



## INFORMATION SERIES

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Issue No. 488

May 4, 2021

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### **Why Rebuild the Triad? Because a Nuclear War Cannot Be Won and Must Never Be Fought**

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The West now faces an unprecedented nuclear threat context and deterrence challenge – well beyond what we faced during the Cold War. Correspondingly, our deterrence considerations must also get beyond 1960s-vintage assumptions and calculations. This conclusion has profound implications for deterrence force requirements and, by extension, the contemporary debate about the nuclear programs advanced by the Obama and Trump administrations.

On what basis do I conclude that the nuclear threats now confronting the West are unprecedented? Opponents' nuclear weapons can be more or less threatening depending on how those opponents conceive of their nuclear use. That is at least as important for deterrence considerations as the weapons' technical characteristics – which are the usual focus. Unfortunately, opponents now appear to think of nuclear weapons in new and extremely

This article is adapted from remarks made by Keith B. Payne at an April 7, 2021 Heritage Foundation symposium.



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 488 | May 4, 2021

---

dangerous ways—and the old, familiar Cold War balance of terror notion of deterrence provides little useful guidance for how to proceed in this new nuclear threat context.

The stable deterrence notion we have inherited from the 1960s presumes an opponent remarkably like the United States in its cost-benefit calculations and decision making. This “mirror imaging” of how the opponent will think and behave makes the functioning of deterrence conveniently predictable because the opponent’s decision making and behavior is predictable, i.e., opponents will calculate and behave as we would. Consequently, we can predict in detail how deterrence will function and what is required to deter that opponent; we can predict “how much is enough?” for deterrence with ease.

It is hard to imagine a more comforting presumption than mirror-imaging: the functioning of deterrence and what is required to deter is predictable in detail because the opponent will calculate and behave as we ourselves would. We know what deters us, and our thinking, of course, is the definition of rationality. Most importantly therefore, we can predict with confidence that the fear generated by a “balance of terror” will reliably deter any rational opponent’s use of nuclear weapons or any provocation that might lead to nuclear war.

The stark challenge we now face, however, is that contemporary great powers and rogue states seem *not* to acknowledge the deterrence restraints that we in the West assume a balance of terror will place on all rational leaderships. Russia, China, and North Korea all appear to see the existing international order as intolerably unfair to them and seek to change it to their liking, including by nuclear threat and military force.

Russia, for example, has been explicit in using nuclear threats to push its goal of changing the existing international order. Russia’s coercive use of nuclear threats goes well beyond the Cold War’s assumed stable balance of terror dialogue that, “if you strike me, I will retaliate massively.” That was the assumed use of nuclear deterrence in Western policy intended to defend the status quo.

Past Kremlin leaders publicly scorned the notion of limited nuclear threats or employment. However, the coercive nuclear threat Russia now brandishes is, “if you resist my expansionist, encroachment, I will strike you.” This is an offensive, coercive nuclear threat unlike anything we faced during the Cold War; it presents an unprecedented challenge for US deterrence strategies and capabilities.

Dr. Mark Schneider, one of the most conscientious and careful observers of Russian forces and policy, describes the current situation as follows: “Russia believes it can introduce nuclear weapons into a conventional war without taking nuclear fire in return and that such action will result in a Russian military victory. This strategy is what the Russians call ‘de-escalation’ of a war although a more accurate description would be ‘escalate to win.’”<sup>1</sup>



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 488 | May 4, 2021

---

Russia appears to see limited nuclear first-use threats and potentially employment as the way to paralyze prospective NATO military opposition in the event conflict erupts from Russia's expansionist drives. This is euphemistically referred to as de-escalating a conflict; that is, a conflict is de-escalated because the West stands down in the face of Russian nuclear escalation threat. This is not akin to Western deterrence strategy or thinking. It is a strategy to defeat Western will and enforce a relatively unchallenged route to changing the international system in ways favored by Moscow.

This reality is a direct contradiction of our familiar Cold War mirror-imaging assumptions of a stable balance of terror and shows the foolishness of continued mirror-imaging. The fundamental presumption of the Cold War's "balance of terror" deterrence notion is that no rational leadership could think about nuclear weapons as Russian leaders now appear to think. Yet, Moscow now appears to expect that the West's fear of nuclear escalation gives it the freedom to use coercive limited nuclear threats to advance its expansionist agenda.

