Understanding Military Implications of Nuclear Weapons
A Frame Analysis of U.S. and Russian Nuclear Policy Discourses 2017-2020

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Abstract
The paper discusses how strategic nuclear capabilities possessed by the world’s largest nuclear powers, the United States and Russia, affect how their state leadership makes sense of the role of military force in international politics. Using the theoretical framework of the theory of nuclear revolution (Jervis 1989) and nuclear realism (van Munster & Sylvest 2016), the author parses the ways in which the role of military force is framed in U.S. and Russian nuclear policy discourses in 2017-2020. For this purpose, the method of frame analysis is applied that draws on the writings of Goffman (1986) and van Hulst & Yanow (2016). The paper concludes that both in Russia and the United States, the understanding of nuclear weapons is symbolic. In other words, policymakers agree upon the fact that nuclear war cannot be fought or won. However, while Moscow distinguishes between nuclear and non-nuclear military capabilities as instruments of diplomacy and coercion, the distinction is absent in Washington’s discourse, whereby nuclear weapons are considered but one aspect of state military might. In both states’ discourses, nuclear weapons have a connection to state identity, which is particularly pronounced in the case of Russia. Finally, U.S. policymakers talk about nuclear weapons “from a position of strength”, whereas Russian state leadership appeals to its nuclear capabilities to boost its international influence and reinforce its great power status.

Keywords: nuclear weapons, nuclear policy discourse, the United States, Russia, framing theory, nuclear realism
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Introduction

Research problem and aim

In his 2009 *Foreign Affairs* article, Professor Bradley A. Thayer noted there are “[f]ew topics in international relations [that] consistently attract as much academic and policy interest as nuclear proliferation” (Thayer 2009). This applies not least to the role nuclear weapons are thought to play in international politics. However, whether “old guidelines [to strategic nuclear thinking] are still usable” (Jervis 1989; see also Morgenthau 1977) remains an open question as political understanding of the issue appears at times convoluted and even misleading, for which there is ample evidence. Along with many other policymakers around the world, US and Russian state leaders agree upon the deadliness of nuclear weapons. Yet, concrete strategies of their use are developed continually. Committing to “seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons” (The White House 2009), nuclear state leaders conveniently turn to a nuclear argument to advance political arrangements serving national security interests (see e.g., Miller & Narang 2019). Although a number of political and military decisionmakers argued for repudiating Cold-War strategic nuclear options as early as in the 1990s, this mode of thought persisted throughout the 21st century in the minds of many analysts and policymakers alike (see e.g., Safranchuk 2003 on Russia’s tactical nuclear arsenal; Waltz’s (renewed) 2013 argument on the stabilizing effect of nuclear weapons; and Cohen 2017 on learning as element of stability under deterrence). To sum up, while “nuclear arms are embedded in structures of established politico-strategic thinking” (Müller 2000: 128), the more precise ways of thinking about nuclear weapons warrant much greater clarity.

Based on the estimates provided by Stockholm Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), total amount of nuclear warheads in possession by Russia and the United States is approximately 12175 warheads (6375 and 5800 warheads, respectively), including deployed, stored and other (e.g., retired) types of warheads (SIPRI Yearbook 2020: 326, Table 10.1). The number of deployed US warheads is 1750, of which 150 are non-strategic (tactical) nuclear warheads\(^1\). The three legs of US nuclear forces (the “nuclear triad”) include bombers, land-based ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and ballistic missile submarines. The submarines and bombers are designed to carry nuclear weapons but can also operate with non-nuclear warheads, while most intermediate-

\(^1\) Note that this distinction between strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons is made at an early stage given its relevance to the empirical analysis.
range and intercontinental ballistic missiles are also equipped with nuclear warheads (often – multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles, MIRVs). In Russia, the nuclear force components encompass strategic bombers, land-based ballistic missiles, ballistic missile submarines and sea-launched ballistic missiles. Given the high number of non-strategic nuclear warheads “assigned for potential use by non-strategic forces” as well as their importance from a doctrinal point of view, tactical nuclear weapons can be considered the fourth key element of Russian nuclear weapons stockpile (Ibid: 343; see also Oliker 2018). Combined, the arsenals comprise around ninety-one percent of the world’s total nuclear warheads inventory. That said, the aim of the paper is to understand how the strategic nuclear capabilities discussed above affect the ways policymakers in the U.S. and Russia, respectively, think about the use of military force. The author also refers to this as military implications of nuclear weapons.

Research question

In formulating a nuclear policy, decisionmakers seek to answer the following questions: “What does [a state] need nuclear weapons for? And how many, of what sort, are enough?” (Kaplan 2016). However, the object of this paper is not nuclear policy itself but its discourse². To emphasize, the author has no intent to scrutinize the meaning of established concepts and ideas embedded in strategic nuclear thinking, rather how the meaning of nuclear weapons is framed by those who formulate and execute nuclear policy in Moscow and Washington, the owners of the world’s largest nuclear arsenals. That said, the research question is as follows: Given the states’ strategic nuclear capabilities, how do U.S. and Russian policymakers frame their understanding of the use of military force in international politics?

Theoretical background

The extant literature on nuclear weapons is immense, compounding any attempts to grasp its breadth and scope. This is especially evident given the variety of academic journals that publish research on nuclear weapons³. Research topics range from global issues such as peace and international relations in general, to international organization, to issues of security and conflict resolution, to specific problems associated with nuclear weapons, such as arms control, non-

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² Consider, for instance, the name of the 2014 ISSF H-Diplo Forum called “What do we talk about when we talk about nuclear weapons?”

proliferation, verification regimes and compliance issues, nuclear ethics, and more. Some of the key questions discussed in relation to nuclear weapons concern why states seek these weapons (Campbell, Einhorn, and Reiss (eds.) 2004; Kroenig 2018; Freedman & Mitchell 2019); how states acquire the components necessary to build a nuclear bomb (Kroenig 2013, 2016; Hymans 2012); strategic and military consequences of nuclear proliferation and the prospects of disarmament or total elimination of nuclear arms (Lavoy 1995; Freedman 2000; Waltz & Sagan 2013; van Munster & Sylvest 2016) as well as nuclear terrorism (Levi 2007; Ferguson 2009; Pilat 2009). Interestingly, the issues have been tackled from various epistemological standpoints. For instance, Jacques E.C. Hymans (2006) presents an actor-centered framework for analyzing state leaders’ motivations for going nuclear, while Devin T. Hagerty argues from a state-centered perspective, developing a theory of “existential deterrence under conditions of opacity” (1998: 171). By contrast, the “proliferation optimist” argument put forward by Kenneth N. Waltz is consistent with what he has called the “third image” of international relations, i.e., the systemic level (see Waltz & Sagan 2013).

Notwithstanding these significant contributions, it is worth noting few studies have been conducted from an interpretivist point of view (see, however, Tannenwald (1999) on nuclear taboos, Rost Rublee (2009) on non-proliferation norms, and Harrington (2009) on “fetishizing” of nuclear weapons). Often, researchers rely on pre-existing concepts of war, nuclear weapons or deterrence, with scarce attention being paid to precisely how policymakers think about the dangerous “fifth horseman” under their command. In other words, while “[t]here are fundamental and enduring realities to be recognized about what nuclear weapons are; about what war is; and about what the former have inescapably done to the latter” (Quinlan 2000: 45), no recent study has so far accounted for these realities.

Also, to my knowledge, a systematic analysis of US and Russian perspective on the military implications of nuclear weapons during the last years remains obscure, hence the empirical relevance of the study. While a number of studies (both within Russian, American and European research fields) have emphasized growing distrust in contemporary US-Russia relations (see e.g. Potter & Bidgood (eds.) 2018; Trenin 2020), clarifying the preconceptions used to frame a state’s nuclear policy will contribute to a greater understanding of the adversary, thereby increasing the chances of rejuvenating bilateral relations and reversing the “continuing downward spiral in US-Russia relations” (Potter & Bidgood: Ibid, 15).
Theoretical and methodological frameworks of the study

In his 1989 book, Robert Jervis suggested a compelling framework for understanding “what nuclear weapons have done to world politics” (1989: 2). The central claim of Jervis’ theory of the nuclear revolution is such that nuclear weapons have fundamentally altered the nature of security and the relationship between military force and statecraft: “Because military victory is impossible, the many patterns that rested on the utility of superior force have also been altered” (Ibid: 8). A similar but more recent attempt of bringing to the forefront the impact of nuclear weapons has been made by Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest (2016), who have developed a theory of nuclear realism based on the philosophical arguments of the four Cold War nuclear thinkers: Bertrand Russel, Lewis Mumford, Günther Anders, and John Hertz. In the words of the authors themselves, nuclear realism is a “concept [that] designates a way of digesting the nuclear revolution” (Ibid: 2). Evidently, the two theories have the nuclear revolution in focus; more precisely, the author intends to explicate their understanding of the impact of nuclear weapons on “the nature and availability of military force” (Ibid: 12). Note also that Robert Jervis argues in line with a classical realist theory, while van Munster and Sylvest put forward a critical realist argument. By complementing Jervis’ theory with that of (critical) nuclear realism, the author develops a framework that guides her subsequent analysis of the contemporary nuclear policy discourses in Russia and the United States.

