The Deterrence Theory of Sir Michael Quinlan

Daniel Skeffington and Lord Stirrup KG GCB AFC

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Preface

Marshal of the Royal Air Force the Lord Stirrup KG GCB AFC

Almost from the moment "Little Boy" was dropped over Hiroshima on 6 August 1945, people have struggled to reconcile the existence of nuclear weapons with their potential to destroy most if not all human life on the planet. One response has been to call for a total ban on their possession, but absent a global authority with the credibility and muscle to police and enforce such a system this is not a realistic option. Unilateral disarmament is an even more illogical approach. It would leave nuclear weapons in the hands of only the most irresponsible of actors, creating a highly volatile and dangerous environment in which the threat of nuclear coercion and miscalculation would rise commensurately.

In the face of this dilemma, the nuclear-armed states, principally the United States of America and the Soviet Union, evolved a system of deterrence in the decades immediately following the Second World War. This was not a static arrangement – on the part of NATO it evolved from the threat of massive retaliation to a more flexible posture – but in all cases it relied upon a collective understanding amongst potential antagonists that their use of nuclear weapons would pose unacceptable risks and costs to themselves. It was thus not just about physical capabilities: it was a form of cognitive warfare that long predated the fashionable use of that term in defence circles.

Since the principal purpose of such deterrence through the second half of the 20th century was to prevent war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, the dissolution of the latter and the end of the Soviet Union caused some to question its continued relevance. This was particularly so given the rise in terrorist threats from smaller organisations and states: entities that might employ chemical, biological, radiological, or even nuclear weapons, but would not be deterred by the kinds of threats that had been effective against the old adversaries.

Such views, however, overlooked a key point. Newer and more diverse threats complicated the picture and might thus require additional responses, but their emergence did not mean that the old threats had disappeared. And in any event, deterring a nuclear exchange was never about nuclear capabilities alone: to be effective, deterrence must take account of military operations across the whole spectrum of conflict. It is therefore wrong to think in terms of nuclear deterrence: one must think of how deterrence in the round can minimise the risk of a nuclear exchange. In the last twenty

years, of course, the evidence of President Putin's aggressive expansionist intent and the rapid development of China's nuclear capabilities have brought us full circle to the consideration of deterrence between states and alliances.

It is therefore timely to re-examine the whole question of our deterrence doctrine and its applicability to the current international situation. Is there any fundamental difference between the challenges of today and those of the Cold War? Are our capabilities and processes fit for purpose? And, most importantly, is our approach to the all-important cognitive element of the deterrence process adequate in the present circumstances? Fortunately, in addressing these questions we do not start with a blank sheet of paper. Our greatest thinker on deterrence during and immediately after the Cold War was Sir Michael Quinlan. Although he died in 2009, he left behind an important body of work, and this provides a particularly good starting point for our current investigation. This paper therefore re-examines his thinking in a modern context, assesses its relevance to current challenges, and builds on his ideas to propose a theoretical underpinning for deterrence which is fit for the coming decades. To the extent that it succeeds, therefore, it stands on the shoulders of a giant.

Executive Summary

> *Complex theorizing about nuclear weapons and war is sometimes referred to, a shade dismissively, as a sort of 'theology', and it has been wryly said that the two disciplines have at least in common that we shall find out for sure what is true and sound only when it is too late to do anything further about it. We have no empirical data beyond 1945 about how events may run if nuclear weapons are used, and none at all about nuclear weapon powers coming seriously to war with one another whether with or without such use. Even propositions about the achievement of nuclear weapons in deterrence cannot look for rigorous evidentiary proof, since such propositions are essentially about alternative history— about what would or might have happened had matters been other than they actually were. This ought to instil in all who make diagnostic or predictive assertions about these matters a degree of intellectual humility that is in practice not always evident.*[1]
>
> Sir Michael Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*, 2009

The emergence of a unipolar world after 1989 marked a decisive moment in international affairs. At the end of the Cold War, many hoped that nuclear weapons would lose their prominent place in inter-state relations; that their reduction, even their abolition, was a real possibility, and that the regional conflicts that defined the twentieth century would decline in both number and intensity. Yet, in many ways, the post-Cold War period produced a fragmented, multi-polar threat environment. A reduction in great power rivalry saw new threats emerge. The proliferation of both rogue states and non-state actors seeking nuclear material for warheads and 'dirty bombs', alongside biological and chemical weapons, presented a new challenge for intelligence and defence planners geared to a state-on-state confrontation. Terrorism became a major transnational issue, resulting in extended campaigns such as the 2001 War in Afghanistan and the 2003 War in Iraq.

Yet great power competition – for many a distant memory – did not disappear: it evolved. While European nations reduced their defence spending, focusing on the benefits of the 'peace dividend' and turning their attention to 'new' threats, they reduced their traditional deterrent posture against Russia. Conversely, Russia began reconstituting itself, rebuilding and extending its Cold War military and regional alliances, while China's entry into the WTO along with the liberal opening of world markets granted it the economic ability to expand greatly its military capabilities, presenting a range of challenges in the Taiwan Strait and the

1. Michael Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons: Principles, Problems, Prospects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 12-13

South China Sea. Great power competition shaped the post-Cold War era through regional wars in the Middle East and North Africa, adding a new dimension to conflicts with non-state and rogue-state actors.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 22nd February 2022 marked a definitive end to the post-Cold War era. A new, multi-polar world order is emerging, characterised by a return to overt great power competition. Yet the old threat picture remains. The challenges of the post-Cold War threat environment thus pose complex and serious concerns for strategic planners and defence establishments across the world, complicating their potential responses to the new strategic era. This was evidenced most recently by the Islamic Republic of Iran's accelerated effort to acquire a nuclear weapon in the spring and summer of 2025. Setting aside the U.S. strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, broader questions have arisen as to the security of nuclear material in the event of a regional war. Equally, the procurement or designing of bio- and chemical weapons is still a potent threat, especially when merged with novel advances in artificial intelligence and the constant sparring of nations in cyber-space.

Within this evolving threat environment, discussions across the NATO alliance have returned to the role of nuclear weapons, refocusing on deterrence in the wake of the Russo-Ukrainian war.[2] In the United Kingdom, the government has recommitted to the submarine-launched *Trident* program and revived the second leg of its nuclear capabilities, announcing the purchase of twelve F-35A aircraft, each capable of delivering low-yield nuclear weapons. This marks a serious, long-term commitment to the deterrence that these capabilities provide, and emphasises the importance of nuclear weapons in the British and NATO arsenal. But what role do such weapons play in national security? Why do we possess them, how might they be used, and how can the possibility of such use be minimised in this new and more complicated world order?

Sir Michael Quinlan, former Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Defence, spent much of his career grappling with these questions. In later life, he sought to provide an answer. For him, there was a clear moral case for nuclear possession and, *in extremis*, nuclear use. A thoughtful and incisive theoretician and practitioner for whom war was an unthinkable catastrophe, he was convinced that neither pacifism nor rationalism was the answer to confronting a nuclear-armed world and devoted much energy to articulating a theory of deterrence. Quinlan's work presents a framework through which to deter aggression by clearly linking interests and worldviews to the capabilities and capacities we need to defend ourselves. For Quinlan, deterrence begins with ethical concerns and a 'sense of self'. These are conditioned by the core things that a society values and prioritises: its 'absolute interests'. Here, ethics, international legitimacy, and hard power politics meet to form a system of communication rooted in realistic and well-defined priorities.

Quinlan's theory holds true even when the dependability of one's allies is doubtful – even a superpower such as the United States. It does so by offsetting one's relative lack of firepower with the demonstrable capability

2. NATO Summit, June 24th-25th, 2025.

to inflict unacceptable losses in response to an adversary's specific aim, in terms of interests prized by that adversary. This is not pure *realpolitik*, but an exercise of judgement rooted in the national interest. Further, while nuclear weapons may be the ultimate element of deterrence, they are only one part of a complex whole. Nuclear weapons are linked to other methods by which one deters, compels, coerces, or otherwise influences one's adversaries. These methods and capabilities are not solely military. While 'hard power' is naturally central to deterrence, it is subservient to value judgements and political goals which inform why and how one uses force. Equally, to this end economic, social, judicial, and even religious or cultural factors can influence and aid deterrence.

