



Deterrence and its discontents

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ABSTRACT

What might Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, have found, had he lived long enough to study the 2018 US Nuclear Posture Review and its drafters? Anxiety about failure and death, fear of impotence, and an obsession with deterrence that obscures the ultimate question: “What is it that the United States wants in this world?” In this essay, the author uses psychoanalytic metaphors to explain why the United States does not currently have a long-term strategy for dealing with its most fundamental foreign policy challenges – and why it needs one, particularly as regards the global nuclear dilemma.

KEYWORDS

Deterrence; nuclear weapons; psychology; United States; security policy; Nuclear Posture Review

Imagine for a second that Sigmund Freud were to analyze the 2018 US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR). He would quickly encounter strong feelings of anxiety and unhappiness that the drafters of the NPR seem to express when writing about nuclear deterrence. Anxiety about failure, and ultimately death, is omnipresent in the document and is met by prescriptions for more nuclear capabilities. Fear of impotence – in the form of unhappiness with the restraints that nuclear deterrence puts on the natural instinct of aggression – is answered in the NPR by the lowering of the threshold to nuclear use. But ultimately, when digging deeper into the document, Freud would come across an obsession with deterrence, one that saves and prevents the “American patient” from asking the ultimate question: “What is it that I want in this world?”

Anxiety

In one of his last treatises, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (*Civilization and Its Discontents*), Sigmund Freud argued that humanity’s drives for destruction and procreation exist in tension with civilization’s laws and its dictates of morally acceptable behavior, leading to strong feelings of discomfort (Freud 1962). In Freud’s own words, “The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction. It may be that in this respect precisely the present time deserves a special interest. Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in

exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety.”

The drafters of the new NPR – mid-level officials from the Department of Defense and the Department of Energy – are anxious that America’s nuclear deterrent is not credible enough to meet a “more complex and demanding” international security situation (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2018). Answering that challenge, they display the effects of what Freud, subsequent generations of psychoanalysts, and previous generations of philosophers have subsumed under the headline of “internalization,” that is, the process of adopting generally accepted societal norms and rules as their own, most significantly through emulating and incorporating previously observed parental behavior (Castoriadis 1996). Internalization provides the subject with a kind of “moral compass” for what is generally considered right or wrong. It is as much a natural as an unconscious process, meaning that the subject cannot simply “get rid of it.” Crucially, the subject is mostly unaware of the potentially beneficial and/or negative consequences that stem from internalization.

Psychoanalysis provides one potential way for enabling the human subject to confront those effects and gain more autonomy by means of encouraging self-reflective and conscious behavior. Thus, externally instigated stimuli can ultimately lead to reflections that can then trigger changes in behavior. The French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis went as far as to label modern societies “autonomous,” under the condition that they are able to change their internalized institutions through collective, self-reflective, and conscious action.

The new NPR has incorporated two crucial thought and behavioral patterns from its Cold War-era predecessors. First, the NPR assumes that deterring America's opponents with nuclear weapons is right, for nuclear deterrence contributed to keeping the world safe from great power war and deliberate nuclear use since 1945.¹ Second, it asserts that if those opponents are nuclear-armed and deterrence failure is considered an option, engaging in arms racing, and thereby exhibiting American resolve, is a worthwhile course of action. Incorporating these patterns means following generally acceptable behavior – at least acceptable in the US political and strategic community. Throughout the Cold War, this behavior came at a significant price. Amongst the many negative side-effects were constant concern and anxiety about the right measure and forms of deterrence and the potentially catastrophic consequences if deterrence were to fail (Jervis 1985). Concern and anxiety made it necessary for the Cold War political and defense establishment to continuously engage with nuclear deterrence.

