

From Nuclear Primacy to Post-Existential Deterrence

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Obtaining nuclear weapons is a first step only, no matter how difficult it may seem to be for some states. Once a nuclear weapon has been tested and top-level politicians have decided to start with weaponization, the new nuclear weapon state has to come up with an agreed nuclear weapons policy. Second-strike capabilities, for instance, are not an automatic by-product of a nuclear weapon's capability. Difficult policy choices have to be made. Making these trade-offs is thus hardly a theoretical exercise, for the choices made have concrete consequences in the realm of diplomatic, financial, industrial and intelligence policy.

Choices have to be made in the three major sub-domains of nuclear weapons policy: force structure, operational, and declaratory policy.

Depending on the choices, five different nuclear weapons policies can be distinguished (in order of diminishing importance of nuclear weapons): nuclear primacy, maximum deterrence, minimum deterrence, existential deterrence, and post-existential deterrence.

The nuclear weapon states will probably shift their policies from nuclear primacy (US), maximum deterrence (Russia), minimum or existential deterrence (UK, France, Israel, China, India, Pakistan, North Korea) to post-existential deterrence (or elimination), taking one step at a time.