Given the object of the study, methodological choices have been made accordingly. The study employs a pragmatist interpretivist approach which aims to “understand how people <…> draw inferences in specific social contexts about the kind of situations they are in” (Ansell 2016: 86). The logic of inquiry is primarily abductive, occurring “through our placing and interpreting the original ideas about the phenomenon in the frame of a new set of ideas” (Danermark et al. 2002: 91). In terms of methodological tools, frame analysis is harnessed to grasp the meaning of nuclear weapons within U.S. and Russian nuclear policy discourses. That said, empirical material used in the study comprises 1) statements by U.S. and Russian government officials; 2) speeches and statements given by Russia’s President Putin; 3) statements by US President Trump; and 4) other official comments and interviews, such as Trump’s Twitter comments and Putin’s comments during the Valdai Discussion Club sessions. The sources have been analyzed

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4 The decision not to label the chosen theoretical framework in any particular way is intentional. This is done to underline that the paper does not have any ambition aimed at conceptual critique.
in the original languages; any translation of statements in the Russian language used in the paper is the author’s own.

Finally, some observations with regards to the limitations of the current paper are in order. In terms of temporal boundaries, the study encompasses the years between 2017 and 2020. In 2017, US President Trump called for revising US nuclear doctrine and its physical stockpile, which resulted in publishing an updated Nuclear Posture Review (2018). Marking another threshold in U.S. strategic nuclear thinking since the end of the Cold War, 2017-2018 is therefore considered a relevant point of departure.

Disposition

In the chapter that follows, the author outlines contemporary academic debate concerning nuclear weapons, including its key concepts such as deterrence and nuclear proliferation. The theories of nuclear revolution and nuclear realism are then presented, with classical and critical strands seen as complementary ends of the chosen theoretical framework. After that, the author proceeds to explain how frame analysis is used as a method of textual analysis of policy discourses, drawing on the contributions by Goffman (1986) and van Hulst and Yanow (2016). Then follows the empirical analysis of U.S. and Russian nuclear policy discourses between 2017 and 2020. The paper concludes with a discussion of its findings as well as methodological limitations while also assessing its scientific contribution to the field of War Studies.
Theory and Method

Part I. Previous Research

Revising conceptual frameworks of nuclear weapons research

It should be noted that the literature covered in this chapter encompasses critical debate on nuclear weapons that emerged after the end of the Cold War, which is otherwise hardly possible to account for within the space limits of this paper. Thus, the trade-off made here is such that, by introducing some of the key concepts of Cold-War strategic nuclear thinking, the author compensates for the lack of a more thorough discussion of the literature of that period. That said, these key concepts are introduced first. Next, the author attempts to parse arguably the most heatedly debated aspect of nuclear weapons, namely the consequences of nuclear proliferation. Some of the ideas are then discussed that are related to the issue of the acquisition of nuclear bomb components as well as the nexus between nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism; finally, the author proceeds to explicate the chosen theoretical framework.

As is well known, the central concept of Cold-War nuclear doctrines was that of deterrence. In short, the logic of deterrence theory “stresses that nuclear weapons promote deterrent, not offensive, strategies and thus decrease the probability of war” (Hagerty 1998: 15; for recent discussions of deterrence theory and its premises, see e.g., Jervis 1989; Glaser 1990; Kuklick 2006; Freedman & Mitchell 2019). Some scholars argue that nuclear superiority is not important once the states have crossed the threshold of secure second-strike capabilities, a crucial concept within deterrence theory: “Nuclear arsenals may be reduced to very small numbers, but if they remain at or above the second-strike level, the military relations of states continue unchanged” (Waltz 2013: 221; see also Jervis 1989). Matthew Kroenig, on the other hand, posits that nuclear superiority tilts the balance of resolve, thereby altering nuclear crisis outcomes. In other words, states that possess superior nuclear arsenals are more willing to escalate risks, which results in their prevailing in crises with other nuclear-armed states (Kroenig 2013). A more recent incarnation of deterrence theory has been termed the “sponge theory”. In short, deterrence logic is still applicable insofar as land-based intercontinental nuclear weapons have no effect on the probability of war between states; as is evident in his later “More May Be Better” essays (1981; 2013), however, he seems to have acknowledged that nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence do affect and, more importantly, cause stability.

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5 It is worth noting that Waltz’s position with regards to the impact of nuclear weapons for global stability has evolved throughout his writings (see Gray 2000). For example, in Man, the State, and War (1959), he argues that nuclear weapons have no effect on the probability of war between states; as is evident in his later “More May Be Better” essays (1981; 2013), however, he seems to have acknowledged that nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence do affect and, more importantly, cause stability.
ballistic missiles act as “sponges” absorbing preemptive adversary nuclear attack, thereby preserving the rest of the arsenals for a retaliatory response (see e.g. Kaplan 2016).

The essence of Waltz’s argument is his analysis of the “different implications of defense and deterrence” (2013: 5). While purely defensive forces cannot punish (e.g. the Maginot line), deterrence as such (i.e. second-strike capabilities) does not help defend anything. Waltz’s point, then, is that nuclear weapons have revolutionized the concept of national security: instead of focusing upon the defense of territory, a nuclear state builds credible deterrence. Risks associated with a possible nuclear exchange between adversaries induce caution; therefore, even unstable states would not resort to their use. According to Waltz’s argument, under deterrence the possibility of an arms race, too, decreases rather than increases: “With deterrent strategies, arms races make sense only if a first-strike capability is within reach” (Ibid: 30).

Waltz’s theory is a powerful one, albeit with its own shortcomings. Specifically, the author takes issue with his account of the international system. Waltz’s approach is state-centric, which might not be a problem in and of itself. However, once one acknowledges that not only states but non-state actors, too, have capabilities to acquire nuclear weapons, his theory does not seem to hold for two reasons. First, whom does the deterrer whose deterrence failed attack if it has been struck by a non-state actor? Francis Gavin (2010) refers to this as the problem of “no return address”; to exemplify, if a host state is only a victim of a terrorist nuclear endgame, it is unclear, based on the logic of Waltz’s argument, what actor, the host or the culprits located on its territory, is to be the object of the state’s retaliatory attack. Second, Waltz has argued that states won’t risk nuclear escalation because of the risks of being annihilated themselves. Yet, when it comes to those instances when state leaders might deliberately run the risks of their state being incinerated: “People fanatically dedicated to some revolutionary cause may have no concern for the survival of their country” (Fred Iklé quoted in Gavin 2010: 14), Waltz’s theory is remarkably silent. Important to note here, too, is that non-state actors “can be satisfied with levels of nuclear reliability and performance that states could not accept” (Heisbourg 2014: 31).

Notwithstanding these remarks, Waltz has put forward a profoundly sound theory of nuclear deterrence his contemporaries as well as later generations of scholars have continuously sought to repudiate. To this end, according to Matthew Kroenig, one of the main figures within the “proliferation pessimist” argument, the problem with deterrence theory is that nuclear weapons constrain U.S. freedom of action, thereby undermining their national interest: “Even if the spread of nuclear weapons contributes to greater levels of international stability <…>, it does
not necessarily follow that the spread of nuclear weapons is in the U.S. interest. There might be other national goals that trump stability, such as reducing to zero the risk of nuclear war in important geopolitical regions” (2016: 62). Other scholars see problems with the logic by which deterrence operates: “Literally, there can be no such thing as ‘the deterrent’, nuclear or otherwise. Whether or not a nuclear arsenal deters is a matter for decision by the recipients of would-be deterrent menaces, not by the owners of the putative deterrent” (Gray 2000: 12). The fragility of deterrence logic is also exposed considering its self-fulfilling nature, prompting questions whether they were mutual second-strike capabilities that effectively contributed to the absence of an all-out war between Cold-War adversaries: “With respect to nuclear war plans it was as much a question of retaining enough missiles and warheads to cover the required targets as it was of retaining enough targets to justify the available missiles and warheads (Freedman 2019: 560). In a similar vein, McCGwire (2000: 148) argues that deterrence theory does not hold given fallacious understandings of an opponent’s calculations of risk and vital interests: “Because the doctrine of nuclear deterrence was premised on a Soviet urge to aggression, Western officialdom focused on the worst-case analysis of their offensive capabilities, paid no attention to Soviet interests and requirements, and actively eschewed any analysis of their intentions, which were a ‘given’”. Finally, a good point has been made by Devin T. Hagerty (1998: 37): “Since successful deterrence results in nonevents, i.e., continued peace, it is logically impossible to prove that nuclear deterrence has worked in any given situation”.

Yet another recent theoretical framework standing in stark contrast with that of Waltz’s is a theory of nuclear opportunism (Bell 2019). Bell points out one of the weak spots in Waltz’s theory: if deterrence is supposed to have a similar effect on the behavior of states on the international arena (that is, the “risks that induce caution” argument), how can this explain the different choices that states have made after having acquired nuclear weapons? More precisely, the theory postulates that “states use nuclear weapons in an opportunistic way to improve their position in international politics and to help them achieve political goals that the state cares about” (Bell 2019: 8). That said, the author himself has acknowledged the limited explanatory power of his theory: while it explains behavioral options chosen at the point of acquisition, it fails to predict whether the claim would hold overtime.

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6 Here, as throughout, emphasis through italicizing is as in the original – unless noted otherwise.
Finally, the author has discerned a so-called “institutional-organizational” strand of the “proliferation pessimist” argument. On the one hand, Scott Sagan (2013) presents an organizational theory framework for arguing against deterrence stability in the era of emerging nuclear states. In his view, the new proliferants’ military will be ineffective in circumscribing the development of nuclear arsenals; in other words, the military as an organization would rather have more weapons than less. Second, their standard operating procedures and organizational interests in conjunction with organizational safety problems might contradict the interests and strategic goals of civilian leaders. The latter would undermine civilian control over nuclear arsenals even more than is the case in states with strong checks-and-balances systems, such as the United States. In short, as put by Peter Lavoy, “Sagan is fearful that most new nuclear states will not be able to fulfill the operational requirements for stable nuclear deterrence” (1995: 709).

