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Rethinking Deterrence: How and Why¹

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It is a pleasure to return to Hudson Institute. In 1978, I met Herman Kahn, co-founder of Hudson Institute, at its much earlier location in Croton-on-Hudson, NY. I went to work for him a few months later. While working for Herman, he encouraged me to devote my studies to the subject of deterrence—I have done so for over four decades.

A New Deterrence Context: New Challenges

Many folks now ask me about the emerging “trilateral deterrence” threat environment. This refers to the simultaneous deterrence engagement of three great nuclear powers, the United States, Russia and China. I frequently hear that this trilateral context is different, so we must rethink U.S. deterrence policy.

But, *how* is it new, and *why* must we rethink deterrence policy? Those are the key questions now. My first comment in this regard is that *the basic nature of deterrence endures, and what is new* with trilateral deterrence is not primarily the obvious fact that there now are three great nuclear powers involved.



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The more significant new condition is that the leaderships of Russia and China have worldviews that conflict sharply with that of the United States and they appear to be forming a quasi-alliance against the United States to realize their common goal of overturning the classical liberal world order. In pursuit of this goal, both Russia and China show their willingness to exploit conventional and nuclear forces to pursue their expansionist goals and are challenging long-standing defensive U.S. deterrence redlines.

What we now confront is the threatened use of nuclear weapons for revanchist purposes. We are accustomed to thinking of deterrence as serving *defensive* purposes. But Russia's and China's coercive nuclear first-use threats are here and now in support of their common goal of overturning the existing world order. This is not the Cold War deterrence concept with which we are familiar. It is unprecedented and compels us to rethink our deterrence policies.

This new deterrence dynamic is a real challenge because we have generally convinced ourselves that only irrational leaderships could consider the first use of nuclear weapons for expansionist purposes. Very recently a senior NATO official expressed that belief to me with absolute confidence.

References now to Putin as being "unhinged" given his explicit nuclear threats follow the enduring U.S. tradition of labeling opponents who behave in shocking, disturbing ways as irrational. But such comments usually reflect only our lack of understanding of how differently opponents can define what is rational behavior—that they do not buy into our enlightened interpretation of rational.

There is great comfort in projecting onto opponents, including Putin, Western notions of what is rational: it means that Putin's current nuclear threats must be a bluff, because actual nuclear employment would be irrational. What a relief. Yet, Russia's and China's revanchist goals require violating U.S. redlines, and their nuclear first-use threats now demand that we rethink how best to deter in contemporary conditions.

The priority deterrence question that now follows from this discussion is new; I can put it plainly: How do we simultaneously deter two revanchist great powers that are driven by the common belief that their goals are of existential importance, and that limited nuclear threats and possibly employment are the way to defeat defensive U.S. deterrence policies?

That is an unprecedented question and our challenge. Deterrence remains the same in principle, but elements of our long-favored Cold War approach to deterrence must change. We do not know how deterrence will be tested in the future; we can only hedge as best we can against a wide range of plausible deterrence contingencies.



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That hedging becomes much more complicated and demanding in the new multilateral deterrence context because Russia and China appear to interpret “rational” in ways surprisingly different from our traditional expectations regarding nuclear deterrence – which will affect if and how deterrence can function.

Deterrence Literacy

A problem in this regard is the generally modest level of deterrence literacy in Western countries. With a few exceptions, the U.S. public debate on the subject is shallow at best – perhaps because there has been so little attention paid to great power deterrence for three decades. I simply stop reading those many commentaries on deterrence that start with the mistaken assertion that U.S. deterrence policy is the “mutually assured destruction” (MAD) doctrine of the 1960s.

As a society, we have great apparent trouble understanding the realities of our past and present approaches to deterrence – much less rethinking it in new conditions. We generally treat deterrence as if it’s akin to basic arithmetic – read a couple of books, attend a couple of classes, and you’ve mastered it. The extreme consequences of whether we can make deterrence work or not do not match the general lack of attention to it.

Those officials actually responsible for deterrence policy are expected somehow to be on-the-spot experts. It is not merely my concern that society does not seem to invest much into the subject. In 2017 – following increasingly egregious behavior by Russia and China – Gen. Kevin Chilton, a former Commander at Strategic Command, lamented the lack of attention to the subject: “Unfortunately, since the end of the Cold War...there has been a dearth of attention paid to the rationale for the nuclear deterrent. The underlying principles and rationale for the deterrent have not gone away, but we have stopped educating, thinking, and debating, with informed underpinnings, the necessity and role of the US nuclear deterrent in today’s world.... We have raised three generations of Air Force officers who may not have been exposed to the most fundamental and yet relevant arguments surrounding deterrence...”

