Pierre Vandier: Deterrence in the Third Nuclear Age

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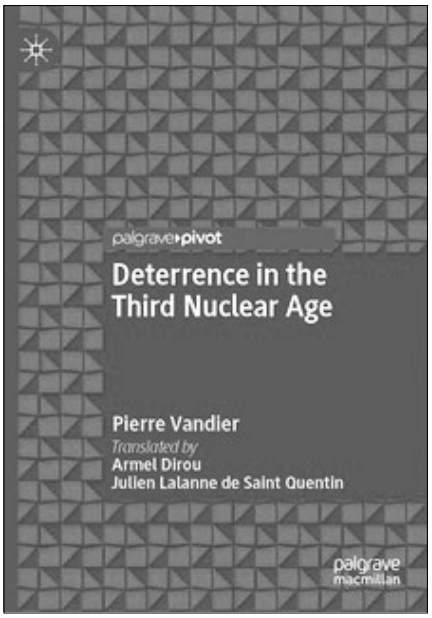

As the Russia-Ukraine war unfolds under the shadow of nuclear rhetoric, the possibility of a world free of nuclear weapons is weakened. Reshaping the contours of European security, the war has unveiled an unsettling truth: nuclear weapons remain central to global power politics. Nuclear deterrence, once considered a relic of Cold War logic, appears to be defining the strategic reality of the 21st century again. Building on this line of thought, Admiral Pierre Vandier – Supreme Allied Commander Transformation in NATO and former Chief of Staff of the French Navy – in his concise yet timely book *Deterrence in the Third Nuclear Age*, published in March 2025 (part of the Rethinking Political Violence series issued by Palgrave Macmillan), offers an insightful discussion on the global nuclear order. He argues that the system, once structured by bipolar stability and later through arms control optimism, is undergoing a complex and unpredictable phase.

Emphasising how "disarmament efforts have not succeeded in removing these weapons from their status as the centrepiece of relations between states," Vandier argued, "the end of the Cold War was not the end of nuclear weapons" (xiii). Thus, drawing on his extensive experience within the French defence establishment, he analyses how today's world has entered a 'third nuclear age,' marked by competitive multipolarity, technological disruption, and, more importantly, the erosion of an established deterrence framework. Linking strategic theory and practical realities of statecraft, he warned against complacency in adapting defence postures, which could potentially result in strategic miscalculations.

Applying the widely established conceptual framework of 'three nuclear ages' – not novel to Vandier – to explicate how nuclear deterrence is not a static doctrine, his book questions how credible deterrence can be maintained in an era of hybrid warfare and shifting power dynamics. It examines the strategic adjustments that nuclear states like France require to preserve their credibility and stability. By reflecting on the first (U.S.-Soviet confrontation) and second nuclear ages (arms control and disarmament), Vandier's analysis challenges readers to question the resilience of classical nuclear deterrence in the current strategic environment.

In this regard, Chapter 1 lays the groundwork by outlining the conceptual and historical foundations of nuclear deterrence, the 'first nuclear age,' tracing its origin back to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Vandier argues that nuclear weapons have fundamentally reversed the nature of conflict, creating a normative 'nuclear taboo' that prevented their use due to the realisation of the "danger of triggering an uncontrollable escalation of violence" (3). Nuclear weapons are not merely a product of technological innovation but a deliberate construction of strategic rationality, shaped by military, political and psychological factors. Vandier underscores how the strength of nuclear weapons relies on operational readiness and the adversary's perception of resolve. Therefore, reflecting on structured stability – the notion that deterrence stability during the Cold War was mainly due to the predictable bipolar order – Vandier deliberated how the U.S. and Soviet Union relied on symmetric capabilities and a shared understanding of escalation threshold that helped prevent miscalculations. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the emergence of the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a pivotal moment in global nuclear governance – an attempt to institutionalise deterrence through cooperation and control.

Articulating this era of hope, Chapter 2 delves into the 'second nuclear age,' a period characterised by optimism and a belief that nuclear threats could be contained through arms control and disarmament initiatives. It revives the "ambition of a definitive and total ban on nuclear weapons" (8). However, this optimism and call for the 'Global Zero' initiative were challenged by the events of 9/11, which revealed the limitations of nuclear deterrence against non-state and unconventional threats. Vandier situates these developments within the boarder strategic context. He notes how the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq without the United Nations consent, the refusal of Pakistan, India and Israel to sign NPT, and the continued proliferation by Iran and North Korea, collectively undermined the credibility of "good faith disarmament" and led states to struggle for their "ultimate safeguards" (14).

Drawing on a realist perspective, Vandier argues that this shift marked the onset of the 'third nuclear age' – a period where deterrence persists not as a relic of the past but as an adaptive and enduring principle of statecraft. He introduces the strategy "beneath the nuclear canopy" (23), emphasising that while total war remains unlikely, nuclear weapons continue to shape the global strategic order by preserving power hierarchies. In Vandier's perspective, the elimination of nuclear weapons or the hopes of it are "totally unrealistic" (21). No state, he argues, has an objective interest in achieving the 'Global Zero' objective; rather, states are modernising their deterrence system to secure their survival. Notably, Vandier neither dismisses the achievement of arms control nor romanticises disarmament idealism. Instead, he exposes the inherent tensions between normative aspirations and strategic imperatives. While international treaties are valuable, they cannot replace the deterrent logic that underpinned the nuclear stability of the Cold War era.