On the other hand, an institutional theoretical framework put forward by Jacques E.T. Hymans (2012) tends to actually downplay the negative consequences of proliferation. In his 2012 book, Hymans develops a theory of nuclear weapons project efficiency and inefficiency, striving to assess nuclear ambitions among the leaders of “developing” countries. To my knowledge, this study has a unique focus: “In many states, weak state institutions permit, and even encourage, top leaders to take actions that undermine [that] spirit of professionalism, and thereby unintentionally to thwart their own nuclear ambitions” (Hyman 2012: 1). The theoretical framework of Hymans’ study highlights the role of oppositional nationalist identity, an intangible aspect of nuclear politics seldom within the focus of nuclear security studies scholars.

At the microlevel, the theory centers around a management approach that values scientific professionalism. From a broader perspective, Hymans’ theory parses institutional dynamics and the impact of “Weberian legal-rational institutional constraints on top-down political meddling” (Ibid: 41, also Ch. 2).

To summarize, looking at organizational and institutional structures within states that seek nuclear weapons, Sagan and Hymans appear to arrive at distinct if not opposite conclusions. To this end, other scholars have underlined the importance of avoiding “nuclear alarmist” arguments overestimating the impact of nuclear proliferation: “Too often, alarmists focus on

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the (sic.) how the nature and qualities of nuclear weapons shape the international environment, as if the possession of nuclear bombs, absent political intent, diplomacy, motivations, or particular strategies, drives world politics” (Gavin 2010: 28, emphasis added). In other words, it is not nuclear weapons per se that result in global instability and threatened national security interests, but how certain threats are viewed, which is itself the result of a particular reading of the Cold War and its lessons.

Before proceeding to summarize the arguments on nuclear (non)proliferation, some notes about the nexus between nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism are in order. To take but a few examples, Charles D. Ferguson presents an explanation of terrorist routes for acquiring nuclear weapons; in short, the options at their disposal include obtaining an intact weapon from a sponsor or creating their own improvised nuclear device (IND). The author distinguishes two components of a potential terrorist nuclear strategy: weapons production and the motivation behind using them. The former, he argues, is relatively not complicated; the latter, on the other hand, is the primary impediment to their using nuclear weapons. Given these challenges, terrorist groups tend actually to rely on conventional arms (see Ferguson 2009). Similarly, as noted by Michael Levi (2007), numerous technical and logistical challenges present for clandestine terrorist networks would most likely deter them from resorting to WMD. That said, while it is natural to assume a straightforward relationship between “terrible” weapons and “terrible” actions, the actual relationship between terrorism and nuclear arms appears less misgiving.

Summarizing the key strands within the proliferation-non-proliferation debate discussed above, the author has put up a table adopted from a 1990s essay on the consequences of nuclear proliferation (see Lavoy 1995). Originally, Lavoy placed the arguments under one of the three categories: “deterrence optimism”, “proliferation pessimism” or “political relativism”. Here, the framework is slightly modified, substituting the category of political relativists for what the author terms “empiricists”. This is so because, as has been observed, many an author use empirical evidence to explain why proliferation occurs with no normative stance taken towards proliferation or deterrence theory. That said, the outlines of the debate might look as follows:

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8 A more recent and equally insightful overview of the extant literature within nuclear security studies has been provided in Scott Sagan’s Introduction to H-Diplo/ISSF Forum on “What We Talk About When We Talk About Nuclear Weapons” (see McAllister and Labrosse (eds.) 2014).
Table 1. Outline of the proliferation-non-proliferation debate based on the reviewed literature.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deterrence Optimists</th>
<th>Proliferation Pessimists</th>
<th>“Empiricists”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hagerty – Asian deterrence</td>
<td>Sagan</td>
<td>Hymans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thakur – Asian deterrence</td>
<td>Butler</td>
<td>Bell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jervis</td>
<td>McNamara</td>
<td>Cohen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baylis – “third way” approaches</td>
<td>Wheeler</td>
<td>Campbell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gray</td>
<td>Kroenig</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quinlan – skeptical of disarmament</td>
<td>Freedman – also skeptical of disarmament</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waltz</td>
<td>MccGwire</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Narang</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Miller</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nuclear realism, humanitarian approach, nuclear terrorism studies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To clarify, this is by no means an exhaustive list of scholars who have parsed the implications of nuclear proliferation during the last decades. However, it can suffice for underlining the continuing relevance of the topic in the 21st century while providing a good background against which the author situates the theoretical framework of the current paper. Also, note that the two theories utilized – that of Jervis and of nuclear realists – have different takes on the issue of nuclear weapons proliferation. This distinction notwithstanding, their explanations of the way in which nuclear weapons have affected international politics and the place of military force in it are remarkably similar and equally compelling. It is to this discussion that we now turn.

*Nuclear realism: Bridging the “classical” and “critical” strands*

The purpose of this section is two-fold: first, the author intends to present two theoretical approaches highlighting their points of continuity and contrast. These are a theory of *nuclear revolution* as articulated by Jervis (1989) and a theory of *nuclear realism* (see van Munster & Sylvest 2014; van Munster & Sylvest 2016)*⁹*. In the end, the ambition is to stress that, despite

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⁹ Note that the four thinkers whose ideas the authors label ‘nuclear realism’ did not describe themselves so at the time of their writing; the name of the paradigm stems from the effort of van Munster and Sylvest to appreciate fully the thinkers’ intellectual contribution to understanding realism’s take on nuclear weapons.
distinct epistemological positions, the two perspectives are complementary and thus useful in applying as one theoretical framework. The author shows why this is unproblematic by stressing that, for the subsequent analysis, she only extracts the most relevant components of the theories. Second, this discussion seeks to clarify precisely what military implications of nuclear weapons entail in the context of the current study, thereby linking the research aim to the chosen methodological approach. Thus, a theoretical framework is provided for understanding how nuclear weapons affect the ways in which decisionmakers make sense of the use of military force in international affairs.

To begin with, it is worth noting that the theory of nuclear realism extends beyond van Munster and Sylvest’s account of “the nature and availability of military force” (2016: 14). Namely, it has discussed the implications of the thermonuclear revolution for rational thinking, national security, technology and ecology, as well as the place of scientific knowledge in society and “the place of imagination in politics and social affairs”, including new moral principles such as “the courage to fear” or “the ethics of survival” (Ibid: 15). Also, as van Munster and Sylvest note, this paradigm seeks to shift our understanding of realism itself through the “dissection of the central strategic concept of nuclear deterrence” (Ibid: 13).

As mentioned in the previous section, nuclear realism is labeled a critical strand of realism. This is so for two reasons. First, according to van Munster & Sylvest, nuclear realism “did not develop out of an idea of how people ought to act ideally or rationally, but from an appreciation of the central place of power in social life” (2016: 58). This rationale is particularly manifest in their discussion of the changed relationship between the social and the scientific in the wake of the (thermo)nuclear revolution: “the bomb had fundamentally reconfigured the role of the intellectual. Intellectuals could no longer claim to inhabit a value-free realm of knowledge beyond the domain of politics” (Ibid: 21). Quoting Foucault, the authors further stress that “[t]he universal intellectual had become impossible in an age of ‘techno-scientific structures’, where truth was ‘centered on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it” (Ibid: 22). Second, in their 2014 article, van Munster and Sylvest point out the deficiencies in “classical” realism, in particular, its account of reality, and stress the importance of their research for critical security studies in general. Therefore, their account of nuclear realism seeks to address “the need to study nuclear weapons in ways that contrast with traditional axioms of strategy” (van Munster & Sylvest 2014: 531).
One of the main ideas of nuclear realist theory stipulates that thermonuclear weapons have transformed the nature of international politics: “It is not the atomic weapons which ‘also’ occur within the political scene; but, on the contrary, it is the individual events that are taking place within the atomic situation” (Anders quoted in van Munster & Sylvest 2016: 46). Similarly, the central claim of Jervis’ theory is “that nuclear weapons have drastically altered statecraft” (1989: 2). Thus, this reading of the (thermo)nuclear revolution highlights the self-defeating logic of nuclear weapons: “how the pursuit of security meant total insecurity, how omnipotent weapons led straight to impotence and how territorial size would become increasingly unimportant” (van Munster & Sylvest 2016: 44). The “illogic” of security in the nuclear era can aptly be exemplified if one considers that, prior to the invention of nuclear weapons, denial of the adversary’s aim implied security for the state that opposed it with conventional force. In the age of nuclear weapons, this assumption no longer holds (Jervis 1989).

Jervis’s theory of the nuclear revolution is deductive, calling for empirical analysis to test its main hypotheses which the author himself openly acknowledges. However, taken at face value, the theory posits that the nuclear revolution has impacted statecraft in several ways. First of all, Jervis places his trust in the logic of deterrence noting that, given increased risks to vital interests of the adversaries, “war among great powers should not occur”, and that “crises are expected to be seldom” (1989: 29). Second, this is also expected to have implications for our understanding of the security dilemma. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that the adversary’s arsenal be as invulnerable as one’s own; that states’ nuclear arsenals are to be reduced so that to “ensure invulnerability and inability to destroy the opponent”; and that (especially) second-strike capabilities are to be maintained (Ibid: 55-6, emphasis added).

Points of continuity...