These anxieties are again particularly prevalent today when it comes to deterring Russia. According to the NPR, Russia possesses “significant advantages in its nuclear weapons production capacity and in non-strategic nuclear forces over the US and allies.” The NPR drafters go on to argue that Moscow “mistakenly assesses that the threat of nuclear escalation or actual first use of nuclear weapons would serve to ‘de-escalate’ a conflict on terms favorable to Russia.” What they refer to is the fear of extended deterrence failure in the context of Russia attacking one of NATO's militarily weak member states in Eastern Europe, perhaps in the Baltics. In that scenario – the argument by Western analysts goes (Kroenig 2015) – Russia could resort to the early and limited use of non-strategic nuclear weapons to coerce NATO into accepting a *fait accompli*. Without the capabilities for an immediate, measured nuclear response, NATO would have little choice but to accept defeat, according to this logic.²

Incorporating crucial experiences from the Cold War, such as NATO countering the Soviet missile buildup of the 1970s with its own intermediate-range buildup in Western Europe, the NPR seeks to remedy the fear of deterrence failure by addressing the regional asymmetry in non-strategic nuclear forces, which clearly favors Russia (Zagorski 2011). The NPR suggests the United States should “modify a small number of existing SLBM warheads to provide a low-yield option, and in the longer term, pursue a modern nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM).” In effect, internalization has led the NPR drafters to incorporate the pattern of answering a political problem by engaging in arms racing.

But what is that political problem? The NPR hints at it when stressing that “Russia considers the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to be the principal threats to its contemporary geopolitical ambitions.” Unfortunately, the review fails to gauge these ambitions. Prominent US scholars have repeatedly pointed out that Russia's geopolitical ambitions – unlike those of the Soviet Union – are not global but regional in nature and geared toward preserving a glaxis between Russia and an expanding NATO in Eastern Europe (Mearsheimer 2014). In essence, these ambitions reflect the paranoia of a state that has historically rooted phobias of being invaded by Western powers, long-standing socio-cultural links to Russian-speaking minorities abroad, and a desperate longing for national pride and prestige (Charap and Colton 2016).

In comparison, nothing at stake for the United States in Eastern Europe, not even its alliance commitments, comes close to that; which means that there is essentially a strong asymmetry of interest, and perhaps resolve, at play (Shifrinson 2017). If that is the case, the NPR's fear of deterrence failure is not unfounded if Washington were to seriously threaten those core Russian interests. But the remedy the NPR offers is not convincing; it ignores the geopolitical problem and tries to offset an asymmetry of interest by addressing an asymmetry in material capabilities. By so doing, it intensifies the security dilemma that has driven much of Russia's foreign policy since the late 1990s. In addition, it makes escalation of general tensions more likely and could even lead to the exact outcome it wants to prevent: deterrence failure.

Unhappiness

The cause of the second case of immediate anxiety is North Korea's buildup of nuclear weapons and missiles. According to the NPR, “Our deterrence strategy for North Korea makes clear that any North Korean nuclear attack against the United States or its allies and partners is unacceptable and will result in the end of that regime.” That objective – deterring nuclear use by Pyongyang – is anything but new and dates back to the Clinton administration.³ But a second fear of deterrence failure is worrying parts of the administration. On August 13, 2017, on the television program “This Week,” then National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster rhetorically asked, “the classical deterrence theory, how does that apply to a regime like the regime in North Korea?” And in October 2017, he declared that the president is “not going to accept this regime threatening the United States with nuclear weapons. There are those who

would say, well, why not accept and deter. Well, accept and deter is unacceptable (Gaouette 2017).” Before succeeding McMaster as National Security Advisor in March 2018, John Bolton had effectively taken the same line of reasoning, arguing that it is “unacceptable” “to leave Americans as nuclear hostages of the Kim family dictatorship (Bolton 2017).”

By publicly labeling North Korea undeterrable, McMaster and Bolton apply what Thomas Schelling described when he used the metaphor of burning bridges behind oneself (Schelling 2008). The more the deterrer maneuvers itself in a position where it cannot escape the consequences of its own conditional threat, its ability to take an alternative course diminishes, making its threats more credible – or at least that is the perception that both McMaster and Bolton wanted to create. But that threat is not credible exactly because Washington has so far provided no alternatives or “off-ramps” to the Kim regime such as a peace treaty for the Korean peninsula, supported by negative security guarantees extended by Washington to Pyongyang in exchange for nuclear disarmament. More important, there is again a stark asymmetry of interest at play. As the NPR correctly puts it, “For North Korea, the survival of the Kim regime is paramount.” But if Pyongyang defines ultimate survival in terms of developing a secure strategic second-strike capability, the shared anxieties of McMaster and Bolton about deterrence failure are very much warranted if the US administration insists on preventing that outcome. As with the Russian interests in Eastern Europe, there is simply more at stake for the North than there is for Washington.

