

How to Avoid a Dialogue of the Deaf on Nuclear Deterrence Policy

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A perennial challenge to formulating the most effective deterrent—one that logically precedes selecting the “right” doctrine and force structure combination—is the inflexible thinking that runs rampant among policy-makers.

Question: How do U.S. policy-makers determine the effect of potential nuclear doctrine and force structure policies on credibility?

Answer: They make this judgment by relying on one of two theories of nuclear deterrence, each of which is rooted in an ideal typical nuclear conflict scenario.

Leading explanations reify, and thus perpetuate, the “dialogue of the deaf” by assuming there is one set of deterrence preferences that accurately reflects the Nuclear Revolution and another that does not.

Explanation 1: A policy-maker’s rational sensitivity to the costs of nuclear conflict should lead him to prefer only the policies necessary for a secure and reliable retaliatory capability. [Waltz (1990, 1995) Mearsheimer (1990)]

Explanation 2: Military officials’ pursuit of greater relative influence in the decision-making process lead them to prefer policies beyond only a secure and reliable retaliatory capability. [Sagan (1985, 1995) Feaver (1992, 1993)]

Explanation 3: Policy-makers who are locked in “pre-nuclear” thinking engage in biased threat assessment and thus prefer deterrent policies beyond only a secure and reliable retaliatory capability. [Jervis (1984, 1989)]

A Theory-Driven Model of Preference Formation

Part I—Challenge of General Deterrence: policy-makers must simultaneously attempt to entertain the widest range of potential nuclear conflict scenarios possible while winnowing them to a manageable range that would allow for an executable set of doctrine and force structure policies.

Part II—Theory-Driven Thinking: policy-makers deal with this challenge by relying on one of two theories of deterrence, each of which is rooted in an ideal typical conflict scenario.

RDA theory: rational and deliberate action

FMA theory: fear, misperception, and accident

Part III—Policy-making Dialogue:

- Neither side of the debate tends to accurately characterize and respond to the concerns of the other.
- Matters of shared concern often are not recognized as such and thus are not addressed.

U.S. Nuclear Deterrence Policy, (1969-1976) and (2001-2008)—Core Findings:

- ***First, there has been no evolution in thinking about nuclear deterrence.***
- ***Second, policy-makers tend to operate according to a single theory of nuclear deterrence over time—despite changes in the strategic environment, weapon technology, and in their material interests.***
- ***Third, policy debates over nuclear doctrine and force structure are not between one group who “understands” the Nuclear Revolution and another that does not.***
- ***Fourth, casting the debate in such a dichotomous way is a significant hurdle to productive dialogue, and thus policy progress, on issues of shared concern.***

Policy prescription: how can policy-makers avoid the inflexible thinking that leads to a dialogue of the deaf?

The structural barriers that necessitate theory-driven thinking are going to be the same, if not worse, in the coming years.

We must, as a result, attempt to negotiate the agential barriers—namely, there must be explicit and widespread recognition that all deterrence preferences are belief-based.

Policy-makers must acknowledge:

There is no “right” or “wrong” on how best to enhance the credibility of nuclear deterrence.

Flexibility in using both the RDA and FMA theories to interpret available information is the best anyone can do.