Having briefly outlined the two approaches, the author now turns to discussing the ways in which they converge. First of all, both “classical” and nuclear realism oppose the “conventionalization” of nuclear weapons, i.e., their understanding through conventional concepts of a war that can be won or survived: “Those who disagree [that mutual second-strike capability has drastically altered the relationships between force and foreign policy] <…> see nuclear weapons as less revolutionary. It is not that they think such weapons are only large conventional explosives, but that they believe they can be understood within the intellectual framework that was developed in the era when deterrence by denial prevailed” (Jervis 1989: 15; see also Morgenthau 1977; van Munster & Sylvest 2016, in particular, Introduction). To
this end, military victory and defeat in a nuclear war is an absurdity insofar as there can be no defense against nuclear attack. Should there be such defense systems, the deterrent component would cease to exist (Morgenthau 1977), hence the “illogic” of conventionalized thinking about nuclear weapons.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, both theories have essentially identical understanding of the “degeneration of the conceptual distinction between means and end” (van Munster & Sylvest 2016: 52; for a similar argument, see also Quinlan 2000). In other words, war could no longer “be used as an instrument of policy” (Ibid: 45). Jervis (1989) notes that, in the era prior to the nuclear revolution, protracted military action could actually have a calming effect on the conduct of war, leaving room for various diplomatic practices, such as negotiations, concessions, and the like. In the nuclear era, by contrast, an impulse or mistakenly taken action can result in all-out war and total disaster. As noted by nuclear realists, “with the advent of thermonuclear weapons, time-honoured practices of the balance of power, diplomacy and war were irrevocably undermined” (van Munster & Sylvest 2014: 536). To summarize, not only could war not be fought on its “old” terms and the enemy defeated in an “old” way, but even the ability of war to serve political aims could not be applied to nuclear weapons.10

...and contrast

Perhaps the most obvious, albeit least important, distinction between the theory of nuclear revolution and that of nuclear realism is such that Jervis’ emphasis is on the mutual second-strike capability as the “tipping point” in going from deterrence by denial to deterrence by punishment and thus altering the foundations of military thinking and statecraft. By contrast, nuclear realists take the advent of the thermonuclear weapons, the Hydrogen bomb, as the point of no return (hence their emphasis on the thermonuclear revolution as opposed to nuclear one).

The most pronounced distinction, then, lies in the ways the theories view deterrence. As noted by van Munster and Sylvest (2016), nuclear realists have unanimously rejected deterrence. Bertrand Russell has namely argued that deterrence theory resembles a game of chicken in that the theory presumes challenging the adversary’s degree of resolve, waiting for one of the parties to a conflict to “run”. Therefore, the logic of deterrence is inherently unstable (Ibid). Further, nuclear realists opposed limited nuclear war and the rationale for tactical nuclear weapons. By

10 In this regard, it is interesting to mention Morgenthau’s (1977) note on nuclear “weapons” and nuclear “war”. To him, these are pure misnomers precisely for the reasons discussed above.
stressing the long-term destructive effect of nuclear weapons, the nuclear realist argument rendered deterrence, notwithstanding its short-term stabilizing effects, untenable as a strategy. By contrast, the theory of nuclear revolution, as has been shown earlier, attributed deterrence logic a stabilizing effect, arguing that mutual second-strike capabilities lower the chances of crises (Jervis 1989). That said, from a strategic point of view, this disparity is quite profound; however, as it does not undermine the central theoretical proposition about the impact of nuclear weapons on the role of military force in international politics, the author does not consider it problematic in the context of this study.

Finally, a short note with regards to the theories’ conceptual foundations. While Jervis draws upon the ideas advanced by Bernard Brodie (particularly, his 1946 book, The Absolute Weapon), to nuclear realists his mode of thought embodied the “conventionalized” thinking about nuclear weapons, which they essentially opposed (van Munster & Sylvest 2016). However, both theories insist that they stand in opposition to these conventionalized ideas. That said, the two strands of realism discussed here might in fact have more in common than the philosophers themselves realized or would have admitted.

As duly noted by Nacht (1977: 161), nuclear weapons created “a non-linear relationship <…> between the number of weapons and their military value”. To exemplify, consider a concept of absolute capability, which “is measured by the match between the country’s forces and the targets it seeks to destroy, not between the two sides’ forces” (Jervis 1989: 47). The concept and its transformation provide a good example of the changing nature of international politics. To summarize, the “nature and availability of military force”, as put by nuclear realists, can be understood as its availability for reaching state goals. Thus, the military implications of nuclear weapons presuppose a changing role for the military force in international conduct of affairs: “the weapons produce their influence by processes that are very different from those operating in the past” (Jervis 1989: 9). To come to grips with the more precise ways in which policymakers think of the influence and the processes mentioned above, the method of frame analysis is parsed in the section that follows.
Part II. Pragmatist Interpretivism and Frame Analysis

Some reflections on the choice of method

In this section, the author outlines and argues for the methodological component of the current research design. Not only is frame analysis appropriate given the object of study, which is nuclear policy discourse, but also with regards to the theoretical framework discussed in the previous section. On the one hand, the theories of nuclear revolution and nuclear realism can provide us with guidance as to the insights that policymakers hold about nuclear weapons and their military impact. On the other hand, the frames discovered as a result of applying the method to empirical material can help both refine and, to some extent, challenge the existing theoretical approach, thus contributing to a greater understanding of the consequences that nuclear weapons have had on the perceptions of the role of military force in international politics.

To begin with, several incarnations of frame analysis can be identified. First, Fairclough and Fairclough (2016) theorize frame analysis as a problem-solution tool for scrutinizing political discourse and the premises upon which political argumentation is built. According to Haste, Jones and Monroe, “[f]raming has been studied in parallel in experimental social and cognitive psychology and in interpretive psychology because <…> strategic communication affects political decision making in the real world” (2016: 313, emphasis added). Third, van Hulst and Yanow (2016) have focused on sensemaking, naming, categorizing, and storytelling, much of what stems from Goffman’s (1986) theory of primary frameworks and keyings. Finally, Ansell offers three pragmatist interpretivist accounts of frame analysis, discussing the different ways in which actors make inferences about the world that exists around them (Ansell 2016). The approach utilized in the study draws primarily upon the theory developed by Merlijn van Hulst and Dvora Yanow.

Before we proceed, an important caveat with regards to the applicability of the chosen method is in order. Frame analysis has been a common research tool “so influential in contemporary studies of media effects, social movement mobilization, political agenda setting, and policy studies” (Ansell 2016: 86). In other words, the studies have focused on the ways frames guide, often collective, action. In this paper, the author intends to come to grips with how nuclear weapons are perceived to affect understanding of the use of force, i.e. how framing is related to sensemaking: “What gets produced in the framing process is both a model of the world—
reflecting prior sense-making—and a model for subsequent action in that world” (van Hulst & Yanow 2016: 98; for a similar mode of thought, see also Haste, Jones & Monroe 2016). For, as Jervis succinctly puts it, “many conflicts involve not concrete gains and losses but, rather, issues whose importance arise (sic.) from the way national leaders have framed the questions” (1989: 181-2, emphasis added).

**Unpacking the workings of frame analysis**

The discussion that follows will center around three issues: unit of analysis, that is, the “level” of U.S. and Russian nuclear policy on which the analysis will converge; stages of the framing process; and the “mechanics”, or analytical tools of the method. According to van Hulst & Yanow, framing can operate on three levels: identities of policy actors, policy process, and the “substantive content of the policy issue” (2016: 102). Naturally, the content of the states’ nuclear policies has been to a great extent influenced by changes in the identities of the actors involved: for example, Charles Glaser stresses the transformation of “the prevailing American view of the Soviet Union” (1990: ix). Substantial changes in the underlying assumptions of nuclear politics can likewise be ascribed to the evolution of the policy process, e.g., such that resulted from the rebalancing of civil-military relations in the United States or the transformation of the political system in Russia. These significant observations notwithstanding, it is the content of US and Russian nuclear policies that is the primary unit of analysis in the current study.

Below, frame analysis will be applied by using three analytical tools discussed by the literature: “(a) highlighting certain features of a situation, (b) ignoring or selecting out other features, and (c) binding the highlighted features together into a coherent and comprehensible pattern” (van Hulst & Yanow 2016: 96)\(^\text{11}\). To explicate, the first tool is called *sensemaking* and entails a “conversation of actors with the situation”, drawing on the actors’ prior knowledge and values (*Ibid*). Policymakers’ speaking of the strategic confrontation between the Soviets and the American as the “nuclear game” is a good example of how actors think about what is going on.

The second set of tools is *naming, selecting* and *categorizing*, the most prominent features of which include metaphors as well as “us-against-them” rhetoric. As noted by van Hulst and

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\(^{11}\) In a similar vein, these have been theorized as “gestalt interpretations” (i.e. inferences); “intersubjective understandings” (i.e. communication); and “guid[ing] subsequent inferences and social interactions” (Ansell 2016: 93).
Yanow (2016: 99), “this enables [actors] to frame the situation they are engaging in ways that the can act in and on”. This allows the actors to identify those aspects of the situation they consider problematic as opposed to unproblematic. Finally, storytelling is employed to weave together “what has been going on, what is going on, and what needs to be done” (Ibid: 101). Here, the focus is on the narrative told by the actors that contemplate the past, explaining how “problems” then ensued. To summarize, it is worth noting that the tools mentioned above can be perceived as discovering different layers of meaning and therefore operating synchronically. At the same time, they can be thought of as consequent steps of the process of creating frames, whereby their understanding also entails a diachronic process.