Joshua Pollack has masterfully argued in a recent essay that over time “many [US] defense policymakers have been drawn to the idea of nuclear superiority” while others have favored the idea of “preparing to fight a nuclear war – just in case – to wipe out as much of the enemy’s nuclear forces as possible, leaving America as intact as possible (Pollack 2017).” McMaster and Bolton seem to have incorporated these patterns, which resurface in the debate about North Korea. But quite contrary to the causes of anxiety, the causes of their and much of the defense establishment’s concerns are rooted in frustration. In essence, that frustration results from the tension between the natural instinct of aggression, as Freud put it, and the civilizing, or implicitly restraining, function of the very concept of nuclear deterrence.

To better understand this tension and the resulting frustration it is once more useful to look at North Korea and Russia – both examples of interest, and perhaps resolve, prevailing against superior material capabilities. They are ultimately classical examples of the equalizing power of nuclear weapons and, thus, of US impotence.⁴ Frustration caused

by the fear of impotence has become more pressing in recent years, as America’s opponents have become more adept in employing all measures short of war to push back against US influence. Be it Russia’s strategy of new-generation warfare (as it is called in Russian) (Adamsky 2015), which relies on a whole range of non-kinetic means of subversion and coercion, including election hacking, military brinkmanship, or nuclear threats; be it China’s tactics of creeping encroachment by building artificial islands in the South China Sea; or North Korea’s crescendo of missile testing – none of those actions, as unsettling as they may be, could reasonably be considered a *casus belli*, let alone a reason for US nuclear weapons use.

The reason for restraint is not only rooted in the ability of Russia and China to destroy the United States but is underwritten by the nuclear taboo, a civilizational restraint in the Freudian sense. Since 1945, nuclear arms have not been used except in test explosions, particularly because of their horrible and indiscriminate effects. The longer the taboo holds, the stronger its restraining effect could get, some scholars argue (Tannenwald 2007). In essence, upholding the nuclear taboo can as well be seen from the angle of internalization.

But again, incorporating these rational as well as moral restraining functions of nuclear deterrence seems to plague US defense decision-makers. The NPR is trying to work around the taboo by lobbying for more “flexible options” (which is a euphemism for more usable options, even though the NPR explicitly rejects that notion) in the form of new “low-yield” warheads for America’s sea-based deterrent and by muddying the waters on nuclear use by listing for the first time “significant non-nuclear strategic attacks” as potentially justifying the employment of nuclear weapons. But deliberate doctrinal ambiguity won’t help to level the asymmetry in interest vis-à-vis Russia and North Korea or untie the Pentagon from the restraining effects of nuclear deterrence. To the contrary, by adding non-nuclear strategic attacks – whatever those might be – the NPR approaches once more the expanding realm of challenges America is facing through the narrow prism of nuclear deterrence.

Having internalized nuclear deterrence behavior and now being re-exposed to its growing discontents, America is unable to confront part of the very institutions that make up its inner self. As a result, America is losing its ability to think outside of the coercive box and engage in a genuine debate about America’s role in the world.

Unrest

For many years, strategic debates in Washington tended to focus almost exclusively on deterrence, and perhaps extended deterrence, and mostly employed the narrow lens of military capabilities in lieu of broader political solutions.⁵ The preponderance of “hardware” over “software” has been omnipresent in the debates about how to respond to Russia, North Korea, or China and very much informs the new NPR. What is seldom debated is how to embed the material capabilities within political processes⁶ that might secure better outcomes.

It's not as if Washington hasn't tried at all to engage with its opponents in political frameworks that go beyond coercive policies. Rather, US policymakers have time and again deliberately sabotaged each other's cooperative efforts and thus undermined the trust necessary for an opponent to enter and uphold an agreement. Instead of engaging Iran on its destabilizing role in the Middle East while leaving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (with which Tehran complies) untouched, Republicans might succeed in upending the deal (Landler, Sanger, and Harris 2018). Instead of having followed up talks with Pyongyang, initiated by the Clinton administration and designed to prohibit North Korea from developing or exporting ballistic missile technology, the George W. Bush administration cancelled the 1994 U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework. In the words of then-Vice President Richard Cheney: “We don't negotiate with evil, we defeat it (Kaplan 2017).”

