

# INTERNATIONAL ACTORS' NUCLEAR RETHORIC – A PERPETUAL DILEMMA AND VARIOUS STANCES

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**Abstract:** *Actors struggle in the nuclear power games is more symbolic one, due to the fact that it is believed that a nuclear attack nowadays is not likely to happen, since it is generally-accepted that nations cannot reliably defend against a nuclear attack by using traditional means. Therefore, the present paper aims to emphasize the role of actors' nuclear rethoric in pursuing nuclear objectives. The document analyzes the nuclear doctrine of the first three most powerful nuclear-states, highlighting the potential of strategic communication.*

**Keywords:** *nuclear rhetoric; nuclear deterrence; counterproliferation; security dilemma; strategic communication.*

## Introduction

Research and achievements on nuclear science brought major benefits in many life sectors, over time. One of the most important outcomes lies in providing a reasonable alternative to produce reliable and clean energy, thus answering to some important environmental issues. Moreover, other crucial discoveries related to nuclear science were made in domains such as medicine, agriculture, food industry, transport, etc<sup>1</sup>.

On the other hand, the use of nuclear power in arms development raises serious issues on the international security agenda, due to the already demonstrated power of such weapons, in 1945. After the use of the atomic bombs upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki, two different reactions took place on the international arena: the first one refers to those actors that joined the arms race in the years that followed, deepening such way the security dilemma; and the second type of reaction refers to the global efforts to constrain the threat of nuclear weapons proliferation. Therefore, in 1968, the *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons* (NPT)<sup>2</sup> has been opened for signature and has entered to force in 1970, aiming to “prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology, to promote cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy and to further the goal of achieving nuclear disarmament and general and complete disarmament”<sup>3</sup>. Today there are 191 states-parties of the treaty (including North Korea<sup>4</sup>), of which four are nuclear-weapon states (NWS), namely the United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom. The only states that remained outside the treaty are South Sudan, India, Israel, and Pakistan, of which the last three mentioned are suspected of

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<sup>1</sup> For more details, see: “The Many Uses of Nuclear Technology”, *World Nuclear Association*, November 2020, URL: <https://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/non-power-nuclear-applications/overview/the-many-uses-of-nuclear-technology.aspx>, accessed on 20.02.2021.

<sup>2</sup> See full text of the NPT at URL: <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/text>, accessed on 20.02.2021.

<sup>3</sup> \*\*\*, “Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)”, *United Nations*, URL: <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/>, accessed on 20.02.2021.

<sup>4</sup> A.N.: On January 10, 2003, North Korea announced its withdrawal from the NPT, effective the next day. Although Article X of the NPT requires that a country give three months' notice in advance of withdrawing, North Korea argued that it satisfied this requirement because it originally announced its decision to withdraw March 12, 1993, and suspended the decision one day before it was to become legally binding. There is not yet a definitive legal opinion as to whether North Korea is still a party to the NPT. See URL: <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/nptfact>, accessed on 20.02.2021.

possessing and/or developing nuclear weapons. Thus, one can presume that there is a total of nine states who own nuclear weapons, with the United States and Russia knowing to possess more than 90% of these weapons<sup>5</sup>.

Taking into consideration that the explosive yield of the existing warheads far exceeds those used in the Second World War, we can assume that the effects of the use of such weapons would be catastrophic, posing an existential threat to states, to the human species, and to global ecosystems. Moreover, it is believed that a nuclear attack nowadays is not likely to happen while it is generally-accepted that nations cannot reliably defend against a nuclear attack by using traditional means and also because such an attack could trigger a nuclear counterattack, which would lead to an irrevocable escalation of the conflict<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, the function of nuclear weapons has more of a symbolic meaning, though not exclusively. Thus, nuclear weapons are a strategic resource of a state or alliance.

We believe that the power games in the nuclear field are being played mostly based on communication, in the terms of using strategic messages. Such messages may involve information regarding intentions, regarding the number of nuclear capabilities, and they are designed to produce particular desired effects, such as discouraging others from conducting nuclear attacks, or such as drawing targeted-states at the negotiating table, in order to bargain the terms for preventing or limiting their mutual destruction<sup>7</sup>.