Before proceeding to discuss the characteristics of the empirical material collected, the mechanics of the method warrant some further explication. Here, the author draws primarily on Erving Goffman’s theory of frame analysis (1986) which she considers crucial for understanding the essence of framing as a process and the techniques used to “deconstruct” what policymakers say is going on around them. From the perspective of the theory of framing, actors form their understanding about events and issues through the lens of the following question: “Under what circumstances do we think things are real?” (James quoted in Goffman 1986: 2). Effectively, these are the above-mentioned “circumstances” that can be conceived of as frames. In the words of Goffman himself, frames are basic elements of certain principles that organize our social experience (Ibid). To this end, the note made by Ansell is further instructive: “For Goffman, framing is essentially a selective organization of meaning” (2016: 92). That said, the following are some basic elements, or constitutive parts of Goffman’s theory of frame analysis. Firstly, primary frameworks, which the author divides into natural and social: “Each primary framework allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms” (1986: 21). Important to note is that the “user” is often unaware of these frameworks and cannot explicate what they are or how they are used (Ibid).

Second, the concepts Goffman utilizes are key and keying. As is evident already in their name, these elements “open up” a new layer of meaning previously inaccessible if only primary frameworks are used to make sense of what is going on: “something patterned on [the original activity comprehended through primary frameworks] but seen by the participants to be something quite else” (Goffman 1986: 44). That said, applying a particular keying does not “eliminate” the interpretation of the issue that emerged prior to it; yet the “systematic
transformation that a particular keying introduces may alter only slightly the activity thus transformed, but it utterly changes what it is a participant would say was going on” (Ibid: 45).

A note on materials

“Documents of all types can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem” (Merriam quoted in Bowen 2009: 29). To the extent the above-mentioned claim is valid, not all documents are necessarily of equal value to the researcher. That said, a careful selection of materials has been made that reflects the chosen research aim and object of study. These texts include: 1) speeches and statements given by Russia’s President Putin; 2) statements by US President Trump; 3) statements by other U.S. and Russian government officials; and 4) other official comments and interviews, such as Trump’s Twitter comments and Putin’s comments during the Valdai Discussion Club sessions.

When choosing the relevant material, an attempt was made to reflect upon how historical and social factors impact the author’s decision to consider certain sources more or less relevant. For instance, given Trump’s interest in social media, twitter comments have been taken into account along with formal statements published on the White House website. In a similar vein, special attention has been paid to annual Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly12 of the Russian Federation given by President Putin. The event has a great symbolic value at the national level; therefore, it was expected to be rich in rhetoric figures and frames.

To this end, texts that did not become part of the empirical material warrant a short discussion as well. Policy documents, for instance, have shown to be far less insightful than both formal and informal acts of speech. More precisely, analyzing the documents the author found herself unable to elicit how policymakers make sense of the world around them through sensemaking or the use of metaphors and narratives. On the contrary, these documents contained established, rigid concepts and formalized ideas about defense nuclear weapons or state defense policy objectives.

The time scope has been chosen to encompass the period between January 2017 to November 2020 (with minor exceptions, such as Trump’s comments as President-elect written in December 2016). As noted earlier, the time frame is motivated by the core document guiding Trump Administration’s nuclear weapons policy – Nuclear Posture Review (2018). Against the

12 The name of Russian parliament, which consists of Duma (the lower house) and Federation Council (the upper house).
backdrop of this key strategic nuclear policy document, Russian discourse had altered accordingly during the same period, which was reflected in the policymakers’ rhetoric. Therefore, 2017-2018 has been considered a relevant point of departure. The texts have been obtained through official government web pages and pages run by the Office of the President of the United States and the Russian Federation, respectively. Comments made by President Trump on Twitter have been accessed through a private online service, “Trump Tweet Archive”, which provides access to all materials published since 2009. The key words searched for included “nuclear”, “arms”, and “nukes”, given how Trump tends to speak of nuclear weapons.

Important to bear in mind are questions that concern the purpose of the texts analyzed: “Documents are produced for some purpose other than research; they are created independent of a research agenda” (Bowen 2009: 31). In this regard, it was instructive to note throughout the research process that similar or identical frames have been used by policy actors when addressing different audiences. This was particularly evident in the case of Russia; to exemplify, Foreign Minister Lavrov’s interview to media agencies (local as well as foreign), foreign government officials and even his lectures and opening statements in universities and at student conferences were consistent in terms of the language and frames used. This added further trustworthiness to the chosen approach to data generation and analysis.

Finally, as Bowen notes, document analysis is often used as a complementary research method. For qualitative studies, this implies the method is applied in conjunction with (semi-)structured interviews or ethnographic practices. With regards to the time and space limits of this study, the focus has been made on written texts. This limitation notwithstanding, the rich scope of materials selected for analysis have compensated for the lack of other types of sources. That said, the next section finally brings to the forefront the ways in which U.S. and Russian policymakers frame and thereby make sense of nuclear weapons and their impact on the use of force in international politics.

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13 To clarify, the source has been double-checked for containing accurate and up-to-date information so that the comments gathered could be reliable and the method of search and collection replicable.
Empirical Analysis

As noted earlier, the empirical analysis proceeds in three steps. Analyzing how frames have been put together is done by looking at 1) sensemaking; 2) naming, selecting, and categorizing; and 3) storytelling. To clarify again, the author makes no causal assumptions about nuclear policy decisions taken by decisionmakers in Moscow and Washington. Neither does she take a normative stance with regards to what is being said. Rather, it is the rhetoric applied by policymakers that is of interest to the author as researcher.

Sensemaking: “What is going on here?”

Three key themes can be discerned when it comes to the United States and Russia’s making sense of the “nuclear situation”. First and foremost, a recurrent interpretation held by U.S. policymakers is such that national nuclear policy is seen as a game. At the same time, the framing does not entail the players are playing together; rather, the “nuclear situation” is seen as a competition between rivalries, i.e., one player against the other. This is evident in formal statements given by the U.S. officials, such as Assistant Secretary’s Ford referring to “strategic competition” or “competitive mindset” (Ford, 15.05.2018; also Ford, 14.03.2019). Talking about the dangers of an arms race, especially when nuclear weapons are factored into national security calculations, he further notes that, “When more than two “players” become involved in this grim “game,” the potential for problems grow at an alarming rate” (Ford, 28.06.2018). Another way in which the “game frame” comes about is through the use of superlatives; for instance, US President Donald Trump has made the following comment about US nuclear arsenals: “We have – I call it – the super-duper missile” (The Guardian 2020). That said, using the narrative of US superiority in military competition is a consistent pattern in Trump’s rhetoric on American weapons, including nuclear arsenals:

“I would like to say so that nobody can even come to close to competing with us, as opposed to just competing. Because what I’m really doing is putting us in a position where there’s not going to be anybody even close. And that’s why we’re — again,

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14 Interestingly, Goffman (1986; in particular, pp. 48-58) identifies several core keys in framing, two of them being playfulness and contests.
we’re looking at all of the planes, all of the weapons, all of the rockets, all of the —
  everything, including, obviously, the nuclear” (Trump, 20.10.2018)\textsuperscript{15}. 

Similarly goes the sensemaking work of policymakers in Moscow, including President Putin:
“Russia remained and still remains the world’s largest nuclear power” (Putin 2018, emphasis added). Talking about a new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), Putin refers to it as a “formidable weapon”, while the new high-speed unmanned underwater vehicles are described as “completely invulnerable” and “fantastic” (\textit{Ibid}). Later in his speech, he notes the following: “No one else in the world has anything like this. Someday, probably, they will catch up but by that time, our guys will come up with something new” (\textit{Ibid}). The latter, in particular, underlines the idea that, in the realm of nuclear weapons, a game is being played where he who “comes up with something new” has the upper hand.

In his 2019 Speech at the General Assembly of the United Nations (UNGA), Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov regretfully noted that, “The lingering absence of a response to our proposal, made to our American colleagues a year ago, is <…> alarming” (Lavrov, 28.09.2019; see also Lavrov, 11.12.2019). Here, he referred to the Cold-War notion, held both by Soviet and American state leaders, that nuclear war cannot be tolerated, as well as that there can, by definition, be no winners in a nuclear war. To this end, two things can be noted about the Russian take on the “nuclear situation”. First, the argument is in line with the theory of nuclear revolution and nuclear realism as presented earlier yet somewhat contradicts the idea about the competitive nature of nuclear policies. Second, as opposed to the U.S. view of the situation, the “winning” component is absent in Moscow’s rhetoric\textsuperscript{16}. Rather, Russian state leadership continuously emphasizes the role of nuclear weapons for strategic stability and national as well as international security (see e.g., \textit{Statement of the Foreign Ministry 2019}). The latter leads us to the second, and related idea through which policymakers make sense of the role of military

\textsuperscript{15} It might be interesting to add here an observation made by several people close to Trump, including Tony Schwartz, the author of an autobiographical work \textit{Trump: The Art of Deal} (2017): “Fear is the hidden through-line in Trump’s life – fear of weakness, of inadequacy, of failure, of criticism and of insignificance. He has spent his life trying to outrun these fears by “winning” – as he puts it – and by redefining reality whenever the facts don’t serve the narrative he seeks to create” (Schwartz 2018). That said, then, the winning narrative might not solely have to do with Trump and his Administration’s understanding of the ways in which nuclear weapons have affected the use of military force, but reflect his personal (and professional) values, as well.

\textsuperscript{16} This is not to say that the American leadership does not adhere to the principle that nuclear war cannot be tolerated, only that they retain the “competition-victory” terminology while the Russians do not.
force given the nuclear capabilities possessed by their states, that is, their understanding of deterrence.

