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Multilateral Deterrence: What's New and Why it Matters

Dr. Keith B. Payne

Dr. Keith B. Payne is a co-founder of the National Institute for Public Policy, professor emeritus and former Department Head of the Graduate School of Defense and Strategic Studies at Missouri State University, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense and former Senior Advisor to the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

Deterrence theorists, policy makers, and commentators are now eagerly discussing “trilateral deterrence.” This, of course, refers to the simultaneous deterrence engagement of three great nuclear powers, the United States, Russia and China.

This brief review of deterrence in new global conditions is divided into two parts: The first identifies some inconvenient truths about what we can know about the functioning of deterrence; the second begins a discussion of *why* new multilateral deterrence conditions have implications for U.S. deterrence strategies and best practice. It is commonplace to assert that trilateral deterrence is different and must affect U.S. deterrence policy – explaining why and how that is true is not commonplace, but it is important to start.

Inconvenient Truths About Deterrence Prognostication

First, some inconvenient truths. Discussions about how changes in the structure of international relations will affect the functioning of deterrence can be interesting and more or less informed, but it is important to acknowledge that no one can be high on the learning curve regarding the functioning of deterrence in a new trilateral (or more, multilateral) deterrence dynamic.



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It took over three decades during the Cold War for the United States to reach a bipartisan consensus on U.S. deterrence goals and related measures of force requirements – not for a lack of brilliant minds working on the subject. We are quite early in the process of trying to understand deterrence in a very different international structure and current discussions often are dogged by continued reference to accepted wisdom inherited from the 1960s.

Aside from the most obvious points about deterrence, we are unavoidably in the world of speculation and conjecture, including what the ubiquitous word “stability” means and what in practice will help or hinder it. A former Secretary of the Navy, Richard Danzig, has quipped with regard to forecasting international relations in general that we are “driving in the dark.”¹ Another has rightly suggested: “To state the obvious, this is not an exact science. It’s more like looking at a fog bank and trying to see what shape is in the fog. What is it that you can kind of see but can’t fully make out?”²

There is nothing wrong with speculation and conjecture about the future functioning of deterrence, as long as everyone understands that informed speculation is the limit of what now is possible. Obviously, planning must be done and policy makers must establish some basis for doing so—there is no pause button on history. But, in contrast to the thousands of commentators’ confident claims since the 1960s that one step or another surely would make or break deterrence, predictions about deterrence demand great humility rather than hubris.

Indeed, the most pervasive myth in this field is that confident prediction about the precise functioning of deterrence is possible. The difficulty in reaching confident conclusions beyond the most obvious is not a matter of finding the right analyst or methodology. The problem is our unavoidable ignorance of the many factors and conditions that can lead to deterrence failure or success. That is, the functioning of deterrence can be affected by an extremely wide range of factors—some of which may be well-known, others may be somewhat obvious (but not their significance in decision making), and others may be completely obscure. And, unfortunately, we do not know the importance for deterrence of what we do not know.

This harsh reality was true in the bipolar world of the Cold War; it is even more significant in a world of three great nuclear powers. Those factors key to deterrence working or failing are multiplied with every new entry into the deterrence dynamic—the imponderables multiply with every new possible interaction. It is for this reason, among others, that trilateral deterrence is different from bilateral deterrence. The reality is that multilateral deterrence is more complex and unpredictable—the uncertainties, imponderables and unknowns with every new party are not simply additive; they are multiplied.

Consequently, those who make or comment on deterrence policy must implicitly or explicitly fill in the unknowns and imponderables about the functioning of deterrence with



presumptions and/or evidence about opponents and contexts that are incomplete and speculative. There are better and worse ways to do so, but our understanding of opponents and context will likely never be adequate for highly-confident predictions in almost any context. Simply put, regardless of the deterrence model underling predictions about how deterrence will function – whether on paper or in mind – for virtually any actual engagement we will not know with confidence how close or far it is from capturing reality. In short, reality matters and predicting the functioning of deterrence in a multilateral context confronts expanding uncertainties and unknowns; that is the inconvenient truth.

Even explaining why deterrence worked or failed *in the past* is a challenge given our frequent ignorance of the specific factors that led to its apparent functioning or failure. With an abundance of historical evidence, we still often only know with confidence that deterrence either failed or failed to apply. We typically do not know with precision *why* deterrence failed because opponents do not often explain *why* they took an action that we hoped they would be deterred from taking. And, only rarely is evidence available to tell us *why* deterrence worked because all we see is that nothing much happened. Again, opponents rarely tell us why they decided *not* to do something they otherwise would have done, i.e., why they were deterred.

