

create a healthy fear in Moscow of American destructive power, and, by means of this fear, keep Communism in line (at a minimum) or even roll it back (a larger ambition).

The West, in short, became committed to a very *expansive* vision of the role of nuclear weapons. They were commonly treated as the decisive factor in the conduct of Cold War diplomacy. They conveyed messages of strength and resolve to Moscow. To use these weapons, it was often suggested, would not be all that remarkable. John Foster Dulles, the US Secretary of State, made this position clear in a speech he gave to a closed NATO ministerial meeting in April 1954. The United States, he said, believed that nuclear weapons “must now be treated as in fact having become ‘conventional’. . . . It should be our agreed policy, in case of war, to use atomic weapons as conventional weapons against the military assets of the enemy whenever and wherever it would be of advantage to do so.”<sup>4</sup> Nuclear arms were war-fighting and war-winning weapons, and they were seen as vital to the conduct of a successful US foreign policy.

This policy assumed that America could maintain its nuclear superiority for many, many years (this assumption was widely held)—perhaps even indefinitely. It also required a massive increase in the nuclear arsenal. In 1947 the US possessed only 13 atomic bombs; in 1948 it had about 50. Thereafter the new weapons came to be mass produced. When Eisenhower was elected President, there were around 1,000 warheads in the US nuclear stockpile. By the time he left office, the arsenal totalled close to 20,000 warheads and was still growing.<sup>5</sup> Maintaining the nuclear advantage, it was generally believed, was essential for the security of free peoples.

The nuclear-based policy of the United States and its allies was attractive as long as the Soviet Union was nuclear-weak. For a few years, during which the USSR was exposed to American nuclear strikes, the American homeland was invulnerable to Soviet strikes of any kind, nuclear or conventional. But such relative Soviet impotence could not last long. Nuclear weaponry had made killing spectacularly easy—so easy that no unilateral defence, no attempts at self-protection, could be expected to prevent national devastation. It was only a matter of time until American society was exposed to nuclear weapons and their long-range delivery systems in the hands of a rival.

Moscow had the strongest incentive to “correct” the problem of the invulnerability of American territory. Indeed, Soviet leaders were determined to show that two could play the nuclear game, first under Khrushchev, with his rocket-rattling theatrics, and later under Brezhnev, when the Soviet nuclear buildup was particularly pronounced. The Kremlin demonstrated that it, too, could produce

nuclear weapons in abundance. In response to the colossal American nuclear buildup, Moscow offered a colossal buildup of its own. And in doing so it deprived Washington of its nuclear “advantage.” It brought about (for the first time) a true mutuality of vulnerability, and created the conditions for a kind of stalemate in the superpower relationship—a stalemate that sits uncomfortably with both the actual turbulence and incessant flux of world politics and the continuing desire of the great powers’ military establishments to devise ways, as they have always done, to use destructive force of all available sorts in pursuit of their nations’ political goals.

## POLITICAL MEANINGS

The presence of nuclear weapons in the modern world, and the consequences and significance of their presence, have been variously interpreted. Official doctrines have changed over time. Experts who espoused a particular position in one decade took a contrary view some years later. People often speak of “nuclear deterrence” as if it has a clear and agreed upon meaning, which it does not have and never has had. Elaborate theories of deterrence are constructed in isolation from the messiness and muddle of actual political conduct. Since no nuclear war has yet occurred, speculation abounds when experience is slight. The public ignorance of nuclear policies is legion (some 80% of Americans do not know that their government is committed to nuclear first-use)<sup>6</sup> and this ignorance is readily exploited by all varieties of ideologues and the spokesmen for numerous special interests. Contradictions and confusion are rife. Many people have tried to find their way through these thickets, in the interest of a clearer and ‘dis-illusioned’ grasp of reality. The following propositions are offered as an interim political and historical report card.

- (1) Nuclear weapons constitute, by their very nature and existence, a mortal threat. As has usually been the case with weapons of destruction, their possessors regard them as defensive while those against whom they are targeted see them as means of aggression. Few if any states, past or present, have admitted to being aggressive, for sovereign states interpret their own intentions kindly. Such moral conceits are commonplace in politics. However, putting putative motives aside, one is left with raw power. The destructive power of nuclear weapons has nothing to do with protection, or objective security, or self-defence—there is, in fact, no such thing as a “nuclear umbrella.” Rather, these weapons are solely tools of destructive attack. Each nuclear