### **Common purposes, different approaches within nuclear doctrines**

The nuclear doctrines of the nuclear-weapon states comply with the terms of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Thus, they share common purposes regarding the prevention of nuclear weapons spread, pursuing the final objective of general nuclear disarmament. Under the Treaty, the nuclear-weapon states are obliged “not to transfer possession or control to any recipient nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices, and not in any way to assist, encourage or induce non-nuclear-weapon States to manufacture, acquire or control over such weapons or devices. Meanwhile, the non-nuclear-weapon states shall not receive any transfer of or control over nuclear weapons or nuclear explosive devices, and not to manufacture or otherwise acquire such weapons or devices as well as not to seek or receive any assistance in this regard”<sup>8</sup>. Also, both nuclear and non-nuclear-weapon states are obliged to submit to the International Atomic Energy Agency’s (IAEA) periodically inspections.

Even so, nuclear-weapon states have different approaches regarding their nuclear doctrines, according to their specific ideology, to their level of influence and to their own interests in the international arena. In the following, we will briefly present some of the current doctrines of the nuclear-weapon states, to understand each one’s vision on the future of nuclear power.

#### *The United States Nuclear Posture Review*

The *Nuclear Posture Review* is being adapted to the global counterproliferation needs. Counterproliferation is defined as the military component of non-proliferation<sup>9</sup>. Counterproliferation policy has had a profound influence on U.S. doctrine for the use of nuclear weapons. From the beginning of the 1990s, the United States began to envisage the use of nuclear weapons against Third World targets. This included not just nuclear armed nations, but

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<sup>5</sup> Jim Michaels, Jane Onyanga-Omara, “There are nearly 16,000 nuclear weapons in the world — and Russia, U.S. hold more than 90%”, *Usa Today*, URL: <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/03/01/nuclear-weapons-russia-united-states/385528002/>, accessed on 20.02.2021.

<sup>6</sup> Bryan C. Taylor, “Nuclear Deterrence and Communication”, in B.C. Taylor and H. Bean (Eds.), *The ICA Handbook of Communication and Security*, Routledge, New York, 2019, pp. 316-341.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, “Bargaining, communication, and limited war”, in *Conflict Resolution*, Volume 1, Issue 1, March, Yale University, 1957, pp. 19-36.

<sup>8</sup> \*\*\*, “Background Information”, *United Nations*, URL: <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt2020/prepcom2019-background/>, accessed on 20.02.2021.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Butcher, *What Wrongs Our Arms May Do: The Role of Nuclear Weapons in Counterproliferation*, Washington, August 2003, p. 11.

those whose arsenals included chemical and biological weapons. Deemphasizing the Russian threat, the 2001 Nuclear Posture Review concentrates on the growing capabilities of various states in the biological, chemical, nuclear, and ballistic missile delivery areas. It prescribes a mix of nuclear and conventional forces to counter these threats. Missile defences play an integral role in defence counterproliferation programs and in U.S. defence strategy.

The United States Nuclear Posture Review – 2018<sup>10</sup> is the document in place that outlines the American vision on nuclear power. First priorities that the current document exposes, refer to the protection of the United States, its allies, and partners, also to the long-term goal of eliminating nuclear weapons, as well as regards the requirement that the United States have modern, flexible, and resilient nuclear capabilities that are safe and secure. The document also mentions “the increasingly explicit nuclear threats from potential adversaries ... drawn by the dynamism in potential adversaries’ development and deployment programs for nuclear weapons and delivery systems”.<sup>11</sup> They incriminate Russia and China for increasing their number of warheads, and North Korea for violating the United Nations Security Council resolutions, though does not regard these states as adversaries, but seeking for stable relations with them. The Review regards the American nuclear capabilities as principal instruments in the process of the deterrence of both nuclear and non-nuclear aggression. Deterring potential nuclear attacks is one of the main purposes of the U.S. objectives. Thus, they claim that their nuclear forces contribute to the deterrence of nuclear and non-nuclear attack, to the assurance of allies and partners, to the achievement of U.S. objectives if deterrence fails, and to the capacity to hedge against an uncertain future. Considering that a common approach for all stances wouldn’t be much effective, the document presents some tailored deterrence scenarios across a spectrum of adversaries, threats, and contexts. It is restated that the U.S. acts with transparency, and they demand the same thing from the other nuclear-weapon states.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Russian Federation’s State Policy on Nuclear Deterrence*

In 2020, Vladimir Putin approves the *the Russian Federation's State Policy on Nuclear Deterrence*<sup>13</sup>, this being the first time when a Russian nuclear doctrine has been published for opened access, as unclassified. It is a strategic defence planning document and reflects official views on the nature of nuclear deterrence, it identifies the military dangers and threats to which nuclear deterrence is being neutralized, presents the principles of Russian nuclear deterrence, and the conditions for the Russian Federation’s transition to the use of nuclear weapons. The policy also complies with the terms of the NPT regarding Russian submission for periodical inspections.

