Correspondence

Nuclear Deterrence—What Is It Good For?

Mark S. Bell
Matthew Evangelista

To the Editors (Mark S. Bell writes):

Matthew Evangelista's article questions the wisdom of bringing Ukraine into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and under the U.S. "nuclear umbrella."[1] Such a policy should indeed be subject to scrutiny. Yet Evangelista's argument regarding nuclear deterrence is not wholly convincing.

Evangelista challenges the claim that "nuclear deterrence . . . preserved the peace in Europe throughout the Cold War" (p. 7). He argues that nuclear deterrence is "fragil[e]" (p. 39) and that "it is wrong to claim that deterrence worked" (p. 38). To support these conclusions, Evangelista offers two main claims. First, nuclear deterrence was "not tested in Cold War Europe" (p. 38): The Soviet Union had "no such intention" to invade Western Europe and there was not "something to deter" (p. 7). Second, nuclear weapons did not prevent crises and in fact made them more dangerous.

These claims cannot support the inference that Evangelista seeks to draw. The first (lack of Soviet aggressive intentions or invasion plans) does not support Evangelista's conclusion about the irrelevance of nuclear deterrence. Nuclear deterrence should be expected to affect states' calculations about what they can achieve in international politics. The Soviet Union was aware of NATO's nuclear weapons, and those weapons may have affected the scope of Soviet ambitions in Europe. As a result, little indication of aggressive plans or intentions in the Soviet archives is perfectly consistent with the restraining power of nuclear deterrence. It does not, therefore, support a strong conclusion that nuclear deterrence was irrelevant.

Second, Evangelista argues that relying on nuclear deterrence during the Cold War made crises more dangerous. This may be true, but it is not evidence for the irrelevance or fragility of nuclear deterrence. It is the *essence* of nuclear deterrence to raise the consequences of miscalculation in crises to catastrophic levels. The political effects of nuclear weapons cannot be decoupled from the consequences of their use; the latter is the cause of the former. Indeed, a plausible explanation for the "willing[ness in the late 1960s] . . . to codify the status quo in a divided Europe" (p. 22) that Evangelista credits with dampening dangers is that it emerged from leaders concluding that the crises of the early 1960s were more dangerous than the political stakes merited—that "coming

Mark S. Bell is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Minnesota.

Matthew Evangelista is President White Professor of History and Political Science at Cornell University.

1. Matthew Evangelista, "A 'Nuclear Umbrella' for Ukraine? Precedents and Possibilities for Postwar European Security," *International Security*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Winter 2023/24), pp. 7–50, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00476. Subsequent references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

International Security, Vol. 49, No. 2 (Fall 2024), pp. 170–173, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_c_00499

so close to disaster jolted the leaders into a détente."[2] In other words, the settlement that emerged, which Evangelista lauds, was partly the *result* of nuclear weapons.

Drawing lessons for current policy debates from history and social science requires caution. Much uncertainty remains about answers to fundamental questions about the nuclear era.[3] Scholars should not dismiss this uncertainty. Just as Evangelista is rightly wary of overly confident arguments about the simplicity of relying on nuclear deterrence, we should also be wary of overly confident arguments that nuclear deterrence is fragile or irrelevant.

—*Mark S. Bell*
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Matthew Evangelista Replies:

Mark Bell begins his response to my article by generously pointing to where we agree: Proposals for bringing Ukraine into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and under the supposed protection of the U.S. "nuclear umbrella" merit scrutiny. He does not comment on either my advocacy of alternative non-nuclear approaches to Ukrainian and European security once the war ends or the theoretical concepts that inform my analysis, such as Robert Jervis's elaboration of the security dilemma (p. 13) or Carol Cohn's critique of "technostrategic language" (p. 14). His criticism focuses instead on my claims that nuclear deterrence should not be credited with preventing war in Europe during the Cold War and that nuclear deterrence was never put to the test, "because the Soviet Union did not intend any of the aggressive actions that NATO feared" (p. 38). The historical record does not support, for example, Winston Churchill's dramatic assertion in 1950 that "nothing preserves Europe from an overwhelming military attack [by the Soviet Union] except the devastating resources of the United States in this awful [atomic] weapon."[1]

Bell correctly paraphrases my view that "nuclear weapons did not prevent crises and in fact made them more dangerous." But he incorrectly attributes to me the view that "nuclear deterrence was irrelevant." If I claim that deploying or threatening to use nuclear weapons ("nuclear deterrence") increases the danger of crises, then logically I do not consider the strategy of nuclear deterrence irrelevant. To emphasize nuclear deterrence's relevance, Bell writes that "the Soviet Union was aware of NATO's nuclear

2. Alexa van Sickle, "The Myths of October," *Survival*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (February–March 2013), p. 160, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2013.767412.
3. Robert Jervis, "The Nuclear Age: During and after the Cold War," in Nuno P. Monteiro and Fritz Bartel, eds., *Before and after the Fall: World Politics and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 131; Mark S. Bell, "The Nuclear Taboo and the Inevitability of Uncertainty," *Security Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2023), pp. 166–172, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2023.2178966.