The Past as Prelude

This author has examined scores of case studies from antiquity to the present in which deterrence either failed or failed to apply. The unavoidable conclusion from examining the past is that deterrence fails for many different reasons in many different contexts, often surprisingly.

A common theme in many cases of deterrence failure is that the party hoping to deter misjudged the situation because it largely misunderstood the opponent's goals, motivations, attention, determination, risk tolerance, perceptions of necessity, opportunity, and the stakes in contention, along with many other possible factors that tend to shape how leaderships calculate risk, cost and gain. More than any other single factor, the deterrer's ignorance and lack of attention is a condition that contributed to deterrence failure when it was expected to provide security. This ignorance can be lessened with serious effort, but not eliminated.

In most cases involving the United States, deterrence failures came as surprises to Washington. For example, on September 19, 1962, *Special National Intelligence Estimate 85-3-62, The Military Buildup in Cuba*, essentially reported that the Soviet Union would not likely place missiles in Cuba because doing so "would indicate a far greater willingness to increase the level of risk in US-Soviet relations than the USSR has displayed thus far and consequently would have important policy implications with respect to other areas and other problems in East-West relations."³ Less than one month later, photographic evidence proved that the Soviets had placed missiles in Cuba. Sherman Kent, then-head of the National Board of Estimates, stated



of this mistake regarding Soviet decision making, “There is no blinking the fact that we came down on the wrong side.” Kent concluded, that “We missed the Soviet decision to put the missiles into Cuba because we could not believe that Khrushchev could make a mistake.”⁴

U.S. expectations regarding opponents’ calculations of risk and benefit have *not* always been based on a firm understanding of the opponent or the context. This is *not* a criticism of U.S. intelligence, it is a reflection of the limits on prediction in international relations. If an opponent’s behavior is shocking, rather than acknowledge ignorance, U.S. commentators and some officials often assert that the opponent must suffer from a lack of reason; we could not otherwise so misjudge their perceptions and calculations. In truth, only infrequently in history do leaders long remain in power if they suffer from serious psychopathologies. Much more likely is that we misunderstand how opponents perceive their goals, risks and opportunities.

The “so what” following from this discussion of theory and history is that even the most confident-sounding claims about whether and how deterrence will work in real-world cases reflect more or less informed speculation. The future now appears to be even more complex in this regard, with additional uncertainties, imponderables and unknowns. That is the inconvenient truth.

Recent Developments

Recently, different commentators have observed with confidence that the likelihood of Russian nuclear employment in the Ukraine War is now increasing, or to the contrary, that it is highly unlikely. What we know is that Russia either will or will not employ nuclear weapons or other WMD. There can be very little basis for great confidence in predictions as to which is more or less likely because that decision will depend on the uncertain perceptions, values and psyches of a small number of foreign individuals in unique and stressful circumstances – hardly the basis for highly-confident prediction. This limitation in the ability to anticipate the functioning of deterrence has become more pronounced in a multilateral deterrence context.

Moscow’s incentives to employ WMD may well increase if Putin doubles down to prevent a loss he cannot tolerate. CIA Director William Burns has stated that Putin “doesn’t believe he can afford to lose” because he has “staked so much on the choices that he made to launch this invasion.”⁵ This may be a key consideration because cognitive studies suggest that individuals often are highly risk tolerant in this type of condition – it is called the “gamblers’ fallacy.”⁶ The risks for Moscow of employing nuclear weapons, however, may be sufficient to overcome the motivations. As noted above, projections on the matter – whatever their opinion – must be speculative. We will become more aware with enough strategic warning or only after the fact, but we simply cannot be confident which factors will be decisive in Putin’s decision making. We can *hope* that Moscow and Beijing will make decisions based on parameters that seem



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reasonable to us, and thus are predictable, but that expectation has often proved wrong in the past.

What we do know with confidence is that for deterrence to function by design in any context, opponents must decide that some level of accommodation or conciliation to U.S. demands is more tolerable than actions that would risk the U.S. deterrent threat. There must be this space for deterrence to work.

The priority deterrence question that now follows from this discussion is important and should be stated plainly: How do we simultaneously deter multiple revanchist great powers, Russia and China, that appear driven by the common belief that their respective expansionist goals are of such existential importance that they are willing to brandish nuclear first-use threats to advance them, and may see limited nuclear employment as a way to work around U.S. deterrence policies?