Quinlan therefore goes beyond 'rationalist' deterrence calculations or threat assessments and assigns a strong importance to cognitive warfare: value judgements and priorities, rooted in how we understand our adversaries and how they understand us; how we communicate our absolute and relative priorities, and how they communicate theirs back. This goes far beyond the bounds of 'hard' power. He showed that the purpose of British deterrence doctrine is to fit within broader U.S. and NATO policies, complicating the decision-making process of its key adversary, Russia, by ensuring that Britain poses sufficient risks to Russian core interest, even in the absence of a clear U.S. military guarantee. This line of thought permeated his understanding of Britain as the 'second centre of decision': the idea that the British deterrent contributed to defence, not through size or scale, but as an independently operated system within the broader NATO nuclear shield, and that it could damage Russia's core interests sufficiently to complicate their decision-making and thereby strengthen the alliance.

From this basis, Quinlan argued that the possession and potential use of nuclear weapons are not only necessary, but within certain circumstances even moral. Indeed, in some cases the non-possession or non-willingness to employ nuclear weapons may even be immoral, particularly if the threat posed is thought to be existential. Quinlan defined an 'existential threat' as one which puts at risk things or values of a state whose loss or destruction absolutely cannot be accepted, as they are central to the notion of the society itself. If an adversary intends to undermine one's way of life in this manner, Quinlan thought one must be able to demonstrate to them how their actions could result in even the modest chance of unacceptable force, coupled with a clear and credible willingness to employ that force, while retaining a degree of ambiguity as to the precise conditions which would invoke its employment. This was a strategic and moral imperative, relying neither on hawkish arguments nor warmongering injunctions that nuclear weapons should be used. Rather, it reflects the realities that nuclear weapons have imposed upon societies since their inception: the impossibility of un-inventing them, and the need to take seriously the threat of their use against oneself. It was in this spirit that Quinlan began, in the latter stages of the Cold War, to engage with civil society, articulating the moral argument for thinking about the unthinkable, precisely to prevent

the unthinkable from occurring.[3]

This paper aims to revive and extend some of Quinlan's key thoughts for contemporary discourse. The United Kingdom and her allies face the most serious threat to their security since the fall of the Soviet Union. Debates on nuclear weapons and deterrence are likely to dominate the coming years as Britain adopts nuclear-capable aircraft and relies more explicitly on her Trident-armed submarine fleet. Those debates have already begun to surface in the wake of the 2025 Strategic Defence Review, as well as in transatlantic discussions with our most important security partner, the United States. Michael Quinlan's work is an important and under-examined resource and can make a valuable contribution to contemporary public discourse. When examined in the current geopolitical context, it leads to the following points, which might be termed the principles of modern nuclear deterrence theory.

1. Nuclear weapons exist and cannot be un-invented. The primary aim must be to prevent their use by deterring conflicts – both 'conventional' and 'nuclear'– and to limit their numbers while retaining credibility.
2. The possession and, *in extremis*, the use of nuclear weapons is both necessary and moral. Thinking seriously about these questions is a moral activity of the highest order.
3. Deterrence works as a 'package', rather than a 'a stack of sealed boxes'. While there is a clear, longstanding conceptual distinction between the actual use of 'conventional' versus 'nuclear' weapons, in Quinlan's mind there can be no clear divide between these classes of weapon in deterrence theory. This is most evident in contemporary Russian strategic doctrine and planning, which has explicitly embraced a 'sliding scale' of deterrence, deliberately blurring this conceptual distinction for strategic advantage.
4. Deterrence must therefore rest on a spectrum of capabilities, from 'highest' to 'lowest', including unconventional capabilities[4], with no significant gaps in either our political or military ability to manoeuvre between them with agility. A broad and flexible approach conforms with a more complex, multi-polar world.
5. Such an approach is based on capabilities and credibility. Possession of adequate capabilities is necessary but not sufficient; it must be accompanied by the demonstrable ability and will to use them, combined with a degree of deliberate strategic ambiguity over the costs we are prepared to impose in response to actions which affect our core interests.
6. The possession of a spectrum of capabilities and the credible will to use them is designed to prevent their use, not to encourage it. To this end, one must establish clearly in the mind of an adversary the damage they would suffer, and the political determination to impose such a cost, should certain lines be crossed.

3. Dr. Tanya Ogilvie-White, who compiled much of Quinlan's correspondence during this period, notes he was a major figure in enabling discussions between government and civil society, and was instrumental in arguing for nuclear arms decisions over Trident to be made public by Margaret Thatcher's Government. Beatrice Heuser, Paul O'Neill, Tanya Ogilvie-White & Kristan Stoddart (April 5 2023) 'Episode 9: Sir Michael Quinlan and British Nuclear Strategy', *RUSI Talking Strategy Podcasts*.

4. Such as covert operations, cyber, and information warfare.

7. The United Kingdom need not field all of the necessary capabilities itself, but an approach that encompasses NATO partners must be coherent and coordinated, covering key areas where it is vulnerable to coercion or might be prevented from responding to threats.

I *Introduction*

> *The breakdowns of deterrence most evident to Western countries since World War II include the crises over Korea in 1950, Cuba in 1962, the Falkland Islands in 1982, and Kuwait in 1990. In most if not all of those instances the existence of adequate military power to defeat and reverse the offence was manifest. The breakdowns were not caused by misperception of that on either side.* ***They resulted from failure— whether blameworthy or not— to implant unmistakably and convincingly in the adversary's mind, in advance, an accurate sense of what would absolutely not be acquiesced in****. This is best done not just by one-off assertion but through understandings of interest, and perceptions of consequent resolve, built up by behaviour over time.*[5]
>
> Sir Michael Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*, 2009

Sir Michael Quinlan was one of the most articulate thinkers and practitioners of nuclear deterrence during the Cold War. After joining the civil service in 1954 he served as Private Secretary to two Chiefs of the Air Staff, ending the Cold War as Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Defence. During his long career in British public life he developed a theory of deterrence, which he was to many the 'high priest'.[6] This was underpinned by arguments both moral and strategic, connecting the idea of deterrence with the value-systems of those whom one intends to deter. For the very activity of thinking about nuclear weapons – their purpose, their power, their role in the protection of the state and its people – begs moral questions from which any analysis cannot be separated.

This approach was heavily conditioned by the pragmatic realities of the Cold War, and framed by two uncomfortable truths: that nuclear weapons exist, and that there is a tendency amongst humans 'to act aggressively and savagely, and to oppress others, a world in which "evil leaders and evil systems" also exist'.[7] He saw in the Soviet Union a nuclear-armed, aggressive, expansionist, totalitarian state willing and able to pose an existential threat to the British way of life. Given the nature of the adversary and ideology faced by Britain and her Western allies, Quinlan's fundamental conviction was that both nuclear possession and nuclear use were justified if the alternatives were sufficiently stark, and in some extreme circumstances nuclear use would be a moral obligation.[8] He viewed the coherence of this argument as essential to defending Western values and was willing to expend significant intellectual time and capital to it in his private correspondence.[9] This was a deeply ethical argument, with strategy growing naturally from foundational beliefs and principles,

5. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 23. He drew on an almost identical passage from an earlier essay. See Michael Quinlan, 'Deterrence and Deterrability', Contemporary Security Policy 25(1), 11-17, pp.12-13 [emphasis ours]
6. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons* 13; Richard Mottram, "Obituary: Sir Michael Quinlan, Leading strategist at the MoD during the cold war, and defender of nuclear deterrence," *The Guardian*, March 2, 2009
7. Frank L. Jones (2013) "The High Priest of Deterrence": Sir Michael Quinlan, Nuclear Weapons, and the Just War Tradition *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, 16(3), pp. 14-42, 21-22; Gregory Giles (July 5 2023) 'Michael Quinlan Was Right: The Enduring Relevance of Nuclear Deterrence'
8. Tanya Ogilvie-White (ed.) *On Nuclear Deterrence: The Correspondence of Sir Michael Quinlan*, (London, Routledge, 2011) 64-66
9. Ogilvie-White (ed.) *On Nuclear Deterrence: The Correspondence of Sir Michael Quinlan*, (London, Routledge, 2011)

driven by the ideological tensions that underlay the Cold War.