1. Winston Churchill, *In the Balance: Speeches 1949 and 1950* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1952), p. 356.

weapons, and those weapons may have affected the scope of Soviet ambitions in Europe." I find this claim uncontroversial. Even before the opening of Soviet archives, scholars documented Soviet reactions to the United States deploying nuclear weapons in Europe. The development of so-called tactical nuclear weapons stimulated a Soviet effort to create similar weapons and integrate them into Soviet military operations some ten years after NATO did so.[2] By the 1961 Berlin Crisis, as I describe in the article, Soviet plans envisioned preemptive nuclear strikes against NATO's nuclear weapons if NATO were to launch an invasion. That is why I cite both NATO's plans to "employ nuclear weapons selectively" (p. 20) and Paul Nitze's advocacy of a strategic nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union (pp. 20–21) as examples of the dangers of attempts at nuclear deterrence during crises.[3]

Regarding the scope of "Soviet ambitions in Europe," and the impact of nuclear weapons on those ambitions, historians benefit from an impressive array of primary materials: minutes of Politburo sessions, meetings of Soviet and foreign communists, memoirs, interviews, and military plans.[4] Bell claims that even if historians find "little indication of aggressive plans or intentions in the Soviet archives," nuclear weapons might nevertheless have restrained Soviet leaders from taking more aggressive actions. I am not sure why Bell's default assumption is Soviet aggressive intentions, when the security dilemma suggests that even status quo powers can appear threatening to their adversaries when they arm in self-defense. His claim that nuclear deterrence accounts for Soviet restraint—rather than, say, fear of war in general after the devasting experience of World War II—reminds me of the technostrategic thinking that attributes causality to weapons rather than humans.[5]

Bell seems to recognize that I am more struck by the counterproductive and danger-

---

2. Matthew Evangelista, *Innovation and the Arms Race: How the United States and the Soviet Union Develop New Weapons* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), chap. 4.
3. NATO Planning for Berlin Emergency, from Secretary General Dirk Stikker to Permanent Representatives, North Atlantic Council, September 27, 1961, pp. 4–5, https://archives.nato.int/uploads/r/null/2/1/216993/C-M_61_104_ENG_NHQL699872.pdf; Paul Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost: At the Center of Decision—A Memoir* (New York: Grove, 1989), p. 204; Fred Kaplan, *The Bomb: Presidents, Generals, and the Secret History of Nuclear War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), chap. 3; William Burr, ed., "First Strike Options and the Berlin Crisis, September 1961," National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 56, September 25, 2001, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB56/index2.html.
4. In addition to the sources provided in my article, see: Vojtech Mastny and Malcolm Byrne, eds., *Cardboard Castle? An Inside History of the Warsaw Pact* (Budapest: Central European Press, 2005); Sergey Radchenko, *To Run the World: The Kremlin's Cold War Bid for Global Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024); Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); the publications and document collections compiled by Svetlana Savranskaya at the National Security Archive, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/about/staff/dr-svetlana-savranskaya.
5. On technostrategic thinking, see Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," *Signs*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Summer 1987), pp. 687–718, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174209. On how the configuration of military forces can make status quo powers appear threatening, see: Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (1978), pp. 167–214, https://doi.org/10.2307/2009958; Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 58–114.

ous impact of nuclear weapons than by their stabilizing effects. Examples include the Soviet Union accelerating its nuclear program under Joseph Stalin following the U.S. atomic bombings of Japan, and the nuclear saber-rattling of his successor, Nikita Khrushchev, not only over Berlin, but during crises over Suez, Iraq, and Taiwan, among others.[6] Leonid Brezhnev, who oversaw a massive buildup of Soviet nuclear weapons, was generally cautious about their use. But even he—sleep-deprived and under the influence of drugs, according to some sources—provoked a U.S. nuclear alert with his threats of Soviet intervention during the 1973 Yom Kippur War.[7] To the extent that nuclear deterrence otherwise made both superpowers careful about direct confrontations, it gave them a free hand to intervene militarily elsewhere—including the Soviet use of armed force against East Germany in 1953, as well as its invasions of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Probably the core disagreement between Bell and myself comes in how we respond to his claim that "it is the *essence* of nuclear deterrence to raise the consequences of miscalculation in crises to catastrophic levels (emphasis in original)." Bell seems to believe that there are political benefits that justify risking the catastrophic consequences of nuclear war by miscalculation. My reading of the history of nuclear accidents and close calls, and my understanding of the impact of nuclear explosions on human life and the environment, make me inclined to look for alternatives to nuclear weapons as sources of security, as I sought to do in my article on postwar Ukraine and Europe.

—*Matthew Evangelista*
Ithaca, New York

6. David Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb: The Soviet Union and Atomic Energy, 1939–1956* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); Radchenko, *To Run the World*, esp. chaps. 5, 7, 10.
7. Radchenko, *To Run the World*, chap. 14.