For example, a Russian decision to employ nuclear weapons would likely be a coercive tactic to paralyze further Western support for Ukraine and thereby enable Moscow to achieve a bloody victory, i.e., “escalate to win.” Russia reportedly already has warned the United States in a demarche of “unpredictable consequences” if it provides “sensitive” arms to Ukraine.⁷

The prominent Cold War “balance of terror” model of deterrence stability tells us that this should not be a problem because no *rational* leadership would actually employ nuclear weapons in this way. And, in fact, commentators often now again assert with confidence that Putin’s threats are a bluff or that he must be “unhinged.” Such a conclusion likely reflects an enduring inadequacy in our understanding of how differently opponents can define what is rational behavior. There may be comfort in projecting onto opponents, including Putin, Western notions of what is rational because that means Putin’s nuclear threats are only a bluff – what a relief. Yet, Russia’s and to some extent China’s nuclear first-use threats, and the possibility of employment, are here and now; they demand that we consider anew how best to deter in contemporary conditions and the capabilities needed to support deterrence best practice.

We do not know how deterrence will be tested; we can only prepare as best we can, while “driving in the dark,” and hedge against a wide range of plausible deterrence challenges.

Contemporary Deterrence Conditions and Their Implications for U.S. Deterrence Strategies

Recognition of the inconvenient truths about deterrence prediction and contemporary conditions leads to the second part of this discussion: How and why a multidimensional deterrence context should affect U.S. deterrence considerations and practice.



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The most basic point in this regard is the need to reduce ignorance, to the extent feasible, with regard to those basic factors that can drive multiple opponents' relevant decision making, i.e., as noted above, their goals, motivations, attention, determination, risk tolerance, perceptions of necessity, opportunity, and the stakes in contention, *inter alia* (even the personal health conditions of a given leader can be important in this regard). The need to do so is not new to considerations of multilateral deterrence, but pursuing an understanding of opponents for deterrence purposes is a task made much more challenging by the expansion of the number of opponents and contexts to be so understood. During the bipolar Cold War, the focus was on the Soviet Union; other countries were considered "lesser included cases,"⁸ i.e., if the Soviet Union was deterred reliably, others would be too. A multilateral deterrence context does not afford that convenient shortcut; the potential for great variation in the decision making and behavior of multiple foreign leaderships cannot be so dismissed.

All attempts to reduce ignorance will be frustrated, at least in part, by a lack of data, ambiguous data, and conflicting data; this is unavoidable. However, the goal of reducing ignorance for deterrent purposes is *not* perfect knowledge, which is unobtainable. The goal is a greater awareness of the opponent so that basic mistakes in U.S. deterrence strategies can better be avoided and deterrence is thus more likely to work in practice.

The Analytical Challenge

As noted, the analytical challenge of usefully reducing ignorance in a multilateral deterrence context is greater than in the Cold War bilateral context because with each new party involved, the number of factors to understand expands. Equally important, the interactions of those factors become more complex as multiple leaderships observe the interactions of each party, which may shape the perceptions and decision making of all those involved and thus U.S. deterrence requirements. The United States is not simply deterring Russia and China sequentially or in isolation, but with each watching each and possibly shifting calculations based upon what they see in each engagement.

An obvious example of this added complication is now trying to understand how the war in Ukraine may influence China's perception of the opportunities, costs and risks of moving violently against Taiwan, and how that may affect needed U.S. efforts to deter China from doing so. In short, the task includes trying to understand how developments in one geographic area could affect the decision making of opponents in distant areas, and thereby shape U.S. deterrence goals and practice in those distant areas. This is the opposite of the U.S. Cold War focus on the Soviet Union, with the expectation that all others were "lesser included cases."

The need, therefore, is for great attention to the identification and understanding of the many different (and in some cases unique) decision-making drivers and how they interact across an



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increasing number of leaderships – most obviously including China and Russia, but also those countries whose behavior could seriously play in deterrence engagements among the three great nuclear powers, e.g., North Korea and Iran.

The common Cold War analytic practice of positing non-descript Countries A and B, and then essentially using game theory and deductive logic to project the functioning of deterrence between the two, and the requirements for deterrence, was woefully inadequate at the time. In the contemporary multilateral deterrence dynamic, the leaderships of the United States, China and Russia have different worldviews and are in many ways unique decision makers. Projections based on positing the interaction among three *non-descript* Countries A, B, and C simply washes out the key factors that are likely to determine if and how deterrence actually functions. Such projections are as likely to mislead as they are to enlighten.

Deterrence Policy and Practice

There are several additional implications for the practice of deterrence in a new multilateral deterrence dynamic that may be identified briefly here. For example, given a multilateral deterrence context and the associated uncertainties of prognostication, it is important to emphasize at least three directions in U.S. deterrence policy: hedging against opponents' coordination; hedging against uncertainty in deterrence requirements; and, hedging against the likely increased potential for deterrence failure.