At a basic level, Quinlan thought that the invention, first of atomic and then of thermonuclear weapons, linked to developments in missile technology, created a new age of war and political competition. Such was their destructive force, they made war between great powers a logical absurdity. However, it was clear from the outset that nuclear weapons could be used to gain an advantage over other states, so it was necessary to think seriously about how, why, and when they should be employed in order to constrain such use. They thus became a 'strategic necessity', intended primarily to raise the risk of their actual use by an adversary to an impossibly high level by imposing unacceptably severe costs on that adversary.

Conversely, he believed the idea of 'no first-use' to be a dangerous doctrine which undermined the fundamentally stable conditions produced by effective nuclear deterrence, and thought the arguments for 'no first use' were weak.[10] In his view 'no first use' amounted to a bluff, and an extremely serious bluff at that.[11] Given the USSR held a vast advantage in conventional forces over NATO allies, nuclear weapons would have to be used by the latter early on in any conflict, rending 'no first use' nonsensical and non-credible as a policy. Instead, he thought conventional forces should be built up to make discussions of no first-use unnecessary, providing a demonstrable chain of capabilities from low-scale conflict to high-intensity mass destruction which would deter an aggressor from acting in the first place. Strong conventional forces linked to credible nuclear deterrence for a range of nuclear and non-nuclear attacks on NATO territory were therefore the strongest, clearest, and most rational means of preserving stability and security on the European mainland. Properly conceived, therefore, nuclear deterrence was an 'inherently stable condition' because the costs it imposed were so high, making even the strongest states cautious and risk averse.[12]

10. Ibid 90-91
11. Ibid, 95
12. Ogilvie-White (ed.) *On Nuclear Deterrence: The Correspondence of Sir Michael Quinlan*, (London, Routledge, 2011) 74

II *The Essentials of Quinlan's Deterrence Theory*

Deterrence long predates the development of nuclear weapons, even if it was not explicitly theorised in contemporary terms.[13] In English, the root of 'deterrence' is that of 'terror' of 'frighten', and 'implies the infliction of apprehension' to shape an adversary's choices and actions.[14] This etymology was central to Quinlan's early thought, as he sought to distinguish deterrence from the closely connected concept of dissuasion.[15] Dissuasion involves maintaining such a degree of 'weighty and sophisticated' military capabilities that competition is ruled out altogether, as it is not worth the political or the economic cost.[16] Quinlan thought dissuasion occurred prior to deterrence, and that deterrence was a subset of this larger practice.[17] To his mind, deterrence proper is about 'fear of costs' coupled with a 'clear discourse' which ensures such costs are understood:[18] peace through strength, achieved by communicating that strength clearly. As we shall see, this does not necessarily entail clarity, as being overly clear may paradoxically weaken one's deterrence posture. Externally, it may create pathways by which an adversary can evade and reduce the impact. Internally, specifying conditions may cause a 'contentious national or international debate' which undermines one's initial resolve, placing pressures on leaders who may capitulate.[19] There is an art to deterring clearly without over-specificity.

Quinlan's notion of deterrence can be summarised as one's ability to impose costs in the mind of the adversary who is not dissuaded from acting in the first instance. It is about communicating those costs to preclude successful action by an adversary to further their own ends.[20] The aim is to elicit a comparison in the adversary's own mind on the 'net balance of advantage' between the costs of his intended action and the costs of inaction.[21] In other words, there is a strong element of cognitive warfare inherent in deterrence theory. It is for this reason that Quinlan theorised deterrence in less rationalistic terms. He recognised the catastrophic damage which nuclear weapons can wreak upon society and sought to place this front-and-centre of the debate amongst NATO's leaders and their adversaries. The core goal of his deterrent theory is to make war unthinkable, by forcing decision-makers to see clearly just how and why aggressive action might cause nuclear weapons to be used.

This involves engaging with strategic and political calculus, but also with moral questions, even beliefs and worldviews. These cannot – indeed must not – be separated. The links between ethical and interests-based

13. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 20
14. Quinlan, 'Deterrence and Deterrability', 14; Dmitry Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024) 30
15. By the end of his life, he accepted these had become blurred in English language discourse but still sought to maintain the distinction. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 18
16. Quinlan, 'Deterrence and Deterrability'. 14
17. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 19
18. Quinlan, 'Deterrence and Deterrability'. 14
19. Quinlan, 'Deterrence and Deterrability'. 13, [emphasis ours]
20. A segment of the NATO Nuclear Planning Group was devoted to the study of the Communication of Nuclear Intentions. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 42
21. Quinlan, 'Deterrence and Deterrability'. 14

thinking – which can incorporate 'values' or one's 'way of life' – and the logic of deterrence are the key to understanding Quinlan's thought. Every person, group, and state has a value system which conditions what they hold most dear, what they fundamentally wish to preserve, and therefore how they act. Barring those who are truly insane, this leaves us with a world of not necessarily rational, but at least deterrable, actors[22]; actors who are rational within their own strategic cultures and circumstances. One must therefore think through the 'possible reasoning of an adversary' in advance, and do so 'in his terms, not in ours', allowing also for how he might think in future circumstances. [23]

The essence of this activity, the practice and planning of deterrence, was to foresee and foreclose future scenarios in which NATO might be forced to surrender. Quinlan explicitly likened deterrence to a 'chess master… blocking off in advance a variety of possible moves in an opponent's mind'. To that end, he argued that practical provisions should be made for international security to avert the very idea of war. This chimes with a much older tradition of British statecraft which underpinned the international system prior to 1914. While wars were not precluded, they were less serious, contained in scope and scale by the military, political, and legal arrangements constructed after 1814, and reaffirmed in 1815, to prevent a 'world war' from erupting on the continent.[24] Since becoming a significant power in the early seventeenth century, English, and later British, forces were regularly mobilised between to deter great power conflict in Europe, clearly establishing in the minds of those mobilising or agitating for war that they could not hope to achieve their aims by conquest, nor pose a serious threat to the British Isles if they tried. Quinlan uses precisely the same logic when discussing 'non-city' targets and limited nuclear war plans in the 1980s, which helped 'ensure that even if an adversary believed in limited nuclear war…he could not expect actually to win one'.[25]

This was true for both state and non-state actors. After the 2001 attacks on the United States, Quinlan devoted significant thought to deterring activities that were typically presumed to be undeterrable, especially suicide attacks by terrorists.[26] Given the difficulty of obtaining and hiding the capabilities for constructing nuclear weapons, deterring nuclear-aspiring terrorists is closely linked to deterring states who support them. Military force cannot have much influence on the former, but it plays a decisive role in deterring the latter. This can be seen in the regional proxy war between Israel and Iran since 2023, which briefly escalated in June of 2025. This war clearly demonstrates the values-based dynamic of Quinlan's thought. Indeed, he considered Iran to be the most serious source of terrorist and non-state nuclear concerns.[27]

The essence of his approach was that British nuclear forces must be 'strong', 'credible', and flexible to deter adversaries, primarily the Russian-led Soviet Union. Yet he did not believe that nuclear weapons could be considered in isolation as a deterrent. On the contrary, he believed deterrence was rooted in thinking about how these weapons might

22. Quinlan thought the 'insane' were irrelevant and ought to be discounted, arguing it was neither workable nor wise to calibrate NATO deterrence around the idea of 'third-world madmen' It is a fair critique of his theory that he viewed deterrence in mechanical terms, even if not through the same lens as the rationalists. Sir Michael Quinlan G.C.B. (1997) 'Thinking about nuclear weapons', *The RUSI Journal*, 142:6, 1-4
23. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 182-183
24. Andrew Lambert, *No More Napoleons: How Britain Managed Europe from Waterloo to World War One*, (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2025)
25. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 182-183
26. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 71-75
27. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons* 167-169

actually be used. Articulating the moral justification for actual nuclear use and connecting this to the prevention of war in general became a lifelong primary concern of Quinlan, particularly in response to Catholic detractors both at home and in the United States. To his mind, one could not separate the reality of nuclear weapons nor the ethics of their use from wider questions and problems inherent in international security.[28] To that end, he favoured an effective British nuclear capability providing a 'second centre of decision' and 'operational independence' within the broader ambit of the NATO Alliance.[29]

Providing this 'second centre' was central to the concept of a British sovereign capability, ensuring a relative independence from the United States whilst also demonstrating our importance to American war planning. Quinlan believed Britain should be able to pose a reasonable deterrent threat on its own, even in instances where the United States was perceived – rightly or wrongly – as not itself involved in a dependable manner. [30] On this view, the purpose of the British arsenal has never been to possess a quantitative, nor even a qualitative, advantage. It is to provide a complicating factor within the NATO alliance, operating through a separate command chain which aligns strongly, though not unequivocally, with the United States'. The advantage is again both cognitive and political, complicating Russian decision-making even in situations when use of the U.S. deterrent was in doubt.

