



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 536

October 19, 2022

---

### **Deterrence Via Mutual Vulnerability? Why Not Now**

Dr. Keith B. Payne

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

#### **Introduction**

During the 1960s, American academics, officials, and policy commentators developed the general outlines of a particular approach to nuclear deterrence that came to be known commonly as Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). While often discussed in esoteric jargon, the basic ideas behind this MAD approach to deterrence are strikingly simple and were keyed to the particular conditions of the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> U.S. policy deemed American and Soviet cities to be mutually and unalterably vulnerable to long-range (strategic) nuclear capabilities. This condition of mutual vulnerability was thought to be “stable” because its advocates presumed that, with both sides’ cities vulnerable, the United States and the Soviet Union had comparable, overwhelming disincentives against nuclear war—regardless of which side might initiate an attack. This condition of mutual societal vulnerability was famously likened to “two scorpions in a bottle.” Neither side, it was said, could provoke the other to serious conflict without suffering immeasurably itself. Mutual vulnerability thus supposedly created a reliably “stable” deterrence relationship.



## **Mutual Vulnerability As Policy**

This condition of mutual societal vulnerability came to be seen as synonymous with deterrence stability and essentially was adopted as a basis for U.S. policy. Counterintuitively, U.S. officials began to describe the vulnerability of U.S. cities to nuclear attack not just as inevitable, but as useful for deterrence stability – a condition expected to be locked into place intentionally via the 1972 U.S.-Soviet Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. The Treaty essentially ensured mutual vulnerability by prohibiting the development and deployment of significant capabilities to defend against strategic missile attack; that was its goal. As a result of this mutual vulnerability policy orientation and the ABM Treaty, the United States cancelled its fledgling Safeguard strategic missile defense system then in deployment.

For decades, academics, government officials, and policy commentators contended that, given the impossibility of defending cities comprehensively against nuclear attack, a condition of mutual vulnerability was the inevitable reality, not a policy choice. Thus, this condition was deemed the only plausible option for stable deterrence. The great expected benefit of mutual vulnerability was that it virtually ensured the absence of major war in U.S.-Soviet relations with the relatively modest level of nuclear armament needed to threaten cities. Deterrence stability via mutual vulnerability was widely considered to be reliable and “easy.”<sup>2</sup>

Mutual vulnerability supposedly not only precluded nuclear war between the superpowers, it essentially precluded any large-scale provocation. Only an irrational opponent, it was loudly and repeatedly proclaimed, could consider the use of nuclear weapons in the context of mutual vulnerability to nuclear attack.

Throughout much of the Cold War, confidence in this mutual vulnerability deterrence narrative was high among most academics and commentators. For example, “The probability of major war among states having nuclear weapons approaches zero.”<sup>3</sup> And, “Our conclusion, in its narrowest terms, must be that the deliberate resort to war by a nuclear power against a power capable of effective retaliation is permanently ruled out...the deliberate resort to major nonnuclear warfare between such powers is also ruled out. And the resort to even such limited warfare as border skirmishes between them is notably inhibited by the danger that it would escalate out of control, ending in nuclear war.”<sup>4</sup>

The mutual vulnerability deterrence narrative had an enormous effect on U.S. policy. However, the United States began to step away from it in the latter part of the Cold War by rejecting intentional threats to Soviet cities as the basis for U.S. deterrence policy. And, in a further half-step away, Washington withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2002 in order to deploy rudimentary missile defense capabilities against “rogue states” such as North Korea. However, the continuing dominance of the mutual vulnerability narrative is apparent in the



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 536 | October 19, 2022

---

contemporary U.S. policy of consciously accepting American societal vulnerability to Russian nuclear attack for deterrence “stability” purposes.

### **Mutual Vulnerability and China**

There now is a considerable push by some academics and commentators to extend the same mutual vulnerability deterrence policy position to U.S. relations with China, including claiming the purported stability benefits of U.S. societal vulnerability to Chinese nuclear attack: “The constructs of strategic stability and mutual vulnerability can help significantly if both governments embrace them and interpret them similarly...to demonstrate goodwill, the United States should acknowledge mutual vulnerability as a fact and necessary policy.”<sup>5</sup>

This is the same familiar line of deterrence thinking, now applied to China, that dominated U.S. policy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and continues to be applied to Russia: mutual societal vulnerability to nuclear attack is inevitable and the “necessary” basis for “stable” deterrence – presuming the overriding caution of all rational leaders in a condition of mutual vulnerability. Advocates of this aged deterrence narrative now present it as a reasonable basis for U.S.-Chinese relations.<sup>6</sup> They also use it, as they did during the Cold War, to argue against U.S. initiatives to protect American society with strategic missile defense.

In short, in the simplistic terms of the U.S. public debate about deterrence: American societal vulnerability vis-à-vis China is stabilizing and good; defensive protection for society is impossible, destabilizing, and bad.

### **Why Not a Mutual Vulnerability Policy Now**

This mutual vulnerability approach to deterrence was problematic during the Cold War; it essentially abandoned preparation for societal protection in the event deterrence failed. The conditions of the emerging threat environment, particularly including China’s rapidly expanding nuclear capabilities, render it increasingly imprudent and dangerous. How so?

Russia and China now employ nuclear first-use threats in their respective efforts to achieve their revanchist and expansionist regional goals—goals they define as of existential importance. Again, esoteric jargon often disguises the relatively simple outline of their strategies, which is as follows: If the United States intervenes against Russian or Chinese determined efforts to advance their expansionist goals, they will threaten to escalate to limited nuclear war, thus expecting the United States will back down for fear of the potential for continued nuclear escalation that would destroy American forces and, potentially, cities.

The fundamental presumptions of this apparent coercive strategy are that: 1) a limited nuclear escalation threat (or strike if necessary) against the United States will serve to paralyze U.S.



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 536 | October 19, 2022

---

decision making rather than invite a large-scale U.S. nuclear reply because the U.S. would have far more to lose if nuclear escalation were to continue; and, 2) Russia and China are willing to risk limited nuclear escalation threats and employment to advance their existential, expansionist goals, while the United States ultimately will not risk putting American cities at risk of nuclear attack to oppose Russian or Chinese regional expansionism.<sup>7</sup>

Such coercive limited nuclear threats and strategies were not part of the Cold War deterrence dynamic, but are now part of Moscow's and Beijing's expansionist playbook – most obvious in Russia's war on Ukraine, where Russian nuclear threats seem