The Cheney quote expounds the systemic problem – in a Waltzian sense (Waltz 1979) – behind America's difficulty with compromise and upholding mutually beneficial agreements. With the demise of the Soviet Union, America lost the single factor most critical to balancing US power. Since then, the country has experienced deep uncertainty about its global role.

For a very short period following the end of the Cold War, America experimented with a quasi-Wilsonian approach, partly lost it in the smoke of the 1993 Mogadishu disaster, and finally pursued a policy of primacy, meaning to “extend the unchallenged supremacy it had gained when the Soviet empire collapsed (Brands 2018).” It pushed for the global embrace of ideational policies in support of individual freedoms and human rights and compromised those very ideals with Huntingtonian politics that alienated the Muslim world. It forged and expanded global and regional security institutions under Bush the elder and Clinton, but then turned away from institutionalization under George W. Bush in favor of *ad hoc* coalitions. Donald Trump's isolationist tendency, contradicted by

his own administration's new emphasis on “great-power competition,” is only the latest thematic about-face that has come to characterize America's volatile post-Cold War foreign and security policy.

Meanwhile, nuclear deterrence, underwritten by America's continued (though relatively shrinking) socio-economic power, which still allows it to maintain second-to-none conventional military power, has remained one of the few constants of US foreign and security policy. There has simply not been an urgent need for reflecting on America's role in the post-Cold War world. Instead, US strategists could “bracket off” the big geopolitical and leadership challenges at the working level to focus on more workable tasks and processes, such as how to maintain escalation dominance at the lower rungs of a nuclear escalation ladder (Roberts 2015). But this era seems to be nearing its end, for significant changes to the international security environment are underway.

Changes in the environment can work as powerful stimuli and enable self-reflective and conscious action of the human subject. In the US case, they might even lead to what Castoriadis positively termed “autonomy.” However, if not met with self-reflection, those changes could well worsen America's unrest and its obsession with nuclear deterrence.

External stimuli

Changes to the international security environment are unfolding at a rapid pace, and some of them might not be fully visible yet. I will group some recent developments along three generalizing trend lines.

The first trend is a significant deterioration in regional security. Russia, China, and North Korea are increasingly opposing US influence, thereby testing the limits of US (extended) deterrence through tactics of creeping encroachment and non-kinetic means. The US response – countering pressure with pressure – risks arms racing, accidental escalation, or external balancing, perhaps, one day, even in the form of a Russo-Chinese alliance. During his first visit to Moscow as China's new Defense Minister in April 2018, General Wei Fenghe stated that “the Chinese side has come [to Moscow] to show Americans the close ties between the armed forces of China and Russia (Griffiths 2018).”

The second trend is uncertainty about US leadership. It is the result of a combination of Washington's long-term unwillingness to acknowledge some of the interests of its opponents and Donald Trump's short-term, mostly rhetorical isolationist tendencies. As

much as America protects its client states, its uncompromising stance towards its regional challengers can prolong and deepen the very insecurity its allies are trying to escape.⁷ In principle, this state of affairs can be maintained as long as the external risks are perceived by protégés as higher than the costs of maintaining an alliance relationship with the patron. But such an arrangement becomes more precarious the more erratic and egoistic the patron state acts – patterns observable to some extent under the Trump administration.

The result could be that protégés start looking for alternative security options. That could mean forum shopping, effectively oscillating between the interests of the patron and the adversary; abandoning the patron and instead bandwagoning with the adversary; external balancing together with other protégés, perhaps with the aim of maintaining equidistance between the patron and the adversary; or internal balancing in the form of investing in defensive capabilities, including nuclear ones. Particularly the latter option – internal balancing – has increasingly come to the fore in its most extreme form with South Korea (Lee 2017), Germany (Volpe and Kühn 2017), and lately Australia (Davis 2018), all experiencing fringe debates about investing in indigenous nuclear-weapons capabilities. Saudi Arabia seems to be the most realistic case of a US protégé pondering that option (Wintour 2018).