The purpose of the British nuclear deterrent is therefore historically rooted in a doctrine of uncertainty, keeping the adversary guessing over which actions would precipitate a nuclear response.[31] This strengthened British, American, and wider NATO security, providing an autonomous capability to a smaller, but no less potent, political actor, one which placed a decisive priority on the security of the European political order. Secrecy over targeting, intentions, and operational questions was integral to the success of this posture, grounding the stability of the international system. In Quinlan's words, the 'second centre' doctrine proved a 'prudent and positive element in the construction of a dependable international system for preserving peace'.[32]

To help realise this, Quinlan sought to 'demystify' deterrence for policymakers, strategists, and ethicists. He thought the practice of deterrence was deceptively simple, as it is 'pretty clear you can get blown up if you get it wrong'.[33] To his mind, deterrence had often been needlessly overcomplicated by those thinking and writing about the subject. He thought deterrence works because of a few very simple propositions. First, it must display the prospect of costs in terms of 'values prized by the 'deterree''. By values, Quinlan meant 'interests' or 'things valued' by an adversary. Pure military instruments are therefore not the only possible instruments of deterrence. '**Political, economic, social, judicial, and even religious or cultural ones (influencing whether actors believe that they have the support of those whose approval they value or depend upon) can also sometimes make a contribution'.**[34]

28. Quinlan, 'Deterrence and Deterrability', 115
29. These remain the two key elements of the British nuclear weapons program. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 121. The term 'second centre of decision' appears in the Defence Open Government Document 80/23 of July 1980. See Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 123-125 for details.
30. Sir Michael Quinlan G.C.B. (1997) 'Thinking about nuclear weapons', *The RUSI Journal*, 142:6, 1-4
31. Ibid, 138
32. Michael Quinlan, *Nuclear Weapons and the Abolition of War*, 293. In: Ogilvie-White (ed.) *On Nuclear Deterrence: The Correspondence of Sir Michael Quinlan*, (London, Routledge, 2011)
33. Ibid 74
34. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 31 [emphasis ours]. Original thought in Quinlan, 'Deterrence and Deterrability'. 12-14

Second, these **costs do not have to be displayed in the 'same currency' or magnitude,** as the actions one aims to prevent. Neither Britain nor France has ever possessed the capability to destroy Russia, at least in the same manner as it could them. The aim of Anglo-French policy has been to 'pose merely fearful damage' to the Russians. Threatening to impose such high costs in response to their own 'obliteration' is a 'perfectly valid approach', if it demonstrates losses that Russia would find unacceptable.[35] The asymmetry in nuclear force levels can be offset by the acquisition of strategic non-nuclear systems, and by retaining a variety of nuclear yields and types of weapons, discussed in the final section of this paper.

Thirdly, the adversary must **'understand clearly and credibly' the action from which he must refrain**.[36] He must be led to perceive that both the existence of capability and the 'general will to use it' will create costs that are unacceptable, 'in one form or another' This involves specifying what actions are truly intolerable and the costs that will be involved, and communicating these to the adversary. It also links the possession of credible means of carrying out such costs should vital interests be put at stake, marking out clear lines of acceptability and tolerance.

Fourthly, though we may specify what actions are intolerable, **we do not have to 'specify *precisely* what form our non-acquiescence will take'.** We are to retain a degree of ambiguity as to the exact nature of the response, while making it quite plain to our opponent that his action 'will not stand', backed by the power, resolve, and means necessary to achieve that end.[37] Clarity on absolute limits, however, and the ability to back these up credibly, is a cornerstone of deterrence, as the immense destructive power and the costs associated with using nuclear weapons mean their employment will not be credible in any but the most existential scenarios.[38]

This presupposes a thorough foreknowledge of what legitimately count as our 'vital interests', and that these conditions are internal to us. The adversary may get glimpses of them in moments of high tension, when some aspect of them is revealed through partial communication of unacceptable circumstances, or he may guess at them through his own calculations. But they are fundamentally hidden and internal, and their indeterminacy when linked to overwhelming force produces an externally stable state whereby action is disincentivised by the threat of legitimate, massive costs.

This links to Quinlan's final point. Deterrence does not live in a world of ideals and certainties, and this requires us to work with probabilities and possibilities instead. As a result, '**[e]ven a modest chance of a huge penalty can have great deterrent force**', outweighing even very high benefits that an adversary might hope to gain from their action.[39] Provided the costs are truly staggering, even a low chance of them being imposed provides a strong disincentive for action. This is a classic statement of the principle of 'peace through strength' in its truest form. These five criteria constitute the substance of Quinlan's deterrence theory.[40] They place an emphasis on the cognitive domain, linking together the procurement

35. Quinlan, 'Deterrence and Deterrability'. 12-14 [emphasis ours]
36. Quinlan, 'Deterrence and Deterrability'. 12-14 [emphasis ours]
37. Quinlan, 'Deterrence and Deterrability'. 12-14 [emphasis ours]
38. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 22
39. Quinlan, 'Deterrence and Deterrability'. 12-14 [emphasis ours]
40. These principles were anchored, more broadly, by the principles of the just war tradition, which remains the most influential and thorough theory regarding the legitimate use of force in international relations, particularly amongst politicians, military thinkers, and strategists. Indeed, Quinlan published a brief book on the subject in 2007 with Field Marshal the Lord Guthrie, former Chief of the Defence Staff. See Charles Guthrie and Michael Quinlan, *Just War: The Just War Tradition: Ethics in Modern Warfare* (London, Bloomsbury, 2009)

of capabilities, the articulation of core priorities, and the political will necessary to deter conflict.

III *Criticisms: Ethics, Politics, and Practice*

Criticisms of Quinlan typically focus on the ethical implications of his theory. Specifically, that nuclear weapons are 'inherently indiscriminate', given their targeting of civilians and combatants, or that the concept of 'proportionality' – that 'attacks be proportionate to the military value of the target or the result to be attained' – automatically invalidates their use.[41] Quinlan's rejoinder was rooted in the just war tradition.[42] He accepted the appalling nature of nuclear weapons and the horrifying consequences of their use but argued that a just cause would render a nuclear response legitimate. To his mind, harming civilians as a consequence of striking legitimate military targets with nuclear weapons was no different to the acceptable losses incurred from the use of non-nuclear munitions for identical purposes, and the conquest of the world by an aggressive, totalitarian adversary would be of such detriment to society that the use of nuclear weapons *in extremis* was legitimate.[43] While their potential use must be confined to an extreme case, they are both morally legitimate and necessary for the security of the United Kingdom through their power to prevent war.