Hedging Against Opponents' Coordination

The nature of the contemporary trilateral context demands U.S. consideration of the possibility that Russia and China will coordinate their actions to advance their respective goals in confrontations with the United States. This is an unprecedented possibility (likelihood?) with numerous implications, including, for example, the possibility of Russia and China confronting the United States with two simultaneous and coordinated regional wars and the corresponding U.S. need to deter their threats of limited theater nuclear escalation in two different geographical locations simultaneously. This is a deterrence challenge that U.S. theater nuclear capabilities may be unprepared to meet given the apparent near elimination of U.S. forward-deployed and deployable theater nuclear weapons proportional to the potential theater nuclear threats.⁹

At the strategic nuclear level of consideration, the coordination concerns include the possibility that Beijing's and Moscow's combined strategic capabilities will present a new problem for the continuing survivability of U.S. strategic retaliatory forces – problems that have not been of concern since the massive Soviet ICBM deployments of the 1970s and early 1980s created a "window of vulnerability" for U.S. ICBM capabilities. If so, the adequacy of U.S. deterrence



capabilities must be paced against the combined forces of two nuclear great powers – a wholly unprecedented condition.

Hedging Against Expanded Uncertainties Regarding Deterrence Requirements

The multiplication of uncertainties in the formulation of deterrence strategies and the potential for coordination between Russia and China increase the imponderables involved in predicting “how much is enough?” for deterrence. Arriving at that standard has always been more art than science, but it is made even more problematic by the expansion of participants in a multilateral deterrence context – particularly with the reality of two expansionist, hostile great nuclear power opponents. Indeed, there can be no single “assured destruction” standard that defines the U.S. strategic deterrent, as was U.S. practice for decades during the Cold War. Instead, there must now be multiple, simultaneous measures of adequacy for different opponents and contingencies, and all of those measures must take into account the uncertainties involved in their definition. And, once those measures are agreed upon, it must be recognized that they will shift over time, perhaps rapidly, in a dynamic deterrence threat environment. Given the many unavoidable uncertainties involved, for example, no one can know with confidence what U.S. deterrence requirements will be in 2030. Nevertheless, we must plan now for that timeframe. As a result, the need to hedge against setting that standard incorrectly, particularly too narrowly, has become even more acute.

A contemporary question that illustrates this problem is whether the United States should proceed with development of the nuclear, sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) as is recommended by the senior-most U.S. military leaders,¹⁰ or cancel it as reportedly is directed in the Biden Administration’s 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*.¹¹ Does hedging against the expanding unknowns regarding deterrence requirements recommend the continued development of this capability?

Given opponents’ coercive regional nuclear first-use threats – made most obvious by Russia’s stream of recent, explicit regional nuclear threats – diverse U.S. theater response options that *are proportional to the threats* and readily available in different theaters, may well be of great value for credible deterrence. In the emerging multilateral deterrence context, as senior U.S. military leaders have observed, *prudent* planning for deterrence certainly suggests continued development of the SLCM-N. The need to hedge against increasing uncertainties helps to explain why that is true.

Hedging Against the Possibility of Deterrence Failure

Finally, the expansion of uncertainties and unknowns regarding the functioning of deterrence applies to both *how* and *whether* deterrence will function. Despite commentators’ frequent assertions that deterrence will likely continue to work as expected, the inconvenient truth is



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that no one knows if such hopeful predictions are true or false, or even what probability may be assigned to them as being true. The Cold War-era notion that such predictions can be made with confidence was never highly credible; they now are based on sand. Consequently, to the extent that the United States is unprepared for the possibility of nuclear deterrence failure, it is unprepared for the realities of a multilateral deterrence context.

The implications of this harsh reality are profound. For example, the Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, ADM Charles Richard, has cautioned that “Every operational plan in the Department of Defense, and every other capability we have in DOD, rests on the assumption that strategic deterrence, and in particular nuclear deterrence, ... is holding right,” and that, “if that assumption is not met, particularly with nuclear deterrence, nothing else in the Department of Defense is going to work the way it was designed.”¹² Given this, the military-operational issues raised by the expanding uncertainties regarding the functioning of deterrence are profound for the United States. For example, after three decades of focusing on rogue states and terrorists, how able is the United States now to confront nuclear first-use threats and to fight in a nuclear environment?