According to Assistant Secretary Ford, the core objective of U.S. nuclear strategy has been to “preserve the efficacy and reliability of [U.S.] nuclear force so that it can continue to protect U.S. national security and international peace and security by deterring aggression, underpinning our defense posture, and anchoring the global network of alliance relationships” (Ford, 30.05.2018). Similarly, in his remarks to the UN First Committee (Wood 2017), U.S. Permanent Representative to the Conference on Disarmament Robert Wood stressed “the crucial role that nuclear deterrence plays in preserving and protecting international peace and security, and the potentially catastrophic consequences were deterrence’s restraining effect to be removed while it still remains necessary”. In a similar vein, Russian President Putin notes that Russia is not “threatening or making any offensive plans”, neither does it “intend to take anything from anyone using [nuclear] weapons” (se excerpt from the interview project “Twenty Questions to Vladimir Putin”, 02.03.2020). In other words, deterrence is seen as a defense strategy, whereby the role of military force in international politics is seen as that of ensuring strategic stability and balance of power. To exemplify, given that the U.S. missile defense system (MDS) tilts strategic balance of nuclear power in U.S. favor, Moscow “has to” develop means to defeat it (Ibid).

Now, recall Kenneth Waltz’s distinction between the concepts of defense and deterrence. Contrary to this conceptualization, both U.S. and Russian policymakers talk about nuclear weapons as tools to ensure the security of their states. The fact that deterrence is, deliberately or not, confused with defense in Russian nuclear policy discourse is further evident in the following statement of Lavrov’s: “I am all for peace. I do not believe that ‘If you want peace, prepare for war’, is a correct phrase <…> But the fact that you need to be ready to defend yourself is unqualified” (Lavrov, 06.06.2019, emphasis added). Similarly, “the strength of U.S. and allied capabilities to deter, and if necessary defeat, any potential adversary’s nuclear or nonnuclear aggression” (NPR 2018: VIII, emphasis added). Note that “classical”, Clausewitzian terminology is used, but what is to be deterred by U.S. military preponderance is not the adversary itself, but its aggression. To summarize, nuclear policy discourse in Russia and the United States reveals the interwoven nature of deterrence and defense as understood by policymakers. To this end, deterrence is thought of as defense – of the state’s international posture.
Although these ideas appear to contradict themselves at first sight, namely that nuclear war cannot be won yet the state needs to compete and surpass the adversary, they make sense from the point of view of deterrence logic. In this regard, note that defending the state’s international posture also implies criticizing any frameworks that aspire to ban nuclear weapons altogether, which is another common aspect of U.S. and Russian nuclear policy discourses: “this proposed treaty [on the prohibition of nuclear weapons]– which ignores the current security challenges that make nuclear deterrence necessary – will not result in the elimination of a single nuclear weapon, nor will it enhance the security of any state (Press statement of the US Government, 07.07.2017). Similarly, Foreign Minister Lavrov has emphasized that “there are many factors to be discussed if we are not to appear idealists who want to ban nuclear weapons, but to ensure global peace and security, strategic stability that will be sustainable and will rely on global parity” (Lavrov, 23.03.2017). “It is not just about the destruction of nuclear weapons for the sake of itself”, said Lavrov during the 2019 Moscow Conference on Non-Proliferation, “but about the fact that there be no destabilizing weapons in the world that would create permanent risks and threats” (Lavrov, 08.11.2019). The reason these arguments are important is because they show that, besides fulfilling the strategic-operational security function, nuclear weapons are ascribed certain symbolic value, too, which affects policymakers’ understanding of the role nuclear weapons have played for parsing the ways in which military force can be used.

That said, the third idea underpinning the thinking about nuclear weapons and the use of force concerns the symbolic nature of nuclear weapons. To be clear, however, there is little evidence to claim that the states embrace this understanding to the same degree. When mentioning military factors affecting strategic stability, Russia’s Foreign Minister Lavrov stressed that, “[t]hese are non-nuclear strategic, including hypersonic, weapons, which are capable of reaching anywhere in the world in one hour without any nuclear warheads. If you have these, you may not need nuclear weapons at all” (Lavrov, 17.01.2017; see also Lavrov, 23.03.2017, Lavrov, 20.03.2019). In saying this, the minister has stressed that nuclear weapons are but one aspect of strategic stability. In other words, military victory can be achieved with the help of non-strategic weapons of the new kind; the role of nuclear arsenals is, therefore, more symbolic, the argument developed further in the following sections. Suffice it to note here that, in any case, nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities are perceived to fulfill different functions. By contrast, looking at Trump’s vision of U.S. nuclear arsenal: “We’ve added the greatest planes in the world, the greatest missiles in the world. We’ve upgraded our nuclear very, very powerfully, including new. We never want to have to use it. <…> But we have the best in the
world in every aspect of military” (Trump, 25.07.2019), it is evident that superior military force including the nuclear potential is essential to pursue state goals. Thus, the nuclear and non-nuclear components are inseparable insofar as they help achieve political goals.

To summarize, the sensemaking stage of frame analysis has illustrated that the logic by which nuclear weapons affect policymakers’ understanding of the use of force does not surpass Clausewitzian logic – in the sense that deterrence is not seen in opposition to defense. Furthermore, the nature of nuclear weapons is thought of as real and symbolic at the same time. In the United States, it is embedded in thinking about the state’s military capabilities in general. In Russia, there is a more pronounced distinction between traditional military means and symbolic tools embedded in thinking about nuclear arms.

Naming, selecting & categorizing

As with all narratives and discourses, nuclear policy discourse in the United States highlights certain aspects of an issue and downplays the others. For instance, in commenting Pyongyang’s statement about their nuclear arsenal, President Trump has noted:

“North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the ‘Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times’. Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!” (Trump, 03.01.2018, spelling as in the original).

Substituting “U.S. nuclear arsenal” for “my Nuclear Button” might have been done in order to exert emotional and psychological pressure upon the “rogue regime” in North Korea. However, this expression occludes the conventional understanding that nuclear war cannot be fought, emphasizing instead how powerful U.S. nuclear weapons are as well as how destructive their nature is (given that the world is only “one push of a button” away from the nuclear catastrophe).

Another prominent character of the U.S. nuclear discourse is the “us-versus-them” rhetoric, which is played out in two important ways. On the one hand, the adversary is described in

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17 To my mind, metaphors seem to be working both ways. Namely, they are used to convey a certain message (i.e. that the U.S. strongly condemns North Korean behavior) inasmuch as they are introduced to avoid doing so. In this case, should the U.S. want to directly threaten North Korean leadership with a nuclear attack, they could have used conventional terminology. By using the “Nuclear Button” expression, US President avoids being charged (at least, not officially) with making explicit nuclear threats.
strictly negative terms, although precisely what is done by the rival state is not necessarily unique to its nuclear posture: “Russia’s President Vladimir Putin who has prioritized a massive military rearmament program, who touted the development of five new strategic offensive nuclear arms in March 2018, regularly brandishes the value of Russia’s nuclear weapons, and who openly threatens to attack Europe with Russian missiles” (“INF Myth Busters” Factsheet 2019, emphasis added).

Second, the work of selecting as a framing tool is evident in the “either-or” logic as follows: “Weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles bring not security but rather ongoing cost, pain, and risk of calamity” (Ford, 30.05.2018). The latter is noted with regards to negotiations with Pyongyang. The importance of what has been emphasized by the Assistant Secretary Ford is captured by the word “rather”. That said, it is impossible to even consider that there can be “positive” implications of acquiring strategic nuclear capability for North Korea’s security. Rather, there can only be “negative” ones. In other words, the opponent is denied any advantages of nuclear capability that established nuclear powers have enjoyed. So, while it is prudent to assume the U.S. leadership does understand that, politically, North Korean security concerns are of the same nature as US own, there is no such acknowledgement at the rhetorical level.

With regards to Moscow’s framing techniques, two observations are in order. First, the naming tool is primarily adopted to blame the adversary, the same way it was done by the United States. When asked to comment on Russian commentators and state TV-presenters’ openly talking about scenarios of using Russian missiles against targets in California, Foreign Minister Lavrov said: “The US, too, simulates the use of its strategic forces”. Each nuclear state leader, he continues, “has to ensure the state’s strategic nuclear forces are maintained in a combat-ready state” (Lavrov, 06.06.2019). In other words, the issue at stake is not the fact that the Russian media talk about (potential) offensive scenarios involving the use of nuclear weapons against the United States, but that the opponent can be faced with similar charges. At the same, on several occasions Russian state leaders have accused Washington of “blow[ing] the entire arms control system that had been painstakingly created over the decades” (Statement of the Foreign Ministry 2019); “breaking” the SALT Agreement (Lavrov, 18.07.2019); “deliberately undermin[ing] global disarmament and non-proliferation architecture” (Statement of the Foreign Ministry 2018; Statement of the Foreign Ministry 2019); and “destroying” the INF

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18 Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, held between 1972 and 1979.
Treaty (Lavrov, 23.08.2020). As summarized by President Putin, “instead of a thoughtful discussion of international security problems, the United States simply canceled out many years of efforts aimed at reducing the likelihood of a large-scale military conflict, including the use of nuclear weapons” (Putin, 05.08.2019). This is important for us to note insofar as it reveals the crucial role Moscow ascribes to international agreements and global nuclear security architecture, which is further discussed in the next section. Further, it is worth noting that, from the framing perspective, the US-is-always-breaking-the-agreements narrative is skillfully constructed to stress the destructive consequences of its actions while silencing the fact that these decisions might have been taken after careful consideration of U.S. national security interests and priorities rather than Washington’s being an irresponsible party to international treaties.