This superficial hawkishness was couched in a far more nuanced view of world order. Quinlan viewed all wars as abhorrent and supported disarmament to the lowest possible levels to maintain credible deterrence between nuclear-armed powers. The invention of atomic weapons rendered war between great powers, either conventional or nuclear, an absurdity. He was a vocal opponent of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which he belived to be unjustified, stemming from a belief that the escalation of conventional war would be the most likely route to a nuclear exchange. Equally, military strikes on nuclear facilities were not an option to be encouraged, but an escalatory step and a last resort, for use where deterrence had failed. For that reason, robust deterrent strategies and practices were required, not just to prevent nuclear war, but to make all warfare impracticable, reducing the risk that a conventional conflict would spill over into a general nuclear conflict.[44]

Neither was he inherently in favour of a British nuclear deterrent at any price, arguing that the U.K. should prioritise conventional warfighting over maintaining nuclear arms at all costs.[45] Equally, his view on stockpiles and targeting solutions was that Britain should maintain the lowest number of nuclear warheads that can enable a credible deterrent. However, he thought reducing numbers below a certain threshold would

41. See Frank L. Jones (2013) "The High Priest of Deterrence": Sir Michael Quinlan, Nuclear Weapons, and the Just War Tradition *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, 16(3), pp. 14-42, 23-24

42. See Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. Ch.5; More broadly, see Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York, NY, Basic Books, 2015)

43. Frank L. Jones (2013) "The High Priest of Deterrence": Sir Michael Quinlan, Nuclear Weapons, and the Just War Tradition *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, 16(3), pp. 14-42, 24-25

44. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 21, 181. Giles' short article provides a helpful summary of Quinlan's key points. See Gregory Giles (July 5 2023) 'Michael Quinlan Was Right: The Enduring Relevance of Nuclear Deterrence' *War on the Rocks*; also Beatrice Heuser, Paul O'Neill, Tanya Ogilvie-White & Kristan Stoddart (April 5 2023) 'Episode 9: Sir Michael Quinlan and British Nuclear Strategy', *RUSI Talking Strategy Podcasts*.

45. This was, of course, contextualised by his view of deterrence as a concept. One cannot convincingly deter or fight a war with a high-end nuclear capability and extremely limited conventional armed forces. One's threats will not be credible. He also notes the limitations that France has faced in procuring and maintaining its own independent deterrent, which costs some three times that of Britain's CASD, limiting the role the French could play in, say, the liberation of Kuwait in 1991. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 122-123

actually undermine deterrence, as they could be more susceptible to a swift, decapitating, pre-emptive strike, and more vulnerable to accident or failure, whilst providing no moral or political advantage compared to a significantly larger stockpile.[46] Perversely, the reduction of stockpiles could also lead to cruder and less ethical targeting solutions, requiring a return to targeting cities rather than more precise military targets to ensure significant costs against an adversary.[47] As such, he advocated only for the minimum number of warheads necessary, calibrated to meet the challenges of the day.

Philosophically, he rejected the views of both nuclear abolitionists and dismissive realists. The former offered little but naive posturing, ignoring the strong national security reasons that states have to acquire nuclear weapons, as well as the complex process by which the political conditions required for genuine nuclear reduction and disarmament are created.[48] The latter he chided for their pious dismissal of genuine political and legal successes in reducing nuclear risk, such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and the type of diplomatic work required to bring this to fruition.[49] Neither engaged seriously with the substantive challenges around reducing nuclear risk, and in doing so added little to the conversation. In some cases, they actively worked against it.

The centrality of deterrence to Quinlan's theory of international politics should not be viewed in isolation from other means of upholding international security, such as

> *allaying grievance, improving mechanisms for peaceful conflict resolution, creating positive incentives for desired behaviour, preventing the acquisition of pernicious capabilities, and improving ability to ward off attacks and lighten their effects.*[50]

However, he thought that deterrence would predominate in most instances. He thus rooted his theory not purely in international law, but in the more substantial concept of 'international legitimacy and backing'.[51] This is a classic linkage between international norms and the requisite military, financial, and political power to enforce them. International law and norms are, of course, of great interest and importance to British security. As the great strategist Sir Julian Corbett knew well, law provides a deterrent factor of its own, even in the international sphere, and has often taken an especially prominent role in British state practice. Properly enforced, law can ensure disputes are resolved without the costly recourse to violence. Yet this is ultimately subservient to political and strategic factors, which generate the conditions from which legal settlements both emerge and survive.

Quinlan was the first to recognise that criticisms of deterrence were easy, and that proving or disproving its validity is difficult. This is because any assessment of deterrence involves a 'comparison between actual and alternative history'. One must buy into the arguments of an alternative history to accept the deterrent theory as valid. Yet alternative history and contingency thinking are important elements of statecraft and government,

46. In terms of the global suffering they would cause if ever used.
47. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 107
48. It was for this reason he took a dim view of, and a strong stance against, Pope Benedict XVI's 2006 speech, denunciating the role nuclear weapons play in global security.
49. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 153-154
50. Quinlan, 'Deterrence and Deterrability'. 17
51. Quinlan, 'Deterrence and Deterrability'. 17

and essential for any practical political discussion. Given this paucity of historical practice and empirical evidence regarding nuclear weapons, Quinlan was particularly attuned to the language used to describe nuclear affairs. In his view, conceptual clarity was the only means by which strategists and practitioners could hope to comprehend these problems coherently. This rested on his conviction that:

> *thinking about nuclear weapons must be constantly on the alert— the more so in the merciful absence of historical experience to anchor and calibrate discussion— both to recognize uncertainty and to probe behind words and customary expressions so as not to lose sight of the underlying realities, or misconstrue them.*[52]

He was keen to avoid unhelpful metaphors such as the 'nuclear threshold', arguing that the prefix 'nuclear' was unhelpful given the 'prime determinant' in whether nuclear weapons would be used would always rest on 'the relative combat performance of non-nuclear forces'.

He was equally dismissive of a simplistic model of an 'escalation ladder' and considered 'escalation' itself to be a misleading term. To Quinlan, all forms of escalation are a dangerous business which involves grave risk where nuclear weapons are concerned. From his point of view, deterrence is not a gradual system, and while analysts might ask 'is nuclear retaliation certain' in a given scenario, these are questions to which we will never know the answers.[53] Deterrence either holds or fails. It is premised on acquiring the capabilities required to prevent an opponent outmanoeuvring one, but these are not 'a stack of sealed boxes': the effect of deterrence is a 'package'. As such:

> *A combatant failing to get his way at one level would always be able to consider his options at another. The various levels of military force are therefore complementary and interdependent; all can contribute to deterrence.*[54]

Likewise, differentiating between 'tactical' and 'strategic' weapons is often unhelpful. Such a distinction may be necessary at a certain conceptual level, but these epithets apply more readily to how these weapons are used, rather than their innate destructive force. During the Cold War, for instance, it was typical to assign 'Strategic', 'Sub-Strategic', or 'Tactical' designations based on the weapon's yield. However, some weapons were used in a strategic role despite not being classed as 'Big-S Strategic weapons' *per se*. This has much to do with how these weapons were employed as part of Britain's nuclear strike options. Systems such as *Yellow Sun* were designed specifically as 'Strategic' weapons, while *Redbeard* was a low-yield 'Tactical' weapon for more limited use. This, again, stems from moral and political positions: what one state perceives as a strategic threat will differ significantly from another.[55]

Here we return to the cognitive aspect of deterrence, for although Quinlan dismissed the idea of an escalation ladder, he did so to establish a far more difficult and integrated concept in people's minds: that the creation of sufficient 'rungs' on a bi-directional ladder, each interdependent

52. Ibid.

53. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 62-63

54. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 22 [emphasis ours]

55. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 18

on one another, would prevent other actors from moving easily, if at all, between such rungs themselves.[56] In other words, the stronger one made the 'ladder' as a whole – through the possession of credible capabilities on a sliding scale between small arms and strategic weapons – the stronger the deterrent effect. This would constrain the ability of an aggressor to act by virtue of a capability's existence, and the strength of political will to use it. It is for this reason that he would have supported the regular integrated demonstration of assets and capabilities through high-end large scale military exercises, used as a form of political communication with one's adversaries.

