

The Possession of Nuclear Weapons: State Terrorism?

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“A world without nuclear weapons would be less stable and more dangerous for all of us.”

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Margaret Thatcher

Such are the words that sum up the world created by our *beloved* concept of ‘nuclear deterrence’. Nuclear weapons generate stability. Nuclear weapons prevent the escalation of violence. In sum, nuclear weapons make the world a safer place. Is this true? I refuse to believe that the existence of a weapon as powerful as 500 kilotons, roughly equivalent to 33,333,333 conventional 30 lbs. bombs placed by a suicide bomber creates security. Nuclear weapons do create a type of stability, one made through terror, which clever politicians and even cleverer experts have termed ‘nuclear deterrence’. Invoking this logic, nuclear deterrence, or the threat of violence with the use of nuclear weapons, is a wider form of terrorism, monopolized by the state, but perhaps soon to be used by clandestine organizations. As opposed to hijacking airplanes or suicide bombings, nuclear deterrence is a subtle, legitimized form of terrorism undertaken by the most powerful player in international relations, the state.

Bush has declared a war against terrorism. Yet, is the idea of nuclear deterrence really different from terrorism? According to the definition issued by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, terrorism is violence or the threat of violence against innocent civilians. Its purpose is to *instill a terror so great into the civilian population*, capturing media attention and pushing for a certain response from the state. What is nuclear deterrence? According to the studies of political scientist Kenneth N. Waltz and deterrence theory, nuclear deterrence is the threat of violence that elicits a certain response from the state (the non-use of nuclear weapons, or the non-use of violence). It does so by instilling terror. Nuclear weapons are unique in that they are unambiguously directed against innocent civilian populations, just like other weapons of mass destruction. Innocent civilians should fear terrorism. Even more so, innocent civilians should fear a nuclear strike.

Just like terrorism, news of the possession of nuclear weapons garners a large amount of media attention. Kim Jong Il captured the world’s attention when he recently joined the nuclear club. Just as terrorism is an unconventional form of violence with a taboo attached, so is the use of nuclear weapons. In some cases, such as Saddam Hussein’s use of chemical weapons against his own population, this form of terrorism can even occur within the state. Terrorism is the policy of the weak. Perhaps nuclear deterrence is terrorism of the powerful, for only the powerful states have possessed this threat of violence, at least until recently. One day the weak may want more access to this powerful form of terror.

This argument may seem too harsh. However, questioning the distinction between terrorist acts of the state and those of non-state actors helps to truly understand the nature of terrorism. In December 2006, former Prime Minister Tony Blair unveiled a plan to Parliament to create a new generation of submarines for Trident missiles that will hold nuclear warheads. Blair refused to give up the UK’s independent nuclear deterrence on the grounds of security. His Defense Secretary, Des Browne, justified this plan stating that nuclear weapons are “not inherently evil” but have a “terrible capacity”, according to the BBC. Oh, but Mr. Browne, nuclear weapons are inherently evil precisely because of the terror of utter annihilation they possess, the same terror that makes deterrence possible, the same terror that makes terrorism possible.

Suggested Reading

Campbell Craig, *Destroying the Village: Eisenhower and Thermonuclear War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: statecraft and the prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1989).

Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986).

David A. Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945-1960,” *International Security*, Spring 1983, Vol. 7, No. 4, pp. 3-71.

Margaret Thatcher, “Speech at Soviet Official Banquet,” (30 March 1987).

Kenneth Waltz and Scott D. Sagan, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: a Debate* (New York: W.W.Norton, 1995).