The Morality of the Nuclear Deterrent - how to decide for yourself

Everyone in the world is threatened by the existence of nuclear weapons. Has anyone the right to wield such destructive power? Everyone has a right to ask this question, and those who live in countries possessing nuclear weapons have a duty to answer it. It has to be a personal moral decision, because if you accept nuclear weapons (NW) for your defence, then morally you hold them in your own hands. This chart is designed to help you decide, and to make national decision makers more accountable. Just follow the chart, answering the questions for yourself; it’s easier than it looks but the decisions can be hard.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR DETERRENCE

The potential aggressor must believe that the capability and the will to retaliate will survive a nuclear attack. He must believe that individual members of the defending forces are sufficiently disciplined that they would inflict an appalling death on millions of innocent people, even after it would serve no useful purpose, deterrence having failed.

Could it be done without also deceiving a large proportion of the population?

- Yes
- No

Is this morally acceptable?

- Yes
- No

Is the possession and deployment of NW, such that the perceived threat or the fear generated by uncertainty is an effective deterrent, a morally acceptable means of defence?

- Yes
- No

Are these conditions morally acceptable?

- Yes
- No

Are they attainable in practice?

- Yes
- No

Could a nuclear deterrent be an effective defence against non-national groups using NW?

- Yes
- No

Were you ever permitted to kill in self defence?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

May a nation state kill in self defence?

- Yes
- No

May a state, acting as a result of a military action, kill civilians through a deliberate policy?

- Yes
- No

May a state, acting in self defence, kill civilians through a deliberate policy?

- Yes
- No

Can NW be an effective deterrent if the intended use is limited to ensuring defeat for aggressors (e.g. by targeting of military infrastructure)?

- Yes
- No

Is it acceptable for a state to be willing to use a NW as a weapon of mass destruction to deter a conventional attack?

- Yes
- No

Are you prepared to take an action that inevitably results in destruction of some innocent lives?

- Yes
- No

You have renounced the principle of the nuclear deterrent as being immoral.

- Yes
- No

To be involved in this process, through military service, a civilian occupation or merely by paying your taxes, would not be consistent with the position you have taken. However, you already bear responsibility to the extent that your decisions serve no useful purpose, deterrence having failed.

Would the unconditional abandonment of the nuclear deterrent by your country be more likely or less likely to lead to the use of nuclear weapons in the long term?

- More likely
- Less likely

Would the abandonment of the nuclear deterrent mean that your country might be subjugated by others with nuclear weapons?

- Yes
- No

May a state intentionally kill civilians using NW deployed as a deterrent?

- Yes
- No

You must now decide what steps are open to you to bring about the abolition of nuclear weapons.

- You may support unilateral disarmament.
- You may support bilateral disarmament.
- You must now decide which course you could support in changing the policy, weighing the risks of various routes to disarmament.

The purpose of this document is to enable a broadly based democratic response to a very complex problem. By limiting the scope to morality, it allows people to consider the ethical implications of various policies without being overwhelmed by the technical and political complexities involved.

Key

1. Moral questions
2. Other questions
3. Comments
4. Ref. to notes

You should now examine the morality of practical modes of deployment, e.g. a preventive strike capability - is this an acceptable course of action?

- Yes
- No

If nuclear war is inevitable, is it acceptable for a state to seek security through NW?

- Yes
- No

You have accepted nuclear weapons for your defence, and therefore also their development, maintenance and deployment. To be involved in this process, through military service, a civilian occupation or merely by paying your taxes, would be inconsistent with the position you have taken. However, you already bear responsibility to the extent that your decisions serve no useful purpose, deterrence having failed.

You have the right to achieve your own security by endangering the rest of humanity?

- Yes
- No

If escalation of the destructiveness of the capability of the nuclear states is most likely consequence of the “balance of terror”, is it likely to prevent them from doing so?

- Yes
- No

Are you prepared to re-examine the case for retaining a deterrent in these circumstances?

- Yes
- No

Do you need to adjust your moral standpoint?

- Yes
- No

Is it therefore likely that eventually the policy of deterrence will lead to a nuclear war?

- Yes
- No

Does the risk of nuclear war imply a risk of serious consequences for neighbouring non-contraband states or even for the rest of humanity?

- Yes
- No

In the face of so much real need in the world can you justify securing your defence through vast expenditure on the nuclear deterrent?

- Yes
- No

If you have accepted the standard by which mass bombing of cities during World War 2 was justified.

- Yes
- No

If you have handed over your conscience to your state.

- Yes
- No

As holders of NW, could you deny other states the right to seek security through NW?

- Yes
- No

If you believe that your state has some intrinsic stability or moral superiority that is lacked by potential enemies.

- Yes
- No

You believe that some more will want to do so?

- Yes
- No

Would conventional war between nation states become more likely without the nuclear deterrent?

- Yes
- No

Are you prepared to compromise your moral standpoint?

- Yes
- No

Would a nuclear deterrent be an effective means of keeping the peace?

- Yes
- No

You may be a pacifist, but please continue with other questions which are still relevant to your case.

- Yes
- No

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Further information is at: www.nuclearmorality.com