One of the highest priorities of the State is to guarantee the deterrence of a potential adversary from aggression against the Russian Federation and/or its allies, and so far the document conforms to the American vision. Further, even if the nature of the Russian nuclear deterrence claims itself as being defensive, the policy states that it is designed to maintain the nuclear capabilities at a sufficient level to ensure a nuclear deterrent, and guarantees the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state, deterring a potential adversary from aggression against the Russian Federation and/or its allies, and in the event of a military conflict - preventing the escalation of hostilities and ending them on conditions acceptable to

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<sup>10</sup> \*\*\*, *Nuclear Posture Review*, Office of The Secretary of Defense, Department of Defense, United States of America, February 2018, URL: <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>, accessed on 20.02.2021.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> \*\*\*, *Presidential Decree No. 355, The Basics of the Russian Federation's State Policy on Nuclear Deterrence*, approved by Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Kremlin, June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, URL: [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/international\\_safety/disarmament/-/asset\\_publisher/rp0fiUBmANaH/content/id/4152094](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/disarmament/-/asset_publisher/rp0fiUBmANaH/content/id/4152094), accessed on 20.02.2021.

the Russian Federation and/or its allies<sup>14</sup>. In other words, Moscow reserves the rights to use its nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction against it and/or its allies, as well as in the case of *conventional aggression* against the Russian Federation, where the very existence of the state is at risk. Other conditions that determine the possibility of the Russian Federation's use of nuclear weapons refers to the receipt of reliable information on the launch of ballistic missiles attacking the territory of the Russian Federation and/or its allies; or the enemy's impact on critical state or military installations in the Russian Federation, which will disrupt the response of nuclear forces.<sup>15</sup> The Russian Federation regards nuclear weapons solely as a deterrent, the use of which is an extreme and coercive measure, and is making every effort to reduce the nuclear threat and prevent the escalation of inter-State relations that can provoke military conflicts, including nuclear ones.

The State policy on nuclear deterrence is a set of coordinated, commonly agreed political, military, diplomatic, economic, informational and other measures, based on the forces and means of nuclear deterrence, to prevent aggression against the Russian Federation and/or its allies.<sup>16</sup> Nuclear deterrence is carried out continuously in peacetime, at a time of imminent threat of aggression and in wartime, until the use of nuclear weapons begins. Nuclear deterrence is ensured by the presence of combat-ready forces and capabilities within the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation capable of *causing unacceptable damage to a potential adversary in any environment*, as well as by the willingness and determination of the Russian Federation to use such weapons. The nuclear deterrent forces of the Russian Federation include land, sea and air-based nuclear forces. The Russian Federation is carrying out nuclear deterrence against individual States and military coalitions (blocs, alliances) that regards the Russian Federation as a potential adversary for them. Nuclear deterrence is also aimed at ensuring that *the potential adversary understands the inevitability of retaliation*<sup>17</sup> in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation and/or its allies.

Given the fact that starting with the Cold War, the U.S. and the Russian Federation have been the pillars of the central nuclear balance, nowadays, security experts raise some concerns upon the fact that changes in the power relationships between actors may bring some new situations within the security agenda<sup>18</sup>.

#### *Chinese nuclear forces and intentions*

China started in 1980's a nuclear weapons modernization program, that is still ongoing. It is estimated that China's stockpile now includes 270 operational warheads, with another 78 being introduced for a total inventory of up to 350 warheads. Thus, a recent report states that China's nuclear arsenal has now surpassed France's as the world's third largest<sup>19</sup>.

Over the years, China has always committed to a nuclear doctrine of no first use of nuclear weapons, and not using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states or nuclear-weapon-free zones unconditionally<sup>20</sup>. "China does not engage in nuclear arms race with any other country and claims to keep its nuclear capabilities at a minimum level required for national security. China pursues a nuclear strategy of self-defense,

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> \*\*\*, Presidential Decree No. 355, *op. cit*, chapter II, article 19.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, chapter I, article 2-3.

<sup>17</sup> \*\*\*, Presidential Decree No. 355, *op. cit*, chapter II, article 9.

