al., 2010). The overwhelmingly destructive power of nuclear weapons, coupled with a certain capability of each side to carry out the threat, made the mutual destructive outcome of nuclear war clearly visible in the so-called “ crystal ball effect” (Blight, 1992; Lee, 1988). Thus, nuclear weapons not only made leaders of both the United States and the Soviet

Union in particular, NATO and Warsaw Pact in general, refrain from uncalculated moves but also eliminate the possibility of the pre-emption (Record, 2004). The other argument proponents often made to defend the success of nuclear deterrence in the Cold War is: deterrence is only considered to be a failure when the threatening nation must resort to the use of force (nuclear weapons) or do not obtain its policy. It is the reality that both the United States and the Soviet Union did not use nuclear weapons and succeeded in preventing each other from using them (McCgwire; Huth, 1999). All these helped the Cold War remains “ cold” and thus nuclear deterrence is very likely a success. (Gaddis, 2005; Berry et al., 2010).

However, a further analysis shows that the claims of effective deterrence in the Cold War seem far from convincing. First and foremost, to assess nuclear deterrence, it is essential to answer the question of what does it take to deter? Nuclear deterrence means the deterred country will not attack because of the threat and the capability of the deterring country to survive the first strike and then retaliate with destructive power. So, in order to be sure that nuclear deterrence works, you have to verify that your adversary does intend to attack you and then restraint from carrying it out because of your threat (Wilson, 2008: 432). Proving other country’s intentions is problematic because of the lack of “ data on the policy calculations of potential initiators who were presumably deterred” (Wilson, 2008). In addition, it was a popular belief in the West during the Cold War that the Soviet Union is a revisionist and needed to be deterred but there seems not enough evidence to uphold that point of view, either (Cohen, 2017; Mueller, 1988). This was admitted by former United States secretary of state Henry

Kissinger, one of the prominent figures during the Cold War: “ Perhaps deterrence was even unnecessary because it was impossible to prove whether the adversary ever intended to attack in the first place” (Record, 2004: 5).

Moreover, nuclear weapons seemed to matter in “ political rhetoric, public discourse, and defense budgets and planning” (Mueller, 2009) during the Cold War, it can be contended that nuclear deterrence is unlikely the sole contributor to the long peace that human being enjoyed nor the absence of nuclear war. This is due to proof by absence, which means your assumption could only be correct if there exist no other alternative explanations for the end result. In this case, the absence of war between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War could be the outcome of many other factors, not only nuclear deterrence. For example, it is worthy to note that nuclear bombs came into being in 1945, at the same time with the establishment of the very important global organization, United Nations. Hence, it could be assumed that it is the United Nations that helped maintain the status quo during the Cold War. In the same fashion, John Mueller (1998) criticized the efficiency of deterrence and attributed the “ long peace” after World War II to such reasons other than nuclear deterrence as the memory of WWII; the post-war contentment (both the United States and the Soviet Union were happy with the status quo), the non-aggressive Soviet ideology, and the believe in escalation of war (the lessons learned from WWI, WWII). According to Former United States secretary of state Henry Kissinger, one of the insiders of the nuclear game theory during the Cold War, the attribution of the absence of nuclear war between NATO and Warsaw Pact since 1946 to

the success of nuclear deterrence seems problematic when he later admitted that “ it is possible that nuclear weapons had little or nothing to do with the absence of a NATO-Warsaw Pact war” (Record, 2004).

Lastly, some case studies which were usually cited as the success stories of nuclear deterrence seem unconvincing, too. In the first instance, at the height of the Berlin Crisis 1948-1949 when the Soviet Union blocked Western Allies’ access to Berlin, decision by United States President Harry S. Truman to deploy B-29 bombers capable of carrying nuclear bombs to Europe did result in the end of the blockade by the Soviet Union (Arnold and Wiener, 2012). However, some unanswered questions remain: Why it took ten months for the threat to be effective and why the Soviet Union dared to provoke the atomic bomb monopoly United States (the first nuclear test by the Soviet Union did not happen until one year later). In the same fashion, the world was actually on the brink of the outbreak of a nuclear war after the United States discovered the Soviet Union’s secret deployment of nuclear missiles in Cuba in 1962 and delivered an ultimatum for the withdrawal of the missiles (Cohen, 2017). Facing the threat from the United States, Soviet leaders ordered to withdraw the missiles from Cuba thus de-escalated the situation (George and Smoke, 1974). But general nuclear deterrence once again failed to prevent the the Soviet Union from deploying nuclear weapons in Cuba in the first place and also failed to restrain the United States from “ instigating a quarantine” (Wilson, 2013) which escalated the situation to the level that, in the word of the then United States President John F. Kennedy, “ the odds of a nuclear war were about one in three”(McMahon and Zeiler,

2012: 305) or secretary of defense Robert McNamara, “It was luck that prevented nuclear war” (Blight and Lang, 2005: 60).

In conclusion, nuclear weapons with their unprecedented destructive power did play a role in international relations during the Cold War. However, attributing the absence of large-scale wars between Warsaw Pact and the West led by the United States to the nuclear deterrence seems far from convincing. The debate on whether nuclear deterrence work or fail is unlikely to subside in the foreseeable future but it is noteworthy that there seem to be a mutual concern of famous policy makers of both the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War such as Mikhail Gorbachev, Henry Kissinger, Bill Perry that nuclear weapons have become a more risky factor than ever before with more countries joining the nuclear club (Shultz et al., 2007; Gorbachev, 2011), not to mention the ambition of countries like North Korea and Iran, the increasing threat of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorist organizations, non-state actors. So, it is high time for the international community to abolish nuclear weapons with “a serious program of universal nuclear disarmament” (Gorbachev, 2011). This would be an interesting topic for future research./.

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