



Book Review

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The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century

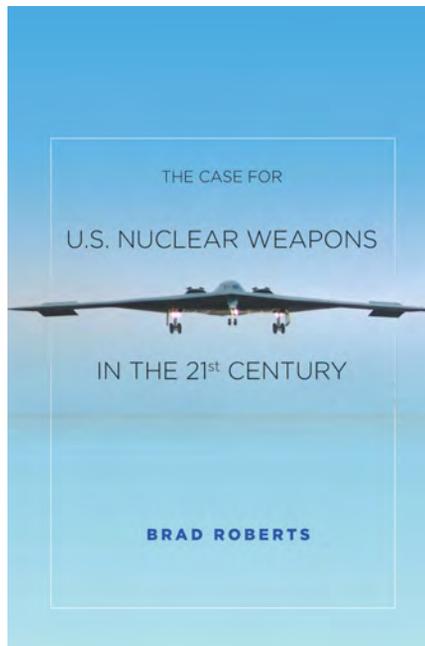
Brad Roberts

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Roberts, director of the Center for Global Security Research at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and an Obama administration deputy assistant secretary for nuclear defense policy, has produced a factually based, highly readable counterargument to the nuclear free advocacy of recent years. Rather than attack the race-to-zero argument head on, the author presents a cool, level-headed analysis based on recent-past and expected world conditions affecting the deterrence posture of the United States. He wastes no time with a historical nuclear weapon narrative but instead begins with a concise discussion of U.S. nuclear policy evolution administration by administration beginning with the George H.W. Bush presidency. From there, current U.S. adversaries are analyzed with separate chapters devoted to isolationist North Korea, authoritarian China, and Russia under Putin's anti-democratic regime. The book's timing could not have been better coinciding with the rise of a populist, domestically focused, U.S. presidency, an expansionist China, and an aggressive Russian state utilizing cyber-attacks in repeated attempts to fracture the Western international coalition.



The author's pragmatic approach is both edifying and sobering. The analysis features dealing with Putin's Russia echoing the daily warnings one hears on CNN or MSNBC about Russian interference in U.S. politics but with a perspective that includes the other side's calculus of their tactical situation. "Humiliation," "encirclement," and "threatened" are words rarely heard from the American side when discussing Russia's motivations for their cyber-attack and misinformation campaigns targeting the 2016 American election. But make no mistake; the author brings this clarity for the sole reason of arguing for the maintenance of a strong nuclear posture—not to excuse Russia for its expansionist moves and covert attacks on western democracies. Roberts provides eye-

opening detail about the current global alignment of nations and an international perspective minus—by its copyright date—the ascendancy of Trump. But I daresay factoring in the current administration's maneuvers, the author by virtue of his diligence and hard work, appears prescient.

Grounded in the real-world experience of service in the Obama administration, Roberts explains how the optimistic "U.S.-Russian reset" of 2009 was derailed by the ascendancy of Putin in 2013. Putin's view that NATO's intervention in Libya exceeded the organization's mandate and was therefore a signal of U.S. intentions to push its hegemony forward while maintaining the international order to its liking, was key to breaking down relations between Washington and Moscow. As a result, Russia embarked on a mission to increase its prowess by annexing territory (the Crimea and eastern Ukraine), and working covertly through espionage and cyber-warfare to decouple the U.S. from its European allies and themselves from each other, thus weakening the alliance and the international regime so favorable to supporting the American agenda. Roberts' insight into these matters is the reader's gain. He uses his access to Obama administration materials to open a door for the reader that permits—as an example of the fine structure provided—Putin's own words to be read. In speeches to the Duma in which the motivations of the Russian president's anti-Americanism are articulated, Roberts clarifies the Rus-



sian standpoint of world order: America and the West, unopposed by another superpower, have forsworn diplomacy for the rule of the gun. Putin's evidence is the American foray into the Middle East, particularly Syria and Iraq, that through the Russian authoritarian's eyes, have made the world less safe (so much for America winning the Cold War).

Roberts explains what Russia will do to even the score. Fearful of NATO moves to garner membership closer to Russia's borders and equally appalled by internal insurrection possibly instigated by NATO or American efforts, Putin and the Russian military hierarchy may have concluded that the West is already fractured regarding its response to a limited nuclear threat and may have adopted a posture that includes the western alliance backing down in the face of potential escalation. No one can be quite sure what is addressed behind the doors of the Kremlin so Roberts has culled the work of many domestic and foreign analysts to provide the following developments that will resonate with anyone following recent cable news programming: Russia is complimenting its nuclear capabilities with cyber and space commands; the Russian military believes that cyberwarfare may lead to capitulation by the enemy; and perhaps most disturbing and foretelling of all is the following analysis that sums up Putin's aims: he cannot obtain destruction of the hated United States without committing national suicide so he seeks maximum extension of Russian influence, the destruction of NATO, and the discrediting and humiliation of the U.S. as guarantor of Western security. We now have proof of this doctrine as western democracies battle Russia to protect their election systems. And no greater proof was ob-

served than by Russia's interference in America's sovereignty that resulted in a current presidential administration that was/is publically anti-NATO, publically pro-Putin and currently fraught with such ineptitude, it is now regarded as a security threat to the West. Our nation's dire situation aside for the moment, need we look further to illustrate the insightful nature of Robert's work?