<sup>18</sup> Mihai Vladimir Zodian, *Proliferarea nucleară și echilibrul strategic central în secolul XXI – Studiu de specialitate*, Centre for Defence and Security Strategic Studies, National Defence "Carol I" Publishing House, 2020, URL: [https://cssas.unap.ro/ro/pdf\\_studii/PROLIFERAREA%20NUCLEARA%20SI%20ECHILIBRUL%20STRATEGIC%20CENTRAL%20IN%20SECOLUL%20XXI.pdf](https://cssas.unap.ro/ro/pdf_studii/PROLIFERAREA%20NUCLEARA%20SI%20ECHILIBRUL%20STRATEGIC%20CENTRAL%20IN%20SECOLUL%20XXI.pdf), accessed on 21.02.2021.

<sup>19</sup> Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, "Chinese nuclear forces, 2020", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Volume 76, Issue 6, 2020, URL: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2020.1846432>, accessed on 21.02.2021.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

the goal of which is to maintain national strategic security by deterring other countries from using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against China”<sup>21</sup>.

Even if some uncertainties have arisen regarding whether their arsenal complies with the minimal deterrence objectives or with the mutual assured destruction, there is evidence that even if the Chinese stockpile did double in size, it would still only make up a fraction of the US and Russian stockpiles<sup>22</sup>.

### **Communication means in the pursuit of nuclear objectives**

These different doctrine approaches of the first three most powerful nuclear-states reveal the basics of their rhetoric and are in accordance with their level of influence in the nuclear power games.

Communication means are already well known for their potential in obtaining the desired results. Over time, the power of communication has mainly been exploited in the sense of bringing negative effects on a certain target, through propaganda, fake news, disinformation, etc. In the nuclear topic, such negative effects were drawn from the rhetoric of those states that wanted to gain international prestige and influence, but in fact misguided other states to join the arms race, in a deep security dilemma that could lead to catastrophic effects. On the other hand, the struggle of the security studies is to find and foster such benefic means of influencing auditors – in the sense of informing, using transparent ways of communication, and promoting the real values one has – since these kind of effects have proven to spread and multiply faster, and also asses easier. Besides, it is in one’s nature to act according to its own beliefs, such way promoting the values that defines him. Therefore, strategic communication is the expression of the second kind of communication process, and volunteer or not, we believe that the three states doctrines presented above have met some principles of the strategic communication.

In other words, the U.S. message on nuclear doctrine conforms with the democratic ideology they want to instill and promote, and also conforms with the state of great nuclear power that they uncontestably hold. Key-words they use in their Nuclear Posture Review such as *transparency*, *deterrence*, as well as their request on the other nuclear-states to have stable relations with them, reflect precisely the American way of thinking, and may be considered part of their Strategic Communication program.

Further, looking at the Russian approach on their nuclear policy, it may be seen that their own way of acting has been translated also in their doctrine, reflecting as well their position of great power and their desire of pursuing influence upon international power games this time in the russian manner, where a higher level of aggression may be implied, even if exposed into defensive terms. Moreover, their aim to make sure *the potential adversary understands the inevitability of retaliation*, can also foresee the role of communication, and namely the role of strategic communication; even though the concept is being developed mostly within NATO and U.S. policies, it’s principles can be general agreed. For instance, one of the basic aims of the StratComm process refers to bringing “public awareness, understanding, and support for policies, operations, and other activities in all relevant audiences”<sup>23</sup>.

Also, the Chinese attitude towards entering the high-level nuclear games, among Russia and the U.S., with more of an apprehensive position when stating their intentions, can be seen as well as a part of a strategic communication. As long as we can’t precisely know the real amount of their warheads or their aim to pursue whether minimal deterrence objectives or mutual assured destruction objectives, their message is proper for any of the two hypothesis, and it brings the desired effects for Chinese community at this point.

Therefore, we want to restate the role of communication and the strategic way of

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<sup>21</sup> \*\*\*, *State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China*, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, “Chinese nuclear forces, 2020”, *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> \*\*\*, “About Strategic Communications”, *NATO Stratcom Centre of Excellence*, URL: <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/about-strategic-communications>, accessed on 21.02.2021.

conceiving messages in the field of nuclear rethoric. Moreover, we believe that communication means can also pursue natural common purposes for all actors, both nuclear-state and non-nuclear-state ones, firstly in the terms of deterrence, then it also comes to support a shared understanding of the nuclear implications, and not least, it can help the cooperation process.

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