To exemplify, it is worth looking at the Russian nuclear discourse surrounding the issue of tactical nuclear weapons. As Robert Jervis succinctly put it, “Many conflicts involve not concrete gains and losses but, rather, issues whose importance arise (sic.) from the way national leaders have framed the questions” (1989: 181-2). This is readily apparent in Lavrov’s interview to the French media in 2018, where he mentioned that the new US nuclear doctrine changes the role of military weapons: from a threat weapon of mutual deterrence to a practical weapon that can be used thereby lowering the threshold of nuclear weapons use (see Lavrov, 18.10.2018, Lavrov, 15.08.2019). Precisely how tactical nuclear weapons (or battlefield weapons) lower the threshold of nuclear use is duly noted in Assistant Secretary Ford’s speech at the 2019 conference on deterrence (DAWC): “These dangers arise because such easily-usable weapons deployed very far forward could be targeted preemptively or quickly overrun, the imminence of which might lead to precipitous use”19. As a matter of fact, the fragility of the claim is exposed by the data on non-strategic (tactical) nuclear arms held by the United States and Russia: 230 against 1875 warheads, respectively (see SIPRI Yearbook 2020, Ch. 10).

In certain cases, the tool of categorizing has been employed in conjunction with naming:

“Under these conditions, the presence of ready-to-use US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe is not just a vestige of the Cold War, but an obviously aggressive position. I hope that European citizens will be able to say a firm "no" to the deployment of weapons of mass destruction on their territory, moreover, belonging to the only

19 Note that in his statement, Ford refers specifically to those battlefield weapons that are forward deployed in a conflict, but the logic still holds. See: Ford’s remarks, 08.03.2019.


That said, the Europeans are first pitted against the Americans, whereby the more peaceful and prudent nature of the former is underlined; second, the label chosen to characterize the US emphasizes its actions are dangerous given historical experience. To put it differently, it is Washington Europe needs to be fearful of (that is, not Russia). Moscow’s account of U.S. actions with regards to its withdrawal from the treaties is further instructive insofar as the leadership employs the terms usually applied when criticizing Russian posture on the international arena\textsuperscript{20}. For instance, in his Statement form 3rd September 2018, Foreign Minister Lavrov has stressed the US has engaged in the revisionism of international agreements and treaties, such as Paris climate agreement, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)\textsuperscript{21}, and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force (INF) Treaty (Lavrov, 03.09.2018). Once again, rather than viewing this as ridding of those agreements that no longer answer US interests, Moscow uses the negatively connotated revisionist-power narrative.

Finally, common to how U.S. and Russian state leaders frame their understanding of the use of force given strategic nuclear capabilities, the role of identity comes into play. Note the following: “As NPT Depositaries, they [the United States and Russia] are also powers with a special symbolic and political responsibility to the nonproliferation regime they helped create” (Ford, 28.06.2018). As noted by Foreign Minister Lavrov, Russia has “responsibilities as a nuclear power, and as a permanent member of the UN Security Council” (Lavrov, 13.04.2019). As is readily apparent, nuclear power is linked to state identity. Whereas this argument is explicated in the subsequent section of the chapter, the author would like to stress here the role of identity as a specific mechanism through which nuclear weapons affect state leaders’ understanding of the use of military force in international politics, which is also important when assessing to what extent the nuclear revolution has, in fact, affected strategic thinking about the use of force.

To summarize, what does the tools of naming, selecting, and categorizing tell us about the role of military force in international politics? First of all, it can be observed that the narrative is not “fixed”; rather, it is culturally and context specific. Note the ways in which it has been put forward by the US state leadership: “Every deterrent relationship and every arms competition

\textsuperscript{20} See, e.g., Remarks by Assistant Secretary Dr. Christopher A. Ford 06.06.2018.

\textsuperscript{21} Also known as the Iran Deal.
has its own idiosyncrasies, and <…> it may not necessarily be the case that lessons learned in one arena make sense mutatis mutandis in nuclear weapons relationships that emerge in different contexts” (Ford, 08.03.2019). That said, the logic of U.S. nuclear reasoning is consequentialist; that is, developing nuclear weapons is unacceptable for “irresponsible states”; it requires risk reduction measures when it is irreversible (Ford, 08.03.2019), and it is absolutely essential for U.S. own security. So, against the backdrop of the current pattern of nuclear diplomacy and nuclear policy discourses, contending there has occurred a “revolution” in thinking about war and the use of force in general is a misplaced conclusion.

Storytelling: Weaving together pieces to create a coherent pattern

The history of US-Russian nuclear relationship spans several decades, wherefore it is interesting to shed light on the ways in which the two states narrate their understanding of this history. Through these narratives, or storytelling, one can then discern some additional layers of meaning ascribed to nuclear weapons by policymakers. Nowadays, the most widely discussed issue is the demolition of Cold-War nuclear security frameworks, such as the INF Treaty (see above). To begin with, consider the narrative embedded in U.S. interpretation of the events. Contemplating the historical circumstances surrounding the emergence of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force Treaty, U.S. Ambassador Huntsman noted: “The INF Treaty represented a good-faith effort between two rivals to de-escalate the threat of nuclear war, particularly the risk of short-notice attacks. President Reagan described its elimination of an entire class of weapons as the realization of “an impossible vision,” and Mikhail Gorbachev said it had “universal significance for mankind” (RBC 04.02.2019). This quote illustrates that both American and Russian leaders had similar conceptions of nuclear war and nuclear weapons since the Cold War; moreover, that this understanding of the role of nuclear weapons in global politics has remained largely intact. At the same time, however, while sharing the common goal of strategic stability and global security achieved through mutual deterrence, Moscow and Washington have gradually come to understand differently the ways to attain the goal. In other words, in the state leaders’ understanding of the use of force, the function of nuclear weapons has continued to be thought of in the same ways as during the Cold War. They are the precise ways in which this function is now to be fulfilled that have changed. In this regard, it is worth noting that, generally, the United States tends to speak of Cold-War treaties, frameworks and arrangements as “antiquated cold war construct” (CNN 2020). The U.S. position is evident in Trump’s vision of the future of arms control negotiations: “President
Trump has charged this Administration with beginning a new chapter by seeking a new era of arms control that moves beyond the bilateral treaties of the past” (Pompeo 2019). Russian state leadership, by contrast, refers to the Cold War legacy with great pietism: “We see how persistent steps are being taken to break down the architecture of international security, the load-bearing elements of which were laid down following the results of World War II and enshrined in the UN Charter” (Lavrov, 08.02.2019). Also, Moscow tends to allude to its historical experience in several other ways, particularly emphasizing its most traumatic episodes. For instance, in his Presidential Address 2018, President Putin makes the following historical comparison: while Russia was substantially weakened in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it has now become “invulnerable” – that is, to any missiles, missile defense systems or other weapons possessed by potential adversaries. The implications of acquiring nuclear capability for Moscow, in Putin’s view, are profound: “The country received nuclear weapons, and this meant the main thing - the swayed strategic balance was restored, unpunished aggression against our people became impossible, and peace and national security of the state were guaranteed for decades to come” (Putin, 28.09.2020).

How Russian state leadership embraces the storytelling tool of framing is remarkable for other reasons as well. More precisely, this includes “misframing” global political issues, which can otherwise be termed “breaking” the established frames (see e.g., Goffman 1986). This is done using rhetorical tools such as analogies and metaphors. To take but one example, note the following story about the changing (and increasing) role of nuclear weapons in global politics:

“Apocalyptic forecasts of the 1980s come to mind, namely, the ‘nuclear winter’. Fortunately, it did not come. However, the ‘Arab Spring’ ensued which, through a series of tragic events, also exacerbated the problem of weapons of mass destruction. I mean the withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA, counting on the total confrontation with Tehran” (Lavrov, 30.05.2018).

To explicate, framing (through linking the words related to different seasons of the year, that is, following one another) is used here to establish a logical connection between the events (much in line with the historical institutionalist approach and path-dependency theory) that are not normally talked about within the same discourse. As the author argues, this is done to emphasize the importance Moscow ascribes to the negative consequences US actions have on Russian security interests.
That said, Moscow’s concerns with global nuclear security architecture and the issue of negotiability warrant somewhat further discussion. Absent in the U.S. nuclear policy discourse, there is a strong emphasis in Moscow on “negotiability as a foreign policy value” (Lavrov, 16.10.2017; see also Lavrov, 25.12.2017, Lavrov, 15.01.2018). “When trust is undermined”, Lavrov continues, “established norms and rules are discarded, and the risks of uncontrolled escalation increase” (Lavrov, 30.05.2018). As far as the argument goes, building a global framework for controlling and decreasing nuclear stockpiles in nuclear states requires acknowledging security concerns of all the parties involved, which has been formulated as the principle of “equal and indivisible security”\(^{22}\). In order to accomplish this goal, negotiations are crucial where all parties can voice their concerns and make sure their security interests are taken into consideration. To ensure this, the nuclear “argument” must therefore be put forward. Notably, the reasoning applies not only to Moscow’s own security concerns but is evident in Sino-Russian proposition (the so-called “road map”) to resolve the nuclear problem of the Korean Peninsula (NPKP). More precisely, the suggestion is such that North Korea be offered to freeze nuclear tests in exchange for the cancellation of the US-South Korean military exercises near North Korean sea borders (see Lavrov, 06.06.2019). To compare, consider how the US talk about their view of the situation and North Korean options. Namely, the purpose of the modernization of U.S. nuclear forces is ensure “that our [U.S.] diplomats continue to speak from a position of strength (Nuclear Posture Review [NPR], 2018: I).

