

## The Narrative of Nuclear Deterrence: Shaping Strategy in an Uncertain World

By

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China's nuclear breakout and Russia's ongoing aggression leave many Western analysts uncertain as to what is in the [mind](#) of Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin. Nuclear deterrence remains the most potent strategy at preventing great-power war and the escalation that would entail the death of many millions.

In nuclear deterrence, where the stakes are high and the consequences of failure are catastrophic, narratives play a crucial role in shaping strategy and influencing outcomes. Narratives surrounding nuclear weapons have profound effects on perceptions of credibility, intentions, and, ultimately, shaping the behavior of states. Understanding the role of narratives in nuclear deterrence is essential for policymakers and strategists seeking to navigate the complexities of nuclear politics.

### Role of Narratives in Shaping Perceptions of Credibility

Narratives are important in nuclear deterrence strategy in shaping [perceptions of credibility](#). The credibility of a state's nuclear deterrent is essential for its effectiveness in deterring potential adversaries. States that possess clear [escalation dominance](#) and [nuclear superiority](#) will hold an advantage in perceptions of resolve and strength. However, credibility is exclusively tied to a state's willingness to use the bomb.

In the United States, the president is responsible for influencing the perceptions of his adversaries through crafting a compelling narrative that will properly induce fear into his enemy. Narratives that emphasize a state's willingness and capability to use nuclear weapons can enhance its deterrence posture, dissuading others from taking aggressive actions. The only other way to enhance credibility beyond strategic narratives is to employ nuclear weapons in some capacity. Such acts are [unpalatable for moral and ethical reasons](#), which leaves crafting convincing narratives as the preferred means of influencing an adversary.

### Influencing Perceptions of Intentions

Narratives also influence perceptions of intentions. States often use narratives to signal their intentions and clarify their strategic objectives. For example, a state may adopt a narrative of [minimum deterrence](#), emphasizing its nuclear arsenal's defensive nature and its commitment to avoiding nuclear conflict. China is the prime example.

The inverse strategy to a narrative of minimum deterrence would be a narrative of [maximum deterrence](#). In this approach, Russia, for example, emphasizes the offensive capabilities of its nuclear arsenal and its readiness to employ nuclear weapons in a wide range of scenarios. This narrative seeks to maximize the perceived threat posed by the Russian nuclear arsenal.

Unlike the minimum deterrence narrative, which emphasizes restraint and a defensive posture, the maximum deterrence narrative emphasizes assertiveness and a willingness to

escalate to achieve strategic objectives. Such narratives can help reduce the risk of miscalculation and escalation by providing clarity about a state's nuclear policy.

## Shaping Perceptions of Capabilities

Narratives also play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of capabilities. States often use narratives to convey information about their nuclear arsenal's size, sophistication, and survivability. These narratives can influence how other states perceive the balance of power and make strategic calculations. For example, a state that portrays its nuclear arsenal as modern and reliable may be seen as more credible and capable of deterring potential adversaries.

Additionally, the concept of [secure second strike](#) is fundamental. This capability refers to a state's ability to respond to a nuclear attack with a devastating counterattack after absorbing a first strike. Second-strike retaliatory arsenals, which encompass a variety of delivery systems such as submarines, land-based missiles, and strategic bombers, are critical components.

Narratives surrounding second-strike retaliatory arsenals are designed to convey specific messages about a state's nuclear capabilities. By highlighting the sophistication and survivability of their arsenals, states seek to deter potential adversaries by signaling that any attack would result in a devastating response.

## Limitations of Narratives

Narratives in nuclear deterrence strategy are powerful tools, but they also have inherent limitations. One major limitation is the potential for misinterpretation or manipulation. Different states may interpret the same narrative in different ways, leading to misunderstandings and increased tensions. Moreover, narratives can be undermined by actions that contradict the message being conveyed. When China emphasizes its commitment to peaceful coexistence but then takes provocative actions, such as conducting aggressive military exercises near Taiwan, the credibility of its narrative is eroded. This is known as the [credibility-action gap](#), where actions speak louder than words, undermining the narrative's intended message.

When leaders openly talk about a [taboo against the use of nuclear weapons](#), expressing a moral revulsion to using them even in extreme circumstances, it can inadvertently weaken the state's deterrent posture. Adversaries may perceive this as a lack of resolve, believing that the state would be unwilling to use nuclear weapons even if its survival was at stake.

## Importance of Narrative Control

In the context of nuclear deterrence, narrative control is not just a strategic advantage but a fundamental necessity. It is through narrative control that states can shape perceptions, manage crisis situations, and ultimately enhance their deterrence posture. This is important for four reasons.

First, narrative control allows states to shape how their nuclear capabilities are perceived by others. By crafting a narrative that emphasizes their resolve, states can deter potential adversaries by conveying a clear and credible message. This perception can influence how other states make strategic calculations and may deter them from taking aggressive actions.

Second, during a crisis, narrative control can be crucial in de-escalating tensions and preventing misunderstandings. A carefully crafted narrative can provide clarity about a state's

intentions and actions, helping to prevent misunderstandings that could lead to escalation. By shaping the narrative surrounding a nuclear incident, states can help manage crisis situations and reduce the risk of nuclear conflict.

Third, narrative control is essential for enhancing the credibility of deterrent threats. A state that successfully controls the narrative can convey a clear and credible message about its willingness and capability to use nuclear weapons, if necessary. This can enhance the credibility of its deterrent threats, making them more effective in deterring aggression.

Fourth, narrative control can help reduce the likelihood of nuclear conflict. By shaping perceptions, managing crisis situations, and enhancing credibility, states can deter potential adversaries and maintain peace and stability in the nuclear age.

## Conclusion

With China and Russia growing increasingly assertive in the pursuit of their interests, nuclear deterrence is once again growing in its importance to the United States. The narratives surrounding nuclear weapons are pivotal in shaping perceptions of credibility, intentions, and capabilities. Crafting convincing narratives is thus crucial for President Biden and future presidents. As a free nation, the United States has never quite mastered the art of narrative creation because it can often seem antithetical to American values. It may seem too much like propaganda.

However, the time has come to reconsider this view. For the United States to effectively deter not only China and Russia, but also North Korea and a nascent nuclear Iran, an effective narrative is an important tool in the toolkit. This is particularly true as the American nuclear arsenal declines relative to those of China and Russia.

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