

## Yes, You Can Be a Feminist and Still Support Nuclear Deterrence

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In 1987, acclaimed feminist researcher Carol Cohn released a scathing gendered critique of Cold War nuclear deterrence. Cohn [argued](#) that the ‘technostrategic,’ masculinized language used to discuss deterrence strategy was not accidental. It obscured moral responsibility, normalized violence, and made nuclear war more plausible. As one of the most influential pieces within its subfield, Cohn’s conclusions are still [cited](#) more than three decades later in the growing cadre of women arguing that the existence of nuclear weapons is anti-feminist.

Cohn is part of a distinct group of political theorists [referred](#) to as international relations (IR) feminists. Rather than offering a causal explanation of war, IR feminists focus on exposing the gender hierarchies embedded in international politics. They specifically argue that the dominant classical IR theories, such as realism and liberalism, privilege masculinity and normalize violence through abstract language. War, in their view, is linked to masculinized norms of autonomy, aggression, and control. Nuclear weapons, as the ultimate instrument of war, are then the ultimate instruments of male violence.

So, what does it mean to be a woman working within the nuclear weapons complex today? Do all women who find themselves in such a position suddenly become anti-feminist? Given that the argument that nuclear deterrence is responsible for the sharp decline in major power conflict is quite persuasive, the answer is most certainly not.

At its core, feminism argues that women are affected differently than men for many things, yet still fundamentally deserve equal rights to life, liberty, and property. War, in particular, is a strong example of this. Unquestionably, sexual violence is a [tactic](#) used in genocides and ethnic cleansings; a type of violence that is predominantly perpetrated against women. Therefore, the prevention of war is also a feminist issue. Nuclear weapons are simply the key to deterring the very global wars that would result in mass atrocities like the [Rape of Nanjing](#). These specific war crimes were enabled by a powerful, unchecked conventional army in an era without nuclear weapons.

Cohn’s critique of nuclear discourse is compelling on its surface, but it does not offer an alternative theory of deterrence. Nuclear war has not occurred since 1945, not because states abandoned violent thinking after World War Two, but because deterrence altered strategic calculations. Feminist IR theory does not explain this outcome.

The deeper issue is that feminist IR theory prioritizes deconstruction over explanation. Its intellectual roots in [critical theory](#) lead it to distrust policy-oriented thinking, viewing it as complicit in domination. As a result, IR feminist scholars often resist offering recommendations to leaders or engaging with strategic trade-offs. However, international relations theory exists to explain and manage conflict, not merely to critique it.

This gap becomes clear when IR feminists are asked the same question classical theories confront directly. Why do wars begin between states at particular moments? IR feminists often answer by pointing to patriarchy, masculinized institutions, or hierarchical gender norms. These may be part of the broader social environment, but they do not explain timing, escalation, or variation. Patriarchy exists in both peaceful and belligerent states.

States pursue deterrence because they cannot directly control their enemies' actions and want to avoid war without capitulation. Deterrence is successful when a state's credibility and capability are maintained. As Herman Kahn once bluntly put it, deterrence works because "the most convincing way to look willing is to be willing."

Cohn critiques the language used to discuss this logic: "Nuclear strategic thinking is a calculus of the relation of one set of weapons to another. As such, it is utterly bankrupt of possibilities for thinking about peace or meaningful security." Cohn gets the argument of deterrence wrong, however. Nuclear strategic thinking is a calculus of the relationship between one state's risk threshold and another's. So far, thankfully, no nation has determined that the military benefit of using nuclear weapons in a conflict is worth the risk that nuclear weapons will subsequently be used against it. This has fundamentally maintained global peace; the fear of nuclear escalation has prevented small wars from intensifying into world wars.

Another element of Cohn's argument, and those of IR feminists at large, is that there is no such thing as objective, impartial knowledge. Contending with this premise is intentionally made difficult by IR feminists as they further argue requests for evidence are themselves masculine-coded; these are arguments of bad faith. Their arguments against nuclear weapons have the same fallacies. Deterrence is measurably less aggressive than the alternatives of armed conflict.

Whether morally troubling others or not, deterrence operates within a realist framework in which adversaries' perceptions determine outcomes. Feminist IR theory offers no alternative explanation for how nuclear war is avoided in a world where states cannot control their enemies' choices. Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher warned that while a world without nuclear weapons might appear desirable, "you cannot base a sure defense on dreams."

Unfortunately, IR feminists have co-opted the broader interaction of feminism with international relations theory. It has since made it difficult for other aspects of feminist thought to combine with IR theories to produce more nuanced explanations of war that do not rely on critical theory. As explanations of war ultimately seek to offer paths of war prevention, feminist IR theory as it stands remains an incomplete theory.

To want war to be avoided is a core feminist issue. Acknowledging that nuclear weapons are the key to this is not anti-feminist. Deconstructing the language of deterrence strategy does not explain why nuclear war has been avoided for nearly eight decades, nor does it offer a credible alternative for preventing it. Preventing global war protects the very populations feminists seek to defend. Women can therefore work in the nuclear enterprise without being morally bankrupt, and feminists can support nuclear deterrence because the prevention of catastrophic war is itself a profoundly feminist objective.



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