**Summarizing the findings**

In this section, the author puts together the observations made earlier to present her reading of contemporary nuclear policy discourse in Russia and the United States, respectively. By and large, U.S. and Russian state leaders reason about the role nuclear weapons have had on the use of military force in line with what the theories postulate. Namely, both states argue that nuclear war cannot be fought. At the same time, however, while Russian state leadership seems to distinguish between nuclear and non-nuclear forces (as the theory would expect them to do), the evidence has shown that the logic of Clausewitz is still relevant for U.S. nuclear thinking.

Second, the important thing to note is how explicit the link is between the state’s nuclear posture and its identity. While the United State acknowledges its “symbolic role” as a nuclear power,

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\(^{22}\) The principle is a cornerstone of the OSCE agenda, but also the START Treaty and not a purely Russian-invented construct.
their ambitions to incorporate nuclear power into state identity are modest. By contrast, Russian state leadership ascribes substantially more value to nuclear weapons – to the extent that the identity of the state is inseparable from its nuclear posture. So, in the case of Russia, talking about nuclear weapons often entails talking about themselves as a nation, “who we are”, not “what we will do” or “how we will react”. In the United States’ nuclear policy discourse, the connection to identity appears not nearly as explicit. Rather, it is about “what we can do”.

That said, nuclear power identity and the role of the Cold-War legacy play a huge role in how policymakers in Moscow make sense of the role of military force in international politics: “The history of the last decades has proved that it is impossible to ensure your sovereignty otherwise; unfortunately, neither does it work to earn respect for yourself” (Lavrov, 06.06.2019). To explicate, Russian state leadership needs nuclear weapons to be heard, to be regarded as a prominent actor whose opinion is to be taken into account, to avoid returning to the state of affairs during the 1990s when its military, economic, and political potential was effectively negligent. The nuclear option is the only one at Moscow’s disposal to assert itself as an important player on the international arena. Hence the importance of negotiations, “inclusive security”, and trust-building for it is impossible to persist in being a great power unless the whole world (and the United States, in particular) is made to pay attention.

 Quite the opposite is the case with the U.S. nuclear discourse. In 1967, Thomas Schelling came up with a concept of compellence, which the author believes duly represents the current U.S. posture: “What the President is doing is sending a strong message to North Korea in language that Kim Jong-un can understand, because he doesn’t seem to understand diplomatic language” (Tillerson 2017). That this is related to US strategic nuclear capabilities is evident as follows: “Any attack will be defeated, and any use of nuclear weapons will be met with an effective and overwhelming response” (Tillerson & Mattis 2017). In other words, the United States allude to its nuclear potential to send a signal form the position of strength, to compel the adversary, to make it do as the United States deems appropriate. Therefore, nuclear weapons are ascribed a totally different role in the American context.

Finally, the author shall emphasize that the leaders of the United States and Russia do not seem to be talking past each other, after all. As noted by Trump shortly after being elected President of the United States: “The US must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its sense regarding nukes” (Trump 2016). Similarly, President Putin has repeatedly mentioned that, “In the world we live in, global security is based upon
nuclear-weapon capability” (Putin, 2018). As noted by nuclear realist thinkers in the 1950s, everything in global politics is happening “within the nuclear situation”, which both state leaders seem to acknowledge and of which they are fully aware. However, although the policymakers do think in terms of ideas outlined by the nuclear revolution/nuclear realism theory, Clausewitzian logic still holds, too. In this sense, the use of military force for defense purpose, embedded in strategic nuclear thinking, is understood as the cornerstone of international nuclear weapons regime.
Concluding Remarks

The central aim of the paper has been to understand how policymakers in Russia and the United States frame and, thus, make sense of the use of force in global politics given the states’ strategic nuclear capabilities. In this concluding chapter the author assesses the degree to which the aim has been fulfilled. Also, the paper’s contribution to the academic field of War Studies is appreciated.

Methodological implications

In their 2002 article, Jane Webster and Richard T. Watson have noted that there exist different ways of illustrating the academic contribution made by a piece of research. More precisely, these include “providing a new theoretical understanding that helps to explain previously confusing results, <...> bringing together previously disparate streams of work to help shed light on a phenomenon, and suggesting important implications for practice” (2002: XIX). To begin with, the chosen theoretical framework based on the theories of the nuclear revolution and nuclear realism has proven utterly helpful in coming to grips with the link between nuclear weapons, security, and the use of military force. Highlighting these links, which might otherwise have been overlooked in the empirical material, has helped the author find more intricate and insightful frame elements in the speeches analyzed. Also, a valuable contribution has been made given the combination of the two frameworks the author has considered complementary and thus mutually strengthening. To provide an example, the theories’ understanding of the “illogic” of conventionalized thinking about nuclear weapons as well as their understanding of deterrence and the classical means-ends relationship between politics and military means has greatly contributed to the author’s understanding of the empirical frames. That said, the paper has succeeded in avoiding a common pitfall of qualitative studies which “include[s] failing to show exactly how the data obtained is related to theory” (Gioia et al. 2012).

Second, a few observations with regards to the methodological aspects of the paper can be made. On the one hand, the author sometimes found it challenging to fulfill the criteria for reflexivity against which interpretive research is often assessed. As argued by Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, reflexivity “allows researchers to trace out the ways in which very specific instances of their positionality affect their research accounts and the knowledge they claim on the basis of those accounts” (2002: 102). However, since the author was aware of how her own
preconceptions and background factor into making sense of the empirical data she delved into, eventually she has managed to ensure her position as researcher was distinct from those positions (the views of the actors studied) she was trying to discover and understand.

On the other hand, frame analysis has proved a highly valuable method. This is so for several reasons. First, although the focus of frame analysis is on the present experience of actors (as opposed to conceptual history, which emphasizes historical context within which ideas and concepts evolve), the tools of sensemaking and storytelling also draw upon embedded values and prior knowledge. Therefore, this paper has to some extent rebutted the critique that frame analysis is ahistorical that is often put forward against this method. Second, using all three tools described by van Hulst and Yanow (namely, sensemaking, selecting, and storytelling) has provided a more nuanced understanding of the policymakers’ past experience, current goals and future ambitions. The latter is especially evident with regards to the case of Russia, the argument emphasized below.

Assessment of empirical findings

First, note the striking imbalance between the frames related to nuclear weapons found in the acts of speech made by Russian and US policymakers, respectively. To clarify, given the author’s careful selection of the material and a reasonable time frame chosen, the rather scarce evidence available to parse the U.S. understanding of the use of military force given strategic nuclear arsenals is no coincidence. Rather, the author argues this is an important empirical observation in itself. In other words, the fact that the U.S. policymakers do not talk about nuclear weapons to the same extent as do their Russian counterparts tells us about the lesser importance ascribed to the issue in general. To what extent this is a consequence of certain causal factors remains, however, an open question outside the scope of the current paper.

Second, the tools of frame analysis have provided valuable insights to help the author answer the posed research question and fulfil the research aim. As has been noted earlier, the analysis has shown that both in Russia and the United States, the understanding of nuclear weapons is symbolic. In other words, U.S. and Russian policymakers agree that nuclear war cannot be fought or won. However, while Moscow distinguishes between nuclear and non-nuclear military capabilities as instruments of diplomacy and coercion, the distinction is absent in Washington’s discourse, whereby nuclear weapons are considered but one aspect of state military might. In both states’ discourses, nuclear weapons have a connection to state identity,
which is particularly pronounced in the case of Russia. Finally, U.S. policymakers talk about nuclear weapons “from a position of strength”, whereas in Moscow, state leadership appeals to its nuclear capabilities to boost its international influence and reinforce its great power status. Discovering the mechanism through which nuclear weapons, in policymakers’ understanding, are connected to the use of military force in global politics, namely, state identity, can be considered an additional goal achieved by the study. That said, the final section will focus upon some suggestions for future research the author has considered relevant against the backdrop of the findings of the paper.

Suggestions for future research

To begin with, the author contends that the ways in which identity affects strategic thinking about nuclear weapons need be scrutinized more closely. While the works of Jacques Hymans discussed earlier do focus on the link between national identity and proliferation, his approach emphasizes the role identity plays in state leadership’s decision to acquire nuclear arms in the first place. By contrast, the approach suggested here would trace (most likely, with the help of process tracing as a method) the interplay between thinking about existing arsenals and state national identity. Importantly, the scope of the project could encompass either established nuclear powers or so-called threshold nuclear states, or both.

Second, the question that occurred to the author was precisely how the structure of civil-military relations in the United States (and possibly, in Russia) affects the end-means logic embedded in nuclear policy. As argued by Kaplan (2016), dramatic decrease on the number of warheads towards the end of the Cold War was due not so much to the negotiations and arms control arrangements, but to the civilian leaders having regained control over the formulation of U.S. nuclear strategy. Thus, the suggested research problem would shed light on the structure of decision-making processes and their outcomes.

Finally, as noted by Pilat, “there have been a number of decent military studies of missiles, but a comprehensive, credible assessment of their strategic impact in the current environment has not been undertaken” (2009: 13). While admitting that undertaking a study as suggested by Pilat would require more specific (including technical, but also strictly military) knowledge of the issue, the author is convinced it would make an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the concepts of deterrence and defense, but also more fully appreciate to what extent the military still adheres to the logic and principles proposed by Clausewitz.
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