

When Extended Deterrence Becomes Probabilistic

Nuclear Restraint Under Multipolar Stress

Working Note — For Discussion

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Disclaimer

This paper presents an analytical framework for discussion. It does not constitute legal, military, or policy advice, nor does it advocate specific national actions.

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Introduction

The modern non-proliferation regime emerged from a specific historical equilibrium. Following the Second World War and throughout the Cold War, global security architecture evolved around a small number of nuclear-armed states providing deterrence and stability for a wider group of non-nuclear signatories. This arrangement was formalised through the **Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)**, which sought to limit the spread of nuclear weapons while promoting peaceful use and long-term disarmament.

In practice, the system relied not only on legal commitments, but on a broader assumption: that global order would be enforced by a dominant security provider, willing and able to bear disproportionate costs in order to preserve stability.

For several decades, this assumption broadly held.

This note does not attempt to predict outcomes or assess policy optimality; it focuses narrowly on how incentive structures shift when the perceived certainty of extended deterrence declines.

The Original Bargain

Under the NPT framework, many economically advanced but non-nuclear states accepted a structural trade-off:

- They relinquished sovereign nuclear deterrence
- They reduced investment in existential self-defence
- In return, they relied on collective security guarantees, alliance structures, and the expectation of global stability

This arrangement enabled:

- Lower defence spending for non-nuclear states
- Greater focus on economic growth, trade, and integration
- A relatively predictable escalation framework

Implicitly, much of the enforcement burden — diplomatic, military, and financial — was absorbed by the **United States**, which acted as the primary guarantor of the system. This “global policing” role was not cost-free, but it was broadly aligned with US strategic and economic interests during a unipolar era.

Emerging Strains in the Current Environment

As global power distribution becomes more multipolar, several stresses are becoming apparent:

1. Credibility of Extended Deterrence

Deterrence depends on belief. Even without formal policy changes, uncertainty around willingness to escalate on behalf of allies weakens deterrence before it visibly fails.

2. Asymmetric Risk Allocation

For non-nuclear states, existential risk is local and immediate. For guarantors, escalation risk is global and political. This asymmetry complicates credibility over time.

3. Shifting Incentives

States that relinquished deterrence under conditions of stability now face an environment characterised by:

- More frequent coercion
- Blurred thresholds between peace and conflict
- Reduced confidence that prior guarantees remain unconditional

4. Economic Constraints as Strategic Tools

Sanctions and economic pressure have become central enforcement mechanisms. However, their effectiveness depends on network dominance and coalition cohesion — both of which are becoming less certain.

Re-evaluation by Non-Nuclear Signatories

Against this backdrop, it is rational for capable non-nuclear states to re-examine the assumptions underlying their long-term security posture.

The question is not whether the NPT was effective historically — it clearly was — but whether the original bargain remains robust under materially changed conditions.

Many signatories made long-term strategic decisions based on:

- Predictable alliance behaviour
- Stable escalation norms
- A relatively concentrated distribution of power

As those conditions evolve, so too do the incentives embedded in the system.

One reason nuclear restraint remains uniquely sensitive is that nuclear weapons represent a singular form of strategic leverage. Unlike conventional capabilities, which scale incrementally and require sustained investment, nuclear weapons produce a discontinuous shift in deterrence posture once acquired. This asymmetric payoff — large strategic impact relative to time and resource investment — makes nuclear capability a focal variable when perceptions of security guarantees weaken. As a result, the stability of the non-proliferation

regime is particularly exposed to changes in perceived certainty, even if no immediate policy change follows.

Economic Power as a Partial Substitute for Deterrence

In the absence of sovereign nuclear deterrence, many non-nuclear states have increasingly relied on economic integration, interdependence, and sanctions-based enforcement as substitutes for traditional military deterrence.

This approach has clear strengths. Deep trade relationships raise the cost of conflict, financial sanctions impose meaningful pressure, and access to global markets can act as a powerful incentive for restraint. For several decades, these tools reinforced the non-proliferation framework by raising the economic cost of escalation.

However, economic deterrence differs from military deterrence in important ways. Its effectiveness depends on coalition size, network dominance, and sustained political alignment. As global economic power becomes more distributed, and as alternative trade and financial networks emerge, the certainty of economic enforcement diminishes.

Economic power can shape behaviour, but it does not provide an absolute guarantee against existential threats. As such, it functions as a *complement* to deterrence rather than a full substitute.

Structural Observation (Not a Policy Claim)

This paper does not argue for treaty withdrawal, proliferation, or changes in national policy. Instead, it highlights a structural tension within the existing framework.

The non-proliferation regime was designed for an environment in which:

- security guarantees were highly credible,
- enforcement capacity was concentrated, and
- escalation control rested with a small number of actors.

As these conditions evolve, restraint increasingly depends on probabilistic rather than absolute guarantees. In such an environment, capable non-nuclear states face a growing gap between formal commitments and perceived security.

Whether this gap is addressed through renewed collective security, institutional adaptation, or informal hedging is an open question. What is clear is that unmanaged drift — where incentives change faster than institutions — carries its own risks.