Most recently, ADM Charles Richard observed that, “Even our operational deterrence expertise is just not what it was at the end of the Cold War. So we have to reinvigorate this intellectual effort. And we can start by rewriting deterrence theory.” He went on to note that Strategic Command is working on this “furiously.”

There is real hope for improvement. But the general public debate on the subject remains shockingly ill-informed – far less informed than it was in the mid-1970s. Much has been lost since then, and we need to catch up quickly.



Inconvenient Truths About Deterrence Prognostication

An inconvenient truth about deterrence is that there are inherent unknowns that render it a more or less uncertain business in most circumstances.

I recently wrote an article entitled, *Deterrence is Not Rocket Science: It is More Difficult*. That title may be surprising, but its validity should be self-evident. It is provided by Emanuel Derman, a physicist turned Wall Street quant, in his book on financial modeling: “In physics you’re playing against God, and He doesn’t change His laws very often. In finance [I add, as in deterrence] you’re playing against God’s creatures, agents who value assets based on their ephemeral opinions.”

The problem in predicting the functioning of deterrence is that there are few reliable laws. Leadership decision making can be driven by an extremely wide range of “ephemeral opinions” – some of which may be well-known to us, others may be somewhat obvious, and others may be completely obscure or seemingly irrational. And, we do not know the importance of what we do not know.

This was so in the Cold War’s bilateral deterrence context, *but the uncertainties expand in the emerging multilateral deterrence context*. With every new entry into a hostile deterrence context the uncertainties, imponderables and unknowns are multiplied. We are moving deeper into the world of speculation and conjecture, including uncertainty about what the ubiquitous word “stability” means and what in practice will help or hinder it. This problem was present to an extent during the bipolar Cold War; it is even more significant in the new deterrence context.

The Analytical Challenge Ahead

So, how do we need to rethink deterrence policy in the emerging multilateral deterrence context? The most basic task in this regard is to reduce uncertainties by understanding, to the extent feasible, those basic factors that can drive multiple opponents’ relevant decision making, i.e., their goals, motivations, attention, determination, risk tolerance, perceptions of necessity, opportunity, and their attachment to the stakes in contention, *inter alia*.

The need now is for understanding opponents’ different (and in some cases unique) decision-making drivers, and how they interact across an increasing number of leaderships. We are not deterring China and Russia sequentially or in isolation; each is watching every move. Events in one theater likely will affect the deterrence dynamics in other theaters. This need for understanding is not new, but the analytical challenge is now greater because with each new party involved, the number of factors to understand expands and anticipating deterrence outcomes becomes more complicated.



This approach to deterrence, now called tailoring, is the antithesis of our declared practice during much of the Cold War. We tended to focus on deterring a single opponent, the Soviet Union, and assumed that it shared our basic deterrence calculations, and that all other opponents were “lesser included cases.” These conveniences, valid or bogus at the time, made for easy, even simplistic, deterrence calculations and are now inadequate at best. Instead, the need now is for the hard work to understand the complexity of multilateral deterrence decision making and to hedge against the uncertainties involved in the application of deterrence in this new context.

Deterrence Policy and Practice: Hedging in the Emerging Multilateral Deterrence Context

Given this emerging deterrence context, it is important to emphasize the need now to hedge against: 1) coordinated Sino-Russian actions; 2) the increased uncertainty in deterrence requirements; and, 3) the increased uncertainties regarding the potential for surprising deterrence failure. I will elaborate on each in order.

First: Hedging Against Prospective Sino-Russian Coordination

The United States must consider the possibility that Russia and China will coordinate their actions to advance their respective goals in confrontations with the United States.

The danger of a coordinated Sino-Russian “entente” is real and growing and presents the possibility of Russia and China confronting the United States with two simultaneous and coordinated regional wars. This is a deterrence contingency that U.S. conventional and theater nuclear capabilities may be unprepared to meet given the great reduction in U.S. forward-deployed forces since the end of the Cold War and the apparent near elimination of U.S. forward-deployable theater nuclear weapons.