Nuclear weapon policy issues receive equally profound treatment. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss extended deterrence in Europe and Asia respectively. Extended deterrence—the nuclear umbrella of protection that has been a centerpiece of U.S. defensive policy for decades, is both a declarative and technical strategy. The plan must be backed by the capability to provide a nuclear response. As such, it has become a much debated topic in the context of U.S. nuclear weapon reduction (Obama administration) and a plan to lessen reliance on nuclear weapons (Clinton and Bush administrations). The concerns of U.S. allies lie with the narrowing of the nuclear umbrella. Roberts discusses extended deterrence in the context of the evolving security environment of Europe and the discussions within NATO concerning “nuclear sharing” (the deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons and nuclear capable aircraft under the command of the U.S. on the soil of select member nations). This policy originated in the 1950s and though reaffirmed in 1999, nuclear weapon reductions in Europe continued to the point where they were reduced to 97 percent of their peak. The Obama administration answered the question about removing the last 3 percent of the weapons by engaging its NATO partners to develop a new strategic concept outlined in Chapter 6 (spoiler alert: nuclear

weapons do not disappear). Roberts does not provide a one sided argument. The critics of the new strategic concept are given voice particularly regarding the use of mixed nuclear and conventional weapons to achieve credible defense (the exact recipe for that mix was not formulated in the strategy).

Readers will find the subsequent discussions detailed but eminently readable. Roberts explains the developing strategies within NATO in light of Putin's annexation of the Crimea and continued interference in the Ukraine. What NATO needs he emphasizes, is a clear understanding on where all the escalation thresholds are with regard to Russia. Given the current administration's reluctance to acknowledge Russian involvement in the 2016 U.S. election cyber-influence campaign – a threshold determined by U.S. intelligence to have been crossed, breached and violated - all readers should take heed of this chapter and its guidance.

In the Pacific, deterrence policy is dominated by the actions of North Korea and its steadfast, reactionary path towards nuclear weapon and international ballistic missile development. Recent developments have to an extent outstripped this chapter (number 7) but by no means are the discussions irrelevant. While acknowledging that extended deterrence is as important in the Pacific as it is in Europe, Roberts points out significant differences in this region: China's maintenance of a positive relationship with the U.S., China's acknowledgement that its economy is tied to the U.S., China's military build-up and assertiveness in the region and Japan's and/or South Korea's potential development of strike forces of their own. The latter undermine deterrence and would likely be met

with reactions harmful to both nations. Another difference: unlike Russia which has used military and cyber means to destabilize the allegiance between European nations, China has not.

One of the hallmarks of this book is its comprehensive view—a view that takes it beyond nuclear weapons. This is apparent in chapter 7 where the discussion includes the role of regional conventional weapons such as missile and interceptor defenses. As an example, Roberts points out that while Japan must consider the mix of defensive systems it needs against North Korea, it must also now consider designing such defense against a more influential and posturing China. This broader analysis is done elsewhere in the book giving the reader perspective on the role of nuclear weapons in the context of current geopolitical and military landscapes.

The earlier chapters (2 and 3) cast a wide net as well. Here, Roberts sets

the table for the remainder of the book exploring what North Korean leaders are possibly thinking is their end-point, their theory (or theories) of nuclear victory. This is followed by a characterization of the U.S. response to regional challengers like China, North Korea and Russia. His “blue theory of victory” is suggested as a means to manage escalation and de-escalation with a nuclear armed state in both peacetime and war. As mentioned, Roberts recommends a continued use of nuclear weapons adapted to the changing threat landscape. Nuclear weapons make the risks of global leadership bearable for the U.S. Other nations are not prepared to join in a weapons rollback and therefore a unilateral reduction by the U.S. is at the very least, unwise. In his epilogue, Roberts dispels the untruth that the way nuclear weapons are thought of in the U.S. is anachronistic—a holdover perception of the Cold War era. This he claims is the thinking of advoca-

cy groups seeking nuclear reductions or zero attainment; thinking, from his analysis, that is simply incorrect.

There are few downsides to this book. The inclusion of non-nuclear strategy and tactics is sometimes hard to follow for the uninitiated but its exclusion would only diminish the analysis. There are no tables, figures or photographs but no component of the book truly calls out for any of that. The terminology is understandable throughout. The acronyms utilized are rather commonplace and in any case, are defined in the text. More than forty pages of reference notes and a sixteen-page index fulfill scholarly research needs. It is a well-constructed and comprehensible analysis. *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons* is a fine read even for those with convictions planted on the other side who advocate for their dissolution. It may very well happen one day, but in Roberts view, that day is not today.