This way, Chapter 2 establishes the continuing relevance of deterrence in global security thinking – a premise that Chapter 3 builds upon through an investigation of France's internalisation of this logic within its strategic doctrine. Vandier emphasises that France's nuclear deterrent is both a tool of its national security and a symbol of its strategic autonomy, especially in the European context, which is increasingly influenced by the U.S. and NATO dynamics. Pointing to France's sovereign right to implement deterrence, Vandier notes that the country is both "fully in and radically out of NATO" (29). This status enables it to retain the "freedom to qualify its strategic situation" and "control over the threshold, i.e. the assessment of the criticality level of the threat it faces" (29). In this regard, the structural elements of the French nuclear triad and the challenges posed by emerging technologies, i.e. hypersonic weapons, cyber threats, and precision strike capabilities, were discussed to explicate how these innovations compel France to rethink its deterrence thresholds. Particularly, the commissioning of new warships by the Chinese Navy, which are equivalent to France's current fleet, is seen by Vandier as a major challenge. He argues that the expansion of China's conventional naval forces is altering the maritime balance, posing a direct strategic test for France. Thus, in the absence of "real conventional resilience," Vandier concludes that "nuclear technology is more necessary than ever to allow a rebalancing of power" (33). He calls it an "effective means of strategic rebalancing," especially in a world where France's technological edge is diminishing compared to other "emerging countries" (33).

In Chapter 4, Vandier underscores the necessity of strategic recalibrations, asserting that deterrence is not a static doctrine but one that should be tested and refined in response to emerging challenges. He connects historical and national perspectives to propose a forward-looking assessment of nuclear doctrine. Vandier argues that classical deterrence of the Cold War is conceptually robust but insufficient for navigating the complexities of contemporary geopolitics. To him, conventional and nuclear arms are "essential to strengthen the credibility of deterrence" (39). Therefore, emphasising, France, in the absence of a territory with strategic depth, but with the privileged access to oceans, should put its "nuclear eggs" in a "basket as elusive as possible" and make an effort to "maintain the tactical advantage of submarine platforms in the long term" (41). He warns that technological advancements and North Korea's nuclear ambitions have introduced new vectors of escalation, requiring refined signalling and readiness. Without a credible nuclear deterrent, France would face a dual burden of overreliance on conventional forces and exposure to the strategic dominance of more assertive powers. In essence, Vandier reaffirms that nuclear deterrence is not merely a defensive tool but the cornerstone of France's long-term strategic stability.

Overall, Vandier's work is a very compelling and timely contribution to the study of nuclear strategy, offering both a historical lens and a forward-looking approach to nuclear deterrence, especially in today's world of increasing uncertainty. The book is an essential read for students, policymakers, and scholars since it bridges the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical strategic considerations. It prompts the reader to question the relevance of nuclear deterrence and to understand it not as an abstract concept but as a dynamic instrument shaped by technological innovations, evolving threats, and political calculations.

One of the book's primary strengths lies in contextualising the lessons from the Cold War and post-Cold War periods to inform the strategic dilemmas of the 21st century, particularly in light of the Russia-Ukraine war. Vandier's conceptualisation of the 'third nuclear age' resonates strongly with current debates on nuclear coercion and escalation control. It offers a valuable lens for interpreting Europe's strategic anxieties and France's pursuit of autonomy in a security environment, currently shaped by NATO-Russia confrontation. As Keir Giles (Chatham House, 2023) argues, Russia has achieved "substantial success in constraining Western support for Ukraine through use of threatening language around the possible use of nuclear weapons," which has created a form of "fear-induced paralysis" among Western decision-makers (1). This weaponisation of rhetoric exemplifies how deterrence has evolved from tangible arsenals to the psychological and informational domains, which Vandier identifies as central to the current strategic era. Thus, effective deterrence in the third nuclear age requires not only credible nuclear postures but also strategic autonomy, flexible signalling, and the political will to confront coercive nuclear narratives.

Nonetheless, Vandier's realist approach carries inherent limitations. His dismissal of disarmament optimism risks normalising nuclear dependence. The book neglects the ethical and intergenerational justice concerns associated with deterrence. By projecting nuclear modernisation as an unavoidable necessity, Vandier's work implicitly forecloses the probability of a nuclear-free world and undercuts global aspirations for arms control and disarmament. Not engaging enough with the normative and humanitarian perspectives – particularly the long-term consequences of perpetuating nuclear deterrence – his work suggests an acceptance of strategic fatalism. Thereby, downplaying the potential role of multilateral frameworks such as NPT and civil society initiatives like the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) in mitigating escalation risks.

While Vandier's case study of France offers a national perspective, it reflects a certain degree of Western-centric bias. There is comparatively limited discussion of nuclear developments in Asia, the Middle East, or the Global South. Likewise, the impact of cyber warfare and artificial intelligence on the command-and-control system, as well as the risk of accidental escalation, could have been explored in greater depth. It is also important to note that Vandier oversimplified the doctrinal adaptation process and is short on discussing the complexities surrounding this procedure, especially the political, organisational, and ethical challenges.

In conclusion, as a high-ranked naval officer, Vandier's work offers a unique voice to the debates on the relevance of nuclear deterrence, which are otherwise dominated by academics and policy theorists. His work is intellectually rigorous and offers anyone interested in understanding the complexities of nuclear deterrence an opportunity to see how the concept has evolved and should continue to adapt in the face of emerging challenges.

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