

The Roles and Salience of U.S., British and French Nuclear Weapons

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The roles of American, British and French (P3) nuclear weapons are fundamentally political, not military in nature. Their principal purpose today is to deter the use of nuclear weapons against the United States, the United Kingdom, France and their allies. Nuclear weapons also prevent coercive diplomacy or “nuclear blackmail” by other nuclear-armed states against U.S., British and French vital interests. Nevertheless, as demonstrated during various conflicts and crises during the Cold War, the P3 states would only consider the employment of nuclear weapons as a last resort under the most extreme circumstances. Still, it remains important that states, particularly those in violation of their treaty obligations with respect to nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, considering armed aggression against the P3 nations and their allies take into account the possibility, however remote, that a conflict might escalate to the nuclear level.

The salience of nuclear weapons in the defense postures of the P3 has clearly declined since the end of the Cold War. Their nuclear systems have become part of the underpinning for maintaining the security of these states and their allies, mirroring the decline in the risks of major inter-state conflicts. The United States, United Kingdom and France want this trend to continue because it reduces the risk that nuclear weapons would actually be used and it strengthens their efforts to prevent further nuclear proliferation. However, the future importance of nuclear weapons to the P3 nations’ security is linked closely to how potential adversaries perceive the utility of their own nuclear weapons. If nuclear-armed states engage in aggression and pose nuclear threats, it may compel the P3 to rely more on their nuclear weapons to prevent or counter such aggression and possible nuclear use. Effective P3 deterrents will be needed during the transition period until all other nations recognize that the benefits of global nuclear disarmament outweigh the benefits of possessing nuclear weapons and join the P3 in reducing the roles and salience of nuclear weapons in their security strategies.

Such a reduction in the salience of nuclear weapons is also linked to the broader role of military force in international affairs. The P3 nations, particularly the United States, have increased their capabilities to defend against missiles and to utilize advanced conventional capabilities in warfare at the same time that they have reduced their reliance on nuclear weapons. For some potential adversaries, nuclear weapons may be perceived as a useful asymmetric counter to the P3’s conventional military capabilities. If such states engage in aggression or portray their nuclear forces as instruments for potential political leverage or even potential use in wars, then it may compel the P3 states to revisit their strategy and return to a greater reliance on nuclear weapons. The unique destructive power of nuclear weapons and the catastrophic consequences that would result from virtually any use of a nuclear weapon justifies focusing on the possibility of their elimination. However, until such time as perceived threats to P3 security have been resolved, nuclear forces will continue to have a role.

Thus, maintaining effective and credible American, British and French deterrents reduces the value of nuclear weapons to potential aggressors. It is also a central element in NATO's current concept of collective security, since credible P3 nuclear deterrents are intended to provide security for all NATO members, regardless of their own individual position with regard to the basing of nuclear capable forces on their territory. The perceived security provided by the maintenance of effective and credible P3 nuclear-capable forces increases the willingness of other major allies and friendly states to refrain from seeking to acquire nuclear weapons for themselves.

Nuclear weapons are not war-fighting instruments. But to be effective and credible, deterrence requires reliable forces that are maintained safely and securely. Moreover, the research and production infrastructure that supports P3 nuclear forces should be able to respond to the possible emergence of new threats with solid competencies, motivated personnel, and adequate facilities and budgets. The P3 states, unlike some other nuclear powers, do not believe their nuclear weapons require any new military capabilities to maintain their effect, but they do require safe, secure and reliable nuclear weapons and delivery systems supported by a modern, responsive infrastructure. By demonstrating their willingness and capability to maintain effective nuclear forces and the necessary supporting infrastructure, while seeking to negotiate stronger measures to prevent proliferation and to reduce nuclear arsenals, the P3 seek to make clear to both nuclear-armed and potentially nuclear-armed adversaries that they have nothing to gain by acquiring or expanding their nuclear forces.

The very existence of nuclear forces carries significant risks as well as benefits, however. They, or the fissile materials necessary to produce them, could be obtained by terrorists through theft, corruption, or the disintegration of states. Technical failures, however unlikely, could lead to accidents. Moreover, in the 21st century, deterrence is a more uncertain process than it was during the Cold War. Once a crisis or conflict begins and nuclear threats are made, there is potential for miscommunications, misunderstandings, or simply risky behavior and poor decisions that could lead to nuclear use. For these reasons, the achievement of a world without nuclear weapons is a goal worth pursuing.

Eliminating nuclear weapons completely is an arduous process that could take decades to achieve. Achieving this laudable goal would require significant changes in international relations, since a world without nuclear weapons is one in which no nation believes it is necessary to have them to ensure its survival, sovereignty, or core interests. The U.S.-Russian New START agreement is a step toward the conditions for such a world, but many additional steps remain, including building a more comprehensive and reliable non-proliferation regime and the resolution of long-standing, intractable regional conflicts. Nuclear weapons can only be eliminated when all nations come to believe they no longer need them. Since we cannot predict the evolution of the security environment during the transition to that desirable end-state, effective P3 deterrents are necessary to ensure that potential adversaries come to believe that the possession of nuclear weapons does not confer any advantage and thus are encouraged to join the P3 in moving toward a nuclear-free world.

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