This short discussion is not the place to elaborate on the many issues raised by the uncertainties of multilateral deterrence and the corresponding need to hedge against the prospect of deterrence failure. Suffice to say here that the implications are extremely significant for how the United States can seek most prudently to ensure the safety of its citizens and allies. Most obvious perhaps is the potential value of at least limited active and passive strategic defenses to help mitigate the consequences of a limited nuclear attack, and to reduce the coercive value of opponents’ threats to launch such attacks. Prominent scholars, including Herman Kahn and Colin Gray, emphasized the need in the past for U.S. defensive capabilities to mitigate the catastrophic consequences of deterrence failure. To the considerable extent that the level of reasonable confidence in deterrence functioning shapes the potential value of such defenses, they can only be regarded as increasingly prudent in a multilateral deterrence context. That is, as confidence in the predictable functioning of deterrence is increasingly open to question, the potential value of defenses must increase. This is another inconvenient truth.

Conclusion

In summary, for deterrence planning, a multilateral context is materially different from a bilateral context, and those differences must be taken into account in planning for deterrence and its possible failure. The emergence of a multilateral deterrence context presents some unprecedented challenges for the United States. It expands the uncertainties, imponderables and unknowns regarding the functioning of deterrence – which remains essential while also more uncertain. In this context, given the considerable variation in opponents’ worldviews and how they define reasonable behavior, the Cold War practice of focusing on the greatest deterrence challenge and considering all others to be lesser included cases is an obvious



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mistake—despite the attractiveness of its relative ease. Increasingly necessary is to be as informed as possible about the decision-making drivers of multiple opponents in diverse circumstances. Positing non-descript countries A, B, and C, and extrapolating expected behaviors on that basis is likely to reduce the prospects for deterrence success—even more so now than in the past.

Identifying the many ways in which a multilateral deterrence context is different from the past and the significance of those differences for U.S. deterrence planning is likely to be a generational process. That said, it is time to get beyond noting that this is an important topic and then defaulting to Cold War accepted wisdom. The “greatest generation” of deterrence scholars did the heavy lifting for their time and helped to preserve superpower peace through the Cold War. Deterrence conditions have changed dramatically, however, and it is time for a new generation to get back to this serious work.

¹ Richard Danzig, *Driving in the Dark: Ten Propositions About Prediction and National Security* (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2011), available at https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNAS_Prediction_Danzig.pdf?mtime=20160906081652&focal=none.

² Newt Gingrich, “Newt Gingrich: My Predictions for next 10 years—I expect these big changes,” *FoxNews.com*, January 3, 2021, available at <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/future-predictions-for-2020s-newt-gingrich>.

³ Sherman Kent, “A Crucial Estimate Relived,” in *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates, Collected Essays* (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1994), accessed at www.cia.gov/csi/books/shermankent/toc.html on August 9, 2000.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Lawrence Richard, “Putin believes ‘doubling down’ key to winning in Ukraine, thinks he ‘can’t afford to lose,’” *Fox News*, May 8, 2022, available at <https://www.foxnews.com/world/putin-doubling-down-win-ukraine-cant-aford-to-lose-cia-chief-warns>.

⁶ See for example, William J. Gering and Adrian R. Willoughby, “The Medical Frontal Cortex and the Rapid Process of Monetary Gains and Losses,” *Science*, Vol. 22, March 22, 2002, pp. 2279-2282.

⁷ Karen DeYoung, “Russia Warns U.S. to Stop Arming Ukraine,” *The Washington Post*, April 14, 2022, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/04/14/russia-warns-us-stop-arming-ukraine/>.

⁸ James Anderson, “China’s Arms Buildup Threatens the Nuclear Balance,” *The New York Times*, July 29, 2020, available at <https://nyti.ms/3f6A4NH>; and, Rachel Cohen, “USAF Rethinks Relationship Between Conventional, Nuclear Weapons,” *Air Force Magazine Online*, August 19, 2020, available at <https://www.airforcemag.com/usaf-rethinks-relationship-betweenconventional-nuclear-weapons/>.

⁹ Mark Schneider, “Does the United States Have Any Real Capability to Forward Deploy Nuclear Weapons Rapidly Outside of NATO?,” *RealClearDefense*, August 27, 2021, available at https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2021/08/27/does_the_united_states_have_any_real_capability_to_forward_deploy_nuclear_weapons_rapidly_outside_of_nato_europe_791788.html.



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¹⁰ Valerie Insinna, “Grady ‘aligned’ with Milley on embattled low-yield nuke program,” *BreakingDefense.com*, May 5, 2022, available at <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/05/grady-aligned-with-milley-on-embattled-low-yield-nuke-program/>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Quoted in Amy Hudson, “Richard Says Nuclear Deterrence Connected to All Other DOD Capabilities,” *Air Force Magazine*, May 7, 2021, available at <https://www.airforcemag.com/richard-says-nuclear-deterrence-connected-to-all-other-dod-capabilities/>.

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