It must be asked anew: How do Moscow's leaders now perceive the risks associated with provoking the West with limited nuclear threats or employment? And, what nuclear risks are Moscow's leaders willing to accept in pursuit of their goal of re-establishing the Russian hegemony in much of Eurasia that they believe the West stole from them. And, more to the point, how *credible against Russian limited* nuclear first-use threats (that may avoid US territory entirely) is the old US balance of terror-oriented deterrence notion when the consequence for the United States of executing such a strategy would likely be its own destruction?<sup>2</sup> The same questions must be asked of China's leadership and its thinking about nuclear weapons and risk—especially with regard to Taiwan.

China's manifest expansionism and goal of overturning the existing international political corresponds with its rapidly growing military capabilities, nuclear and non-nuclear. U.S. Strategic Command Commander, ADM Charles Richard has described China's nuclear buildup as a "breathtaking" and "unprecedented expansion," and has expressed concern that the combination of Chinese capabilities now threatens to enable China to deter the United States: "And you add all of this together, and they can do any plausible nuclear employment strategy regionally. This will backstop their conventional capability and will potentially constrain our options, that is, we will be the ones that are getting deterred if I don't have the capability to similarly deter them."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, China appears to seek the capability, including via nuclear threat, to deter the United States from supporting its allies, partners and interests in the event of a conflict with China.<sup>4</sup> This is an unprecedented coercive nuclear threat now confronting the United States.<sup>5</sup>



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 488 | May 4, 2021

---

General Glen VanHerck, Commander of Northern Command, describes the situation as follows:

If our competitors believe that they can destroy our will or ability to surge forces from the United States because of a perceived inability to defeat their attacks, they will be emboldened to aggressively pursue their strategic interests. In essence, this situation creates an opportunistic gap between our nuclear strategic deterrent and conventional deterrent capability for potential adversaries to exploit. This opportunity creates intent and, perversely, an incentive for adversary action.<sup>6</sup>

This situation suggests a significant hole in any US deterrence strategy based on confidence in old stable balance of terror thinking. This may sound nebulous, but it is a stark, real world problem. Much of our defense planning reportedly is predicated on the confidence that strategic nuclear deterrence will prevent opponents' nuclear use; if that expectation is mistaken, we have a breathtaking deterrence problem. An observation by ADM Richard suggests this point:

*Strategic deterrence is the foundation of our national defense policy and enables every U.S. military operation around the world. Any individual strategic policy or capability decision made absent an understanding of the effect on the overall strategy could potentially increase the risk of deterrence failure. If strategic deterrence fails, little else...no plan or capability, works as designed.... Every Operation Plan (OPLAN) in the Department and every capability assumes that strategic deterrence will hold.*<sup>7</sup>

I fully agree with President Reagan's familiar comment that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. That now means that Western strategies and capabilities, nuclear and non-nuclear, must be structured to credibly deter this so-called, contemporary "Red theory of victory."<sup>8</sup>

This is a new deterrence requirement for Western policies and capabilities, and our understanding of deterrence stability and balance must catch up to the geopolitical realities that we now face multiple nuclear-armed foes whose goals, calculations and behavior is not predictable. They are not our mirror-image; rather, they seek to change the existing world order that we seek to preserve, and they believe coercive nuclear threats and possible nuclear use are a tool to that end.

What is implication of this situation for the calculation of "How much is enough" for credible deterrence? The US requirement now must deter a range of plausible nuclear threats from multiple opponents, particularly including unprecedented, limited nuclear escalation threats. Correspondingly, US policies and capabilities must now be resilient, flexible and tailored to support *credible* deterrence policies across a range of strategic threats to us and our allies.





## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 488 | May 4, 2021

---

This requirement puts a premium on the deterrence value of the nuclear triad and on NATO nuclear forces for the resilience and flexibility they can provide. Retaining that deterrence value is the expressed goal underlying the Obama and Trump Administration's programs to rebuild the aged US nuclear forces.