History has repeatedly demonstrated that the perceived weakness of status quo powers can be highly provocative to revisionist powers and lead to deterrence failure. A perceived lack of U.S. preparation for two simultaneous regional wars now could embolden both Moscow and Beijing to seek to achieve their goals via the use of force—undercutting U.S. extended deterrence goals.

The Two-War Standard Left Behind. For years, U.S. military planners designed a strategy that called on the United States to be prepared to fight two major regional contingencies (MRCs) simultaneously. This two-war standard became the benchmark against which the adequacy of U.S. forces was judged. Yet, by 2010, the United States had shifted from the two-MRC force-sizing construct to focus on counter-terrorism and irregular warfare.



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Restoring the two-war force-sizing standard now appears to be logical and prudent to bolster the deterrence of Sino-Russian aggression. Addressing this need would be prudent for extended deterrence purposes, but insufficient. Why so? Because the threat of nuclear use will hang over any U.S. conflict with Russia and China. The harsh deterrence reality is that both China and Russia have declared the realization of aggressive, expansionist goals as being of existential importance. Establishing the U.S. conventional capability to counter a two-front conventional war could compel Russia and China to accept the risk of engaging in nuclear escalation, if needed, to paralyze U.S. support for allies and thereby secure “existential” goals.

Consequently, U.S. conventional and nuclear capabilities together must provide Russia and China with seamless and overwhelming disincentives to their initiating attacks or engaging in nuclear escalation in the event of a conflict.

Sino-Russian Coordination: Potential Deterrence Challenges at the Strategic Force Level.

Working hard to ensure that U.S. strategic nuclear forces are *manifestly* survivable is a fundamental, on-going priority of U.S. deterrence policy. In the foreseeable future, Beijing’s and Moscow’s combined strategic nuclear and advanced conventional capabilities may expand to present a new challenge for the continuing survivability of U.S. strategic retaliatory forces. If the threat of such joint action seems to be far-fetched, recall that in 1969 the Soviet Union reportedly invited the United States to engage in a joint strike against China’s nuclear facilities.

Many commentators continue to assert that concern about a strike against U.S. strategic forces is a thing of the distant past. They have dismissed the threat of such an attack out of hand since the end of the Cold War. But, three developments suggest otherwise: 1) the potential for Sino-Russian coordination; 2) their expanding nuclear force numbers; and, 3) their extreme dedication to revanchist goals. These together may compel the subject again to be at the forefront of U.S. deterrence considerations in a decidedly more challenging threat context.

Deterrence Implications of the Potential for Sino-Russian Coordination: U.S. Deterrence Threat Options. A corresponding concern regarding strategic deterrence involves the threat options that the United States can credibly brandish simultaneously against Russia and China – each of which has an expansive number of targets the United States may need to hold at risk for deterrence purposes.

The question is whether that portion of the U.S. force posture that could survive a combined Sino-Russian strategic attack would have sufficient capacity and flexibility to support credible U.S. deterrence threat options against both countries simultaneously or sequentially.

For example, if a sizable number of the U.S. warheads on ballistic missile carrying submarines were to survive a Sino-Russian strategic attack, would that level of U.S. retaliatory potential



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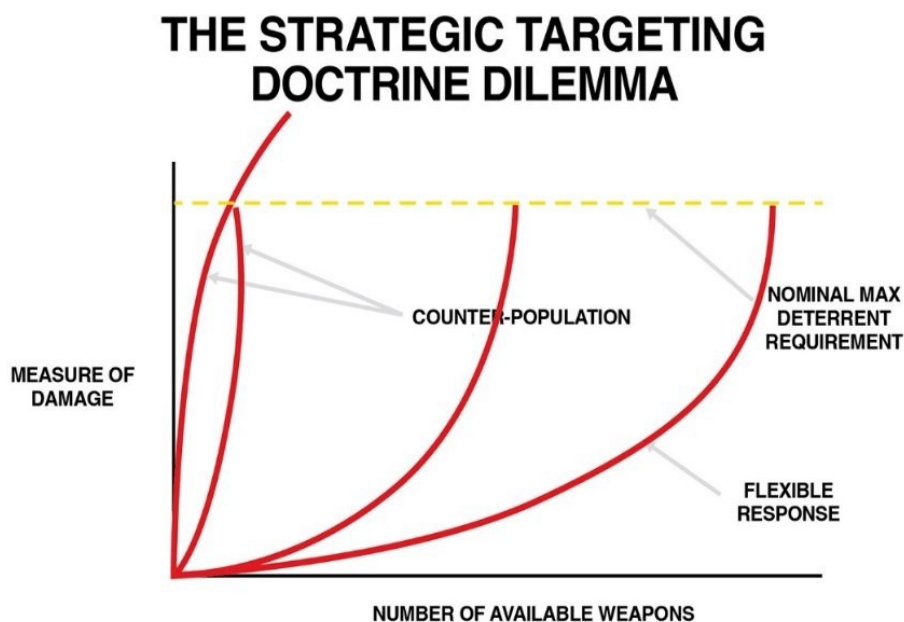
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provide a credible deterrent to a Sino-Russian attack in the first place, or to follow-on Sino-Russian strikes if deterrence fails to prevent an initial Sino-Russian first strike?

