Principle of deterrence in which opposing parties with nuclear arsenals recognize that each could annihilate the other and therefore do not attack. Immediately after dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II, the United States and the world realized that they were facing a new kind of security environment. Unlike traditional weapons, a single nuclear bomb was capable of destroying an entire city; and many nuclear bombs could destroy a country as a functioning society. When the Soviet Union, the rival superpower to the United States, acquired the bomb in August 1949, global security changed forever.

Suddenly, two hostile powers had the capability to utterly destroy one another. This resulted in a security dilemma at the survival level and required a new kind of logic. Because both sides would want to launch preemptive attacks and destroy the other’s arsenal (to prevent the same kind of attack on themselves), nuclear war was likely to break out, although both sides were certainly averse to the idea. The only way to counter such a possibility was to accept mutual vulnerability and mutual destructive capacity—a concept that became known as mutually assured destruction (MAD).

This acceptance was gained through the development of second-strike capacity (massive retaliation). According to this logic, the United States and the Soviet Union should protect their arsenals from attack so that one would be capable of destroying the other, even if attacked first. Both countries accordingly kept their defenses on hair-trigger alert to avoid being placed at a disadvantage; they could respond within minutes to a nuclear strike. Both had extensive targeting lists, showing which cities should be struck within the rival nation, and in what order.

The United States and the Soviet Union recognized that an attack could destroy the enemy but would also result in self-destruction. Both countries accepted this reasoning. Both countries also asserted that they would attack only if fired upon, and the threat of nuclear destruction was sufficient to prevent both from cheating. MAD asserted that the best way to avoid a nuclear war was to realize and accept its potential consequences.

The logic of MAD became even more bizarre—both countries needed to ensure that they could truly devastate the other for a second-strike doctrine to be acceptable. Therefore, each country needed to build its nuclear arsenal to make certain that it could launch a more effective second strike if it would become necessary (and make the other country believe that an overwhelming counterattack would follow a strike). Yet, as each country built up its arsenal in this kind of defensive maneuver, the other perceived the buildup as threatening and expanded its own arsenal, resulting in an escalating arms race as each side sought a relative advantage. Ironically, however, the point of having a highly developed weapon system in a MAD world was that the weapons should not be used.

This kind of deterrence logic was developed and used in the 1950s and 1960s, most particularly during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Postures changed somewhat in the 1970s and 1980s, as both countries began to think about alternative forms of offense and defense. Both the United States and the Soviet Union were looking for ways in which they might take leads in the arms race and move beyond MAD to a strategy of assured survival. The United States began developing the Strategic
Defense Initiative (SDI) for this purpose and explored space technology for the launching of missiles, earning the SDI program the nickname *Star Wars*.

Both countries also began to look into the practicalities of enhancing defensive systems. In 1972, some argued successfully that building up defenses was counterproductive in a world of MAD logic because it would simply induce the other party to create stronger offensive weapons and accelerate the arms race. Defensive arms were previously rejected for that reason. During the Reagan administration, others asserted that limited defenses in the form of antiballistic missiles (ABMs) might actually slow the arms race and would be of some value if relations between the superpowers deteriorated. They would raise the costs of attack and protect the American people better.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the new imbalance in power relations, MAD has become irrelevant. The former nuclear deterrence principle is being gradually replaced by a strategy of cooperative threat reduction (a mix of defense and deterrence). The balance of power shifted in favor of the United States, and the unequal strategic positions of Russia—and China, which has gained recognition as a nuclear power—called for different kinds of nuclear deterrence, including a new form of MAD: minimal assured destruction. During the administration of President Bill Clinton, there were even suggestions of a new kind of strategy altogether: mutual assured safety.

Despite the numerous instances of seeming illogic, MAD was an effective form of deterrence for a number of years. It raised the cost of attack so high that deliberate nuclear strike became almost unthinkable. Although there were instances in which it seemed that mutual destruction was a possibility, recognition of the imminence of self-destruction was sufficient to prevent attack and retaliation.

See also
Arms Race; Cold War; Deterrence; Nuclear Deterrence; Nuclear Proliferation; Nuclear Weapons

**APA**

**Chicago**

**Harvard**

**MLA**


Copyright © 2006 by Sage Publications, Inc.

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/mutual_assured_destruction

Chicago
https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/mutual_assured_destruction

Harvard

MLA