However, the possession of capabilities was not the only element to Quinlan's deterrence theory. He combined this with nuclear signalling, and an element of constructive ambiguity. The purpose is to establish, in the mind of an adversary, the perception that a nuclear exchange is possible, and therefore dissuade him from acting in the first place. Signalling need not be a 'positive' display of strength, and Quinlan was willing to deploy 'desperation' as a strategic signal, deliberately indicating Britain's lack of conventional stocks of ammunition as evidence of their inability to fight a major conventional war, demonstrating the increased risk that Britain would resort to nuclear use.[57] He also gave priority to understanding the structure and intent of the regime one is aiming to deter. This applies to both conventional and nuclear deterrence. Understanding how a regime operates, as well as the pathologies of one's own, are vital to deterrence. Though this was intuited by many British theorists during the Cold War, it could only be confirmed by post-Cold War studies of Soviet war planning, which demonstrated the extent to which purely 'rationalist' theories of deterrence were misplaced.[58]

Deterrence, therefore, is a sophisticated form of cognitive warfare, achieved through studying behaviours, institutional cultures, exercises, and strategic planning. It relies upon an understanding of an adversary's worldview, particularly the worldview of the leadership, and the links between values, intentions, existential priorities, and the capabilities of one's adversary. One must then communicate one's own intentions and absolute priorities as clearly as possible whilst retaining a degree of strategic ambiguity in other areas to avert nuclear confrontation. The aim must be to establish, within the adversaries' mind, a clear understanding of the costs of their actions and of one's own ability to respond to them, as well as the seriousness with which certain actions would be viewed. An analysis of both Russian and Chinese nuclear and strategic thought is therefore central to Britain and NATO's deterrence theory and practice.

56. Sir Christopher Colville, Elizabeth Braw, and Peter Watkins (22nd October 2024) 'Future Deterrence: Threats and Challenges', *Freeman Air and Space Institute*.

57. Beatrice Heuser, Paul O'Neill, Tanya Ogilvie-White & Kristan Stoddart (April 5 2023) 'Episode 9: Sir Michael Quinlan and British Nuclear Strategy', *RUSI Talking Strategy Podcasts*

58. Lawrence Freedman & Jeffrey Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) Ch.22, esp. 337-338

IV *Deterrence in a Multipolar World*

> *Only the truly insane have no sense of weighing consequences; and to have a different value-system does not mean having none, no currency in which the risk of unacceptable disadvantage can be posed…There is no such thing as an undeterrable state.*[59]
>
> Sir Michael Quinlan, *Deterrence and Deterrability*, 2004

Quinlan's deterrence theory was primarily conditioned by Britain's strategic circumstances in the wake of the Second World War, and the evolving Cold War with the USSR. The clear and present threat to the Home Islands was a nuclear-armed, imperialist-minded Soviet Union in Eastern Europe, whose influence stretched far into the North Atlantic, the Middle East, Africa, central Eurasia and South-East Asia. Britain's strategic posture was driven by deterring Soviet, and later Russian, aggression.[60] Yet even after the USSR collapsed, Quinlan maintained that Russia should remain the UK's 'reference-point', as it did for the United States and vice versa.[61] This was based on calculations about Britain's relationship to the United States and to its other NATO allies. As such, re-tooling Quinlan's deterrence theory for this more complex era of competition requires us to apply his core insights to a shifting, multipolar strategic environment, albeit with the overt Russian threat firmly at the centre of such thought.

When Quinlan penned *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*, he could reasonably assert that 'the full military capability, both conventional and nuclear, of the United States remain[s] unequivocally committed to the defence of all NATO allies, and to the agreed NATO strategic concept'.[62] Britain and her European and Commonwealth NATO partners would continue to operate in a world dominated by a reliable U.S. strategic arsenal. This assumption that European security was underpinned by a U.S. security guarantee went almost unchallenged after 1989, with little reflection about the place of European powers in the world order. This is no longer a tenable position. The strategic picture has changed regarding U.S. commitments to the European continent, the capabilities they can hope to spare from the Pacific, and the direct threat posed by Russia. Britain and like-minded allies must now shoulder a greater share of the burden for European security, articulating a more coherent view of their place in the world.

This requires us to pay attention to the myth, history, and culture that now drives the foreign policy of Britain's adversaries, particularly Russia

59. Quinlan, 'Deterrence and Deterrability', 12-13, 15

60. Although he probably would have conceded that an attempt by any nuclear-armed state to dominate the Eurasian landmass would have been an unacceptable and existential risk to British security. See Hal Brands, *The Eurasian Century: Hot Wars, Cold Wars, and the Making of the Modern World*, (New York, W.W. Norton and Co, 2025)

61. Sir Michael Quinlan G.C.B. (1997) 'Thinking about nuclear weapons', *The RUSI Journal*, 142:6, 1-4

62. He was writing on the downsizing of U.S. 'tactical' nuclear weapons stockpiles in Europe, arguing that the move was sound given developments in accuracy and lethality, and a change in political circumstances on the continent, rendering short-range systems more a hindrance than a help. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 175

and increasingly China. How does the Russian Federation view itself and its place in the world, and how do we view ourselves? It is clear that Western powers failed to deter Russian aggression in Ukraine because they 'fail[ed] to exercise deterrence in terms that are meaningful for its leaders'.[63] The costs of military action were not demonstrably and credibly disproportionate to the perceived benefits, and were not communicated clearly to the Russian leadership, whose policy of security through territorial expansion has remained consistent for well over a decade. While it is difficult to produce a full picture of the Russian world view from open sources, a study of military journals, institutions, political statements, and cultural sources can provide a good understanding of who influences the top military and political thought.[64] Deterrence, of course, is not a universal concept, but one which is shaped by 'specific cultural contexts' and which 'varies across strategic communities'.[65] Understanding the deterrence theory of an adversary enables one to leverage strategic advantage over them, providing new opportunities to foreclose actions harmful to one's core interests.

The extent to which Russian elites revived their own Tsarist ambitions in the areas they claim as 'historic territories', including Russian-speaking regions of many former Soviet states, was widely misread prior to late 2021 and early 2022, with an emphasis placed instead on the 'rationality' of Putin's worldview.[66] This misreads the relatively homogenous cultural thought at the apex of the Federation. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia has come to see its value system as underpinned by a particular cultural, geopolitical, and historical view, one which ties national security to imperial expansionism.[67] Russian military and political elites frame this in terms of a revanchist, revisionist nationalism centred on an existential civil war for the survival of the 'Russian state' against 'collaborationist states' supported by the West.[68] There is a clear religious, even eschatological dimension to Russian military thought that extends far beyond the fusion of theological ceremony and nuclear weapons[69], instead expressed through the kinds of non-political and non-military aims and justifications for those aims that have been put forward by senior thinkers.[70] Common critiques within the Russian literature on this topic include the instrumentalisation of international norms by the West, the decline of the unipolar U.S.-led order and its replacement by a multipolar system, as well as the 'nazification' narratives propagated about Ukraine and the wider 'liberal-fascist' West: a 'Fourth Reich' under the thumb of the United States.[71] A form of moral superiority now undergirds Russia's understanding of its place in the world.[72]

This has resulted in stark conceptual and strategic differences from western powers, whose outlook is often drawn from an English understanding of deterrence.[73] The Russians have taken quite a different view of this concept: the Russian term *sderzhivanie*, the phrase most closely associated with English 'deterrence', means 'to prevent something from occurring'.[74] In practice this means the use of threats and limited force, either to 'maintain the status quo…to change it' or 'to shape the strategic

63. Keir Giles (March, 2025) 'Europe's Pathway to Ending Russia's War on Ukraine' *Baltic Defence College.*

64. Anya Fink and Michael Kofman (2020) 'Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Key Debates and Players in Military Thought' *CNA*; Krisztián Jójárt (2024) 'The war against Ukraine through the prism of Russian military thought', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 47:6-7, 801-831, 804

65. Adamsky; 'Quo Vadis, Russian Deterrence?' 52, 77-78

66. Thomas G. Mahnken and Joshua Baker, 'Fallacies of Strategic Thinking in the Ukraine War', in Hal Brands (ed.), *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP 2024), 188. Cited in: Katri Pynnöniemi & Kati Parppei (2024) 'Understanding Russia's war against Ukraine: Political, eschatological and cataclysmic dimensions', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 47:6-7, 832-859

67. This is as true today as it has been at various points throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from the Crimea in 1853 to the continental rivalry between Imperial Russia and Germany in the lead up to the First World War, and more recently the European theatre of the Cold War. Brands, *The Eurasian Century.*

68. Pynnöniemi & Parppei 'Understanding Russia's war against Ukraine' 842

69. See Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy. Religion, Politics, and Strategy*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019). What began with the Russian Orthodox Church providing pastoral care for the nuclear corps now extends to the blessing of nuclear weapons in elaborate rituals, patron saints for each 'leg' of the triad, and 'mobile temples' to accompany them. Its institutionalisation has gone hand-in-hand with Russian nationalism.