Until fairly recently, the US has been on what some describe as a 30-year holiday away from strategic thought and movement. Opponents have not reciprocated the clearly expressed US desire for further nuclear reductions and disarmament—they have gone in the opposite direction for well over a decade. As General Ferdinand Stoss, the director of plans and policy at U.S. Strategic Command, has observed. "... despite the U.S.'s concerted efforts to reduce the role of nuclear weapons ... our adversaries since 2010 are doing the opposite."<sup>9</sup>

For example, while the United States has enjoyed its 3-decade holiday from renewing its nuclear capabilities, Russia has recapitalized roughly 80 percent of its strategic nuclear forces.<sup>10</sup> It also has conducted low-yield nuclear weapon experiments despite the U.S. nuclear test moratorium since 1992,<sup>11</sup> introduced new theater nuclear systems that were supposed to be outlawed by the INF Treaty, and unilaterally developed unprecedented strategic nuclear systems that are not covered by the New Start Treaty. I'm reminded of the famous 1979 comment regarding Soviet behavior by President Carter's Defense Secretary Harold Brown: "When we build, they build, when we cut, they build." In this regard, nothing has changed but the names.

Are the current Obama and Trump programs adequate to sustain deterrence now? I believe them to be necessary, and hope they are adequate. I wish I could be more definite, but there is no methodology that can eliminate the uncertainties regarding "how much is enough" for deterrence in such a diverse threat environment—which is why hedging against uncertainty as best we can is so critical and why rebuilding the triad is so important.

Yet, predictably, many commentators criticize the Obama and Trump nuclear rebuilding programs as being destabilizing and the cause of a new arms race—as if the US is now somehow initiating an arms race rather than responding after an *unrequited* three-decade holiday. We also hear definitive claims that the Obama and Trump Administrations' plans for rebuilding the triad now are unnecessary for deterrence—that we can deter reliably and predictably with much smaller forces, and without the ICBM or bomber legs of the nuclear triad.<sup>12</sup> These are comforting and confident claims about deterrence requirements, but they are built on Cold War mirror-imaging presumptions that render deterrence predictable and the question of "how much is enough" easily and confidently answered.

For example, "The submarine force alone is sufficient to deter our enemies and will be for the foreseeable future,<sup>13</sup> and, "We don't need land-based missiles to deter attack."<sup>14</sup> Why are



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 488 | May 4, 2021

---

submarine-launched missiles said to be adequate for deterrence, and thus ICBMs are unnecessary? Because “The U.S. has hundreds of nuclear warheads deployed on submarines at sea, and any one of those subs could destroy *the 50 largest Russian cities.*”<sup>15</sup>

Threatening an opponent’s societal assets (e.g., “cities) as the basis for detailed predictions about deterrence requirements reflects the familiar Cold War “balance of terror” standard for defining “how much is enough?” for deterrence. However, it must be understood that the contention that the U.S. deterrence capability is and should be based on the threat to destroy an opponent’s cities reflects the most simplistic and imprudent “balance of terror” thinking inherited from the 1960s. For decades and on a fully bipartisan basis, U.S. policy has rightly moved away from these archaic deterrence notions for being immoral and inadequate for deterrence. And, actually carrying out such a threat would be both illegal and a gross violation of the Just War Doctrine. Yet, critics of U.S. nuclear modernization plans continue to harken back to 1960s deterrence notions, and based on them, assert with confidence predictions about the U.S. forces needed for deterrence now and in the future.

Please realize that these confident deterrence claims are, in fact, entirely speculative. They ignore decades of bipartisan U.S. deterrence policy evolution and reflect long-discarded Cold War deterrence notions with their embedded “mirror-imaging” presumptions of predictable opponents with defensive goals rather than contemporary threat realities. Given the uncertainties involved in identifying present deterrence requirements, much less future requirements, any such claims are now wholly unwarranted anachronisms. They endure via frequent repetition but are now more likely to misinform than they are to enlighten.

My conclusion is that given the severe and unprecedented nuclear and non-nuclear challenges now facing the West, most of the continuing 1960s-vintage criticism of current bipartisan US nuclear programs is dangerously imprudent in a subject area that deserves the utmost prudence. Critics continue to draw on Cold War deterrence thinking, but U.S. policy has evolved over decades and must continue to do so. If we do not recognize that now, we may well learn the hard lesson of deterrence failure at some future point.