If U.S. retaliatory capabilities were to be reduced substantially by a Sino-Russian counterforce attack, the U.S. strategic deterrent could be seen as limited to an incredible and morally repugnant “counter-city” deterrent option. The critical question is whether that type of deterrent threat is an acceptable measure of retaliatory capabilities for U.S. deterrence purposes. A “counter-city” approach to deterrence has rightly been rejected by all U.S. administrations for decades on a fully bipartisan basis because it may be incredible as a deterrent and for its moral repugnance.

For decades Washington has instead pursued a “flexible response” deterrence policy intended to hold at risk a range of opponents’ critical assets while avoiding societal damage to the greatest extent practicable. For this approach to deterrence, the U.S. force posture must include diverse options and the targets to be held at risk reportedly may need to include opponents’ military capabilities, command and control capabilities, and civilian leadership.

But such a deterrence strategy depends on the combined size and survivability of the U.S. force posture. The graphic below is by the former Commander of Strategic Command Commander, ADM Richard Mies. It offers a notional illustration of this challenge:





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This graphic indicates that as the number of available retaliatory weapons declines, the United States moves further away from having the capacity needed to support a “Flexible Response” approach to deterrence and moves towards a “Counter-Population” deterrent. The bottom line here is that the United States must now hedge against being in a position of having such limited retaliatory threat options that they are incredible for deterrence, morally intolerable and legally problematic.

Sino-Russian Coordination: Potential Deterrence Challenges at the Theater Nuclear Level. Given the potential for Sino-Russian coordination, the United States must also now hedge against the threat of opponents’ regional nuclear first use in *two* theaters *simultaneously*. This is a novel challenge that the United States most likely must meet if U.S. extended deterrence commitments are to be credible.

Is the United States currently prepared to deter Sino-Russian nuclear threats in Europe and Asia, without risking escalation to a potentially suicidal strategic nuclear level? The significant imbalance in theater nuclear capabilities suggests otherwise. Should Moscow and Beijing believe that the United States lacks either the will or the capability to respond *proportionally* to their regional first use of nuclear weapons, extended deterrence will likely be undermined, and the risks of regional aggression will grow.

To hedge against this unprecedented deterrence challenge, a reconsideration of the size, characteristics, and deployment of U.S. theater nuclear forces is warranted. The prospective SLCM-N is an obvious step in that direction, but it may not survive the U.S. political process based on the argument that such forces reflect a rejection of deterrence in favor of “war-fighting.” This argument has been resurrected from the 1980s and fails Deterrence 101. It misses the potentially essential deterrence requirement for such U.S. forces in the emerging threat environment.

Second: Hedging Against Expanded Uncertainties Regarding Deterrence Requirements

Defining the adequacy standard for deterrence means answering the question “how much is enough?”. Answering that question has always been more art than science. But, identifying “how much is enough?” is even more problematic in the emerging multilateral deterrence context. Deterrence requirements will be different across time and place. The multiplication of uncertainties related to deterrence increases the difficulty of identifying an informed adequacy measure for deterrence.

There can now be no single measure that defines the adequacy of the U.S. strategic force posture, as was declared U.S. practice for more than a decade during the Cold War. Needed now are multiple, simultaneous measures of adequacy that take into account the uncertainties



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that follow from the variation in contexts and opponents' "ephemeral opinions." Further, once those measures are identified, they will likely shift over time, perhaps rapidly. There are no enduring conclusions in this regard.