70. Pynnöniemi & Parppei 'Understanding Russia's war against Ukraine'

71. Pynnöniemi & Parppei 'Understanding Russia's war against Ukraine' 849

72. See Michael Kofman et al. (10 September 3004) 'Book Review Roundtable: Russian Ways of Thinking About Deterrence. *Texas National Security Review*. Russia is not alone in their worldview, but it is among the most evident.

73. Ibid, especially the essay by Michael B. Petersen.

74. Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky; 'Quo Vadis, Russian Deterrence? Strategic Culture and Coercion Innovations'. *International Security* 2025; 49 (3): 50–83 p.57; Dmitry Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024) 30-31; See also Samuel Charap (September 2020) 'Strategic Sderzhivanie: Understanding Contemporary Russian Approaches to "Deterrence"', The George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Paper Number 062.

environment, to prevent escalation, and to de-escalate'.[75] This is closer in practice to the English meaning of 'coercion'.[76] As a result, Russian strategic doctrine incorporates nuclear weapons into a sliding scale of viable military and non-military responses to aggression, from exercises based on battlefield deployment of 'tactical' nuclear strikes to information and psychological warfare operations designed to undermine its adversaries' trust in their public institutions.[77] The purpose is to provide a framework through which to control the shape of a war and end it on terms politically favourable to Russia.

This strategic approach is linked to the purpose of Russia's non-strategic nuclear arsenal, designed to deter superior opponents with a technological edge from achieving major political success on the battlefield.[78] The flexibility of this doctrine has provided Russia with a sophisticated attitude to grey-zone and sub-threshold warfare, though its limits were also revealed after its invasion of Ukraine faltered in early 2022. While Russia has employed nuclear threats to communicate intent and signal resolve throughout the conflict[79], it has since been successfully deterred from employing nuclear weapons in Ukraine as their use would impose serious costs upon them from the states which support Ukraine as well as from Russia's own allies. This was highlighted towards the end of 2022, when China and India chided Putin for raising the readiness of his nuclear forces, leading to the Russians backing down.

Since these experiences in 2022 Russia has learned three lessons and now seeks to establish three main goals. As Adamsky notes, these are to restore 'coercive credibility' as its deterrence strategy, '[r]efine nuclear coercion for conventional scenarios that do not produce existential threats but that threaten Russia's vital interests', and 'develop a coercion scheme for a non-nuclear near-peer competitor' such as Ukraine. [80] Crucially, Russia seeks the capacity to 'climb, descend, and skip over' rungs in the deterrence ladder without losing 'coercive tension'. Informational coercion and chemical weapons represent the most likely options in this regard, alongside a shift in reliance to strategic non-nuclear forces, backed up by a potent and diverse nuclear arsenal.[81] This is problematic for NATO, which already struggles to respond to Russian coercion due to missing gaps in its own deterrence posture, particularly high-end conventional weapons such as hypersonics and long-range precision strike, as well as the capacity to replenish these capabilities in a high-intensity conflict. Working out how to cope with these new types of 'rung' is of central importance to British and NATO strategic deterrence. Quinlan's view would be that responses do not have to be symmetric, nor matched in scale or intensity. They must simply identify ways that this 'coercive tension' can be held hostage and neutered. Manoeuvrability is at the core of Russian doctrine. Neutralising how Russia skips gaps in the deterrence architecture or exploits blind spots through its own relative advantages will limit its core strategic doctrine, which now differs significantly from that of the USSR.[82]

Russian non-nuclear strategic signalling[83] has also been demonstrated in Ukraine through nuclear-capable hypersonic missiles

75. Adamsky; 'Quo Vadis, Russian Deterrence?' 57
76. Ibid 127
77. Fink and Kofman 'Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Key Debates and Players in Military Thought'
78. Sidharth Kaushal and Sam Cranny-Evans (21 June 2022) 'Russia's Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons and its Views of Limited Nuclear War' *RUSI Commentary*
79. See Sean M. Maloney, *The Cool War: Nuclear Forces, Crisis Signalling, and The Russo-Ukranian War, 2014-2022* (Annapolis MD, Naval Institute Press, 2025)
80. Adamsky; 'Quo Vadis, Russian Deterrence?' 53
81. See Fink and Kofman 'Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Key Debates and Players in Military Thought'
82. Lawrence Freedman & Jeffrey Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) Ch.42
83. Adamsky; 'Quo Vadis, Russian Deterrence?', 68-71

like Oreshnik. Russian experts have called for more nuclear exercises, live nuclear testing, and the mounting of patrols, and these seem likely as Russia reconstitutes its deterrent posture by rebuilding its conventional forces following operations in Ukraine.[84] Further, Russian experts are examining how AI can 'neutralize detrimental human emotions and cognitive biases' to improve decision-making in conventional, nuclear, and informational warfare. This 'sliding scale' doctrine – once considered 'monstrous heresy' under the USSR[85] – is likely to remain the dominant mode of thinking for the foreseeable future[86], echoing China's advances in doctrine and capabilities in that regard.[87] The aim of developing such weapons is to enable states involved in limited wars to exert nuclear threats through non-nuclear strategic systems, demonstrating escalation potential and communicating resolve without resorting to less credible threats of direct nuclear use.

How can this be countered? To Quinlan's mind, despite doctrinal difference the same general approach applies toward the Russian Federation as it did toward the Soviet Union. The difference lies in how NATO members react to doctrinal developments, adjusting strategies to counter shifts in both capability and 'sacrosanct' values.[88] This is an outgrowth of Quinlan's analysis of international politics, which held that all states or similar entities have assets they wish to retain, some concern for the lives of their citizens, and a hope for the survival of the regime, providing leverage for those who wish to construct 'penalty systems' which can influence behaviour.[89] Scholarship on Russian deterrence can demonstrate the various perceptions and approaches influencing their thought and develop cognitive countermeasures. A working knowledge of doctrinal influences and 'perceived' existential interest allows for the minimisation of an adversary's strategic mobility, limiting their ability to exert influence up and down the coercion ladder in the way that they would choose.

This is traditionally regarded as 'escalation dominance', although Quinlan had a subtly different understanding of the phrase. He stressed the importance of cutting off an adversary's pathways of strategic influence, achieving this through the procurement of capabilities and carefully choreographed demonstrations of how they could be employed. This places the onus on the aggressor to make the larger, more dangerous steps in order to press their political goals.[90] As Russia is now intent on pursuing a strategic nuclear doctrine which relies on the ability to move flexibly between a wide range of capabilities, in support of a worldview inimical to Western ideas of freedom, this presents clear vulnerabilities which the United Kingdom must be alert to and respond to accordingly.[91] Deterring this posture requires an appreciation of what Russia regards as its core interests and existential priorities, and how to exploit them. Conversely, Britain and NATO must identify and articulate credible priorities in response and communicate these through the language of deterrence – that is, through the procurement of capabilities designed to generate unacceptable risks on that 'sliding scale' in key areas, underpinned by the political will to use these capabilities, as well as other non-military means.

84. Ibid.

85. Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence* 21; Also, Christopher A. Ford 'Thinking About Russian Nuclear Weapons', Journal of Strategic and Policy Studies 5(2) (2025). One of the most dangerous elements of new Russian strategy concerns the degree to which command and control over nuclear systems is pre-delegated from the President of the Russian Federation down to battlefield commanders to produce political leverage. This remains uncertain.