1. Mark Schneider, “Putin Nucs Biden,” *RealClearDefense.com*, April 3, 2021, at [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2021/04/03/putin\\_nukes\\_biden\\_771156.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2021/04/03/putin_nukes_biden_771156.html).
2. Henry Kissinger dismissed the credibility of such US nuclear threats over four decades ago, saying, “...we much face the fact that it is absurd to base the strategy of the West on the credibility of the threat of mutual suicide...because if we execute, we risk the destruction of civilization.” Henry Kissinger, “The Future of NATO,” in Kenneth Myers, ed., *NATO, the Next Thirty Years* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979), p. 8.
3. See *Statement of Charles A. Richard, Commander, United States Strategic Command Before the Senate Committee On Armed Forces*, April 20, 2021, p. 6. See also Bill Gertz, “China Engaged in ‘Breathtaking Nuclear Expansion,’” *The Washington Times*, April 21, 2021, available at <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/apr/21/adm->



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 488 | May 4, 2021

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4. See for example, Richard D. Fisher, Jr., “Taiwan and Nuclear Arms Control Instability,” *Taipei Times Online* (Taiwan), June 22, available at <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2020/06/22/2003738629>; and, Patrick Tucker, “US Nuclear Fears Are Shifting From A Clear Russian Threat to a Murkier Chinese One,” *DefenseOne*, April 20, 2021, available at <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2021/04/us-nuclear-fears-are-shifting-clear-russian-threat-murkier-chinese-one/173501/>.
  5. This point is discussed at length in, Keith Payne, *Redefining “Stability” for the New Post-Cold War Era*, *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 2021).
  6. Glen D. VanHerck, “Deter in Competition, Deescalate in Crisis, and Defeat in Conflict,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, Number 101 (2nd Quarter 2021), p. 6, at, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2553378/deter-in-competition-deescalate-in-crisis-and-defeat-in-conflict/>.
  7. *Statement of Charles A. Richard, Commander, United States Strategic Command Before the Senate Committee On Armed Forces*, op. cit. (Emphasis in Original).
  8. Brad Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in The 21st Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), pp. 35, 99, 103-104, 192-194, 260-262, 268-271.
  9. Jack Beyrer, “U.S. Allies Threatened By Russian Nukes Under Biden,” *Washington Free Beacon*, April 5, 2021, at, <https://freebeacon.com/national-security/american-allies-threatened-by-russian-nukes-under-biden/>.
  10. *Statement of Charles A. Richard*, op. cit. p. 9.
  11. United States Department of State, *Executive Summary of the 2020 Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments* (Compliance Report), April 2020, available at <https://www.state.gov/2020-adherence-to-and-compliance-with-arms-control-nonproliferation-and-disarmament-agreements-and-commitments-compliance-report/>.
  12. See for example, William J. Perry and James E. Cartwright, “Spending Less On Nuclear Weapons Could Actually Make Us Safer,” *Washington Post*, November 16, 2017, at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinion/spending-less-on-nuclear-weapons-could-actually-make-us-safer/2017/11/16/396ef0c6-ca56-11e7-aa96-54417592cf72\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.2fe3b14ea6c7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinion/spending-less-on-nuclear-weapons-could-actually-make-us-safer/2017/11/16/396ef0c6-ca56-11e7-aa96-54417592cf72_story.html?utm_term=.2fe3b14ea6c7); William Perry, “Why It’s Safe to Scrap America’s ICBMs,” *The New York Times*, September 10, 2016, available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/30/opinion/why-its-safe-to-scrap-americas-icbms.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/30/opinion/why-its-safe-to-scrap-americas-icbms.html?_r=0); William J. Perry and Tom Z. Collina, *The Button* (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, Inc., 2020), p. 128.
  13. William Perry, “Why It’s Safe to Scrap America’s ICBMs,” op. cit.
  14. William J. Perry and Tom Z. Collina, “ICBMs That Would Be Destroyed in the Ground? No, Thanks,” *DefenseOne.com*, April 21, 2021, available at, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/04/264b-icbms-would-be-destroyed-ground-no-thanks/173498/>.
  15. *Ibid.* (Emphasis added).

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## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 488 | May 4, 2021

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international security environment and how the dynamic geostrategic landscape affects U.S. national security. Contributors are recognized experts in the field of national security.

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