As a result, the need to hedge against setting deterrence adequacy standards *too narrowly* has become acute. The narrower the measure of deterrence adequacy, the greater the presumption that opponents' decision making is reliably predictable and that the future will unfold as expected – an extremely optimistic presumption.

It is important to recall that the parameters of the current U.S. nuclear rebuilding program and New START ceilings were largely set over a decade ago – at a time of great optimism regarding U.S. relations with Russia and China. The need now to hedge against intense Russian and Chinese hostility and *expanded deterrence uncertainties* suggests the corresponding need to rethink whether the measures of deterrence adequacy from over a decade ago remain suitable for defining "how much is enough?". That is the critical question. The underlying conditions have since shifted dramatically, so likely must our measures of adequacy.

This is not a plea for more nuclear weapons, per se. I do not know where this rethinking ultimately will lead. But I do know that this is the question in the emerging threat environment. Answering it must precede many other moves, including the possible resumption of arms control negotiations.

Third: Hedging Against the Possibility of Deterrence Failure

Finally, the expansion of uncertainties regarding the functioning of deterrence applies to both *how* and *whether* deterrence will work as we hope. Pointing to the potential for deterrence failure may sound extraordinary only because we have become so accustomed to believing nuclear deterrence works predictably, reliably, even easily.

We can, with serious effort, greatly reduce the uncertainties regarding deterrence, but they cannot be eliminated, and those factors that have led to deterrence failure over the course of centuries are likely to be more pronounced in the emerging deterrence context. As confidence in the reliable, predictable functioning of deterrence wanes in the multilateral context, the capability to reduce damage in the event of deterrence failure becomes increasingly important.

To the extent that the United States does not hedge against the possibility of deterrence failure, it is unprepared for the realities of the multilateral deterrence context. This is why there is a new need to emphasize hedging against the possibility of failure in our deterrence calculations. The implications of this harsh reality are profound. Most obvious perhaps is the potential value of even limited active and passive strategic defenses to help reduce the prospective



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destruction from limited nuclear attacks, and to help mitigate the debilitating effects of Russian, Chinese, and North Korean coercive threats to launch such attacks.

This is a significant departure from the still-prevalent policy notion that unmitigated U.S. societal vulnerability to Russia and China is a useful and necessary component of strategic stability, and that defenses can provide no meaningful protection against attack.

Conclusion

The basic principles of deterrence are enduring and unchanged, but the application of deterrence must adjust to different opponents and contexts.

The emergence of a multilateral deterrence context in which two great nuclear powers share intense hostility toward the United States and existential, revanchist goals presents some unprecedented challenges for the United States. This context expands the uncertainties, imponderables and unknowns regarding the functioning of deterrence—which remains essential for U.S. and allied security, while also being more uncertain. When deterrence is essential but also uncertain, we are in a rough place; we must work to hedge against those uncertainties as best we can.

Given the considerable variation in opponents' worldviews and how they define reasonable behavior, it is increasingly necessary to be as informed as possible about the decision-making drivers of multiple opponents in diverse circumstances, and to adjust U.S. deterrence strategies accordingly.

Identifying the additional many ways in which the multilateral deterrence context is different from the past and what that means for U.S. deterrence policy is likely to be a generational process. A significant element of this serious work is to understand opponents, and to hedge against the challenges presented by the evolving context. Those challenges now include hedging against: 1) the potential for Sino-Russian coordination in hostilities against the United States at the regional and strategic levels; 2) the expanded uncertainties regarding the calculation of "how much is enough?" for U.S. forces to support multiple, tailored U.S. deterrence strategies; and, 3) the expanded uncertainties about the reliability of deterrence, i.e., uncertainties regarding *if* deterrence will "work."

The "greatest generation" of deterrence scholars, particularly including Herman Kahn and Colin Gray, did the heavy lifting for their time and helped to preserve superpower peace through the Cold War. It is time for a new generation to get back to this serious work.



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¹ These prepared remarks are drawn from a recent *Occasional Paper*, co-authored with David Trachtenberg entitled, *Deterrence in the Emerging Threat Environment: What Is Different and Why it Matters*, available at <https://nipp.org/papers/deterrence-in-the-emerging-threat-environment-what-is-different-and-why-it-matters/>.

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