86. Krisztián Jójárt (2024) 'The war against Ukraine through the prism of Russian military thought', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 47:6-7, 801-831, 805-806

87. Fiona S. Cunningham, *Under the Nuclear Shadow: China's Information-Age Weapons in International Security*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2025) Ch.1, esp. pp.22-32

88. There are clear parallels here to how the U.S. must engage with China's shifting position in the Pacific. Sacrosanct interests for the Russian Federation are, at a glance, the stability and prosperity of the regime, the position of Russian power globally and its perception within the greater Russian-speaking communities, its territorial possessions and influence vis a vis 'The West', and the recovery of historic territories and peoples under its sovereignty. The very concept of Russian 'sovereignty' is itself unintelligible within a Western frame of mind here, and further work should expand on how the Russian concept of sovereignty informs how Britain and her allies approach their own deterrence posture. It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with this.

89. Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 30. Close to this analysis was the overarching strategic case for British nuclear weapons, which was always made by H.M.G. in broad terms, being:

> related in essence to the **unsettled and still-anarchic character of the international environment**; to the continued **intention of the United Kingdom to be a major load-bearing actor** in it, and to have the confidence to accept responsibilities and risks accordingly; to the **impossibility of predicting dangers far enough ahead** for it to be acceptable to defer provision against them until they had become evident; and to the effective finality of any decision to withdraw from the possession of a nuclear armoury'.
>
> **Ibid. 129 [emphasis ours]**

90. This was Quinlan's explanation of the concept of escalation dominance, though he rarely used the term himself. *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. 66 [emphasis ours]

91. One might note there is little substantive difference between Russian nationalism revanchism and Soviet expansionism here. They may employ subtly different methods, but their antipathy toward western liberal democratic values is similar in character. As in the Cold War, understanding this worldview by no means entails acceptance of it.

Within a multipolar environment dominated by Russian aggression, Quinlan would prioritise providing clear, simple doctrine from which more detailed policy priorities can flow. Deterrence theory can become overly complicated extremely quickly, so focus is key. To that end, seven clear principles emerge from Quinlan's thought which are essential for effective nuclear deterrence.

> The first is that nuclear weapons exist, and they cannot be uninvented. The primary aim of H.M.G. must be to deter their use by limiting 'conventional' and 'nuclear' conflicts as far as is possible, and by limiting the numbers of weapons possessed without undermining credibility.
>
> Second, the possession, and – *in extremis* – the use of nuclear weapons is both necessary and moral. Thinking seriously about these questions is an inescapable moral activity of the highest order.
>
> Third, despite this focus on the nuclear dimension, deterrence works as a 'package', and so there can be no clear divide between conventional and nuclear weapons in deterrence theory. Gaps conventional or nuclear capabilites can be exploited. This is most evident in contemporary Russian strategic doctrine and planning, which has explicitly embraced a 'sliding scale' of deterrence, deliberately blurring this conceptual distinction for strategic advantage.
>
> Fourth, deterrence must therefore rest on a spectrum of capabilities, from 'highest' to 'lowest', including unconventional capabilities, with no significant gaps in either the political or military ability to manoeuvre between them with agility. A broad and flexible approach conforms with a more complex, multi-polar world.
>
> Fifth, this approach is based on capabilities and credibility. Mere possession of the necessary capabilities is insufficient; it must be accompanied by the demonstrable ability and will to use them, combined with a degree of ambiguity over the costs we are prepared to impose in response to actions which affect our core interests.
>
> Sixth, possessing a spectrum of capabilities and the credible will to use them is designed to prevent their use, not to encourage it. To this end, one must establish clearly in the mind of an adversary the damage they would suffer, and the political determination to impose such a cost, should certain lines be crossed.
>
> Finally, the United Kingdom need not field all of the necessary capabilities itself, but a NATO approach must be coherent and coordinated, covering key areas where it is vulnerable to coercion or might be prevented from responding to threats. Together, these seven principles formed the core of his theory of nuclear deterrence.

These principles provide a bannister for those thinking about nuclear

issues at all levels of conflict, including the increasingly relevant, sub-threshold space of so-called 'grey zone' warfare. In practice, they place an emphasis on a 'whole of government' contribution to deterrence efforts, looking far beyond the narrow military domain to the political, legal, religious, and cultural dynamics of great power competition. It requires us to develop a far deeper understanding of the military doctrine of our adversaries and to find clear ways of communicating our own absolute priorities. The essence of the doctrine is about foreclosure; cutting off avenues for simple escalation and implanting a core message in an adversary's mind: *your actions have a chance of triggering a nuclear response, and we can credibly show you how this would happen*. For some states this will require considerably fewer capabilities than for others.

V Conclusion

Quinlan's nuclear deterrence theory involves a recognition of things as they are, but with a firm view of what is right and worth defending: the meeting of moral priorities and interests with the realities of a nuclear-armed world. Nuclear weapons cannot be 'un-invented', and so long as we recognise what they are, and what they are not, their destructive power can be contained – even channelled– into the creation of a stable international security architecture. The logic of this architecture is deterrence. What is needed to achieve this is an ability to induce, in the mind of the enemy, the prospect of a credible slide into a full nuclear exchange from which meaningful recovery is not possible.

An investigation of Quinlan's nuclear deterrence theory naturally raises more questions than it can provide answers. The concerning developments in Russian strategic and political culture are likely to impact British and NATO defence planning for the forseeable future. This is to say nothing of Chinese movements in the Pacific, of rogue states like Iran and North Korea, or non-state actors pursuing nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons. All of these remain active issues for British and NATO war planning. Yet Quinlan's theorising about deterrence reminds us that these can all be countered. Absent true 'madmen', the fundamentals of deterring conflict remain much the same as they were throughout the Cold War. The means may change, and the ways we conceptualise them, but the methods remain remarkably consistent. They are predicated on foundational principles. Even adversaries who do not 'think like us', so to speak, can be deterred.

However, this requires serious engagement with their priorities and vital interests, and rests on something more foundational, more personal. What are Russia and China's core strategic interests, and what are our own? The clear-sighted prioritisation of ends, ways and means will guide how we deter, and why. Without internal clarity on strategy, interests, and priorities, there can be no deterrence. This requires greater engagement with high-level cultures of strategic thinking in adversaries and allies. There is more work to be done on this. Equally, Quinlan's theory asks us what capabilities are needed to exercise effective deterrence as a whole. We acquire capabilities for their physical, but also their communicative, effect. The two are closely connected. What do certain capabilities allow us to do on the spectrum of deterrence? How do they enable us to increase or reduce the gaps in the 'ladder', improving our own manoeuvrability or denying it to adversaries. These are fundamental questions which require deeper investigation, ensuring Britain's contribution to NATO is premised

on strengthening the right areas of the alliance's overall architecture, fixing gaps in our communicative capabilities as well as physical systems.

Whether the answers to these questions involve the British and their European allies acquiring additional capabilities for their arsenals, or whether additional exercises, posturing, and dual-key arrangements will suffice, merits close and continuous examination. It likely lies somewhere in between the two. Quinlan reminds us that not all deterrence begins from a position of strength: the classical British army, a small force effectively delivered and supported by a navy exercising command of the sea, with superior command and intelligence capabilities, could dissuade even the greatest land powers from resorting to brutal continental conflicts. Regardless of the capabilities Britain acquires in the future, ministers and officials must develop the necessary experience and practices to make this deterrent politically credible now, including the reintroduction of large-scale exercises with a nuclear component and clear communication of nuclear signalling. Practices must be rebuilt and sustained by common institutional culture, and their inculcation is as much a priority as acquiring the systems themselves. Regardless of broader strategic concerns, the reintroduction of airborne tactical nuclear capabilities via the F-35A puts Britain on the path to restoring these.

Above all, Quinlan's thinking on deterrence takes us back to basics. It rests on two historically conditioned perspectives: how our adversaries perceive the world and their place within it, and what we ourselves hold dear enough to protect. Deterrence may occur in the minds of those we seek to deter, but it originates in what we are willing – and able – to defend. Revisiting the thought of Britian's great Cold War strategist reminds us of this central lesson held by many of her most successful statesmen, from Lord Palmerston to Lord Salisbury, Lord Curzon to Lord Home. Practitioners of deterrence must think carefully about what they hold dear, and how they might best go about preserving it through the art of sound strategic communication. They must first off know their own mind, and make sure their adversary knows it too.

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