The third trend is an erosion of restraining institutions. By restraining institutions, I mean international agreements on nonproliferation, disarmament, and arms control. The tentative proliferation debates in Seoul, Berlin, and Canberra, coupled with a very real frustration of a majority of states with the nuclear-armed powers not meeting their disarmament obligations under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), risk the treaty's continued existence. Last year's conclusion of a Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons by 122 non-nuclear-weapons states (Reuters 2017) underscores that the very institutionalized nonproliferation and disarmament regime America helped to build has been put in jeopardy also by Washington's undiminished reliance on nuclear deterrence. On top of that, bilateral arms control arrangements between Washington and Moscow are collapsing, with neither side undertaking serious efforts to reverse that process (Kühn, Shetty, and Sinovets 2017). The result could be a complete loss of transparency and mutual predictability, with all the negative second-order effects.

To be clear, none of these trends is irreversible, and at least two of them have not (yet) played out as described here. Unfortunately, the NPR is mum on all three trends.

Even more concerning, the NPR's handling of the erosion of restraining institutions mirrors the US leadership's general loathing for restraint. Instead of respecting its NPT obligations under Article VI, it views disarmament as a supportive tool for US nonproliferation objectives. Stripped of its meaning, disarmament becomes a means of restraining others. Instead of setting more ambitious arms control objectives, the NPR follows Russia's negative example and introduces additional new nuclear capabilities.

Diagnosis

If Sigmund Freud were to give his diagnosis, he would probably commence by concluding that America's discontent with nuclear deterrence, as exemplified by the NPR, won't go away. Rather, he would expect to see it grow over time. As with every other unconsciously suppressed problem, the degree of suffering from anxieties and frustrations increasingly torment the restless patient.

But this is where the analogy ends. America cannot be "put on the couch." Self-reflective and conscious behavior cannot grow overnight. But the mounting fears of imperial overstretch and domestic erosion provide powerful reasons to start a debate about means and ends in US foreign policy. To begin with, the US political establishment should recognize that America's obsession with nuclear deterrence blurs its vision. Deterrence can be a powerful means for preserving peace, but it is not a substitute for political processes. It is also not the sole answer to the growing political leadership challenges of the 21st century. Once that painful but necessary insight takes hold, America must address the deeper problem of finding its role in an increasingly multipolar world. For that, America will need a long-term strategy. In the best of all worlds, such a strategy will tie means to ends, will be aligned toward an ambitious but realistically achievable goal, and will be followed through over more than just four or eight years. If that does not happen – and the odds are that continued internalization of the patterns of a bygone era will prevent any significant course correction – the cracks in a deterrence-based *Pax Americana* will grow bigger.

Notes

1. Although some scholars doubt that conclusion. See, for instance: Wilson (2008).
2. Proponents of that logic refer to the readiness levels of NATO's dual-capable aircraft in Europe, which are currently measured in weeks, and to the assumption that allies' aircraft might not be able to penetrate Russian airspace. According to NATO, its dual-capable aircraft "are available for nuclear roles at various levels of readiness –

the highest level of readiness is measured in weeks.” See: NATO (2015). See also: Lanoszka and Hunzeker (2016).

3. In an interview in 1993, Clinton warned “We would overwhelmingly retaliate if [the North Koreans] were to ever use, to develop, and use nuclear weapons. It would mean the end of their country as they know it.” Quoted from: Williams (1993).
4. To quote from the 1965 Gilpatric Committee report, “As additional nations obtained nuclear weapons, our diplomatic and military influence would wane...” Report by the Committee on Nuclear Proliferation. 1965, FRUS, 1964–1968, Vol. 11.
5. For a recent overview, see the first paragraph of: Pegahi (2017).
6. For an earlier argument in a similar vein, see: Freedman (2004).
7. Lanoszka (2017). In an interview in early 2018, Moon Chung-in, senior foreign policy adviser to South Korean President Moon Jae-in, said “We are very much worried about American unilateral military action on North Korea because North Korea is most likely to retaliate against South Korea.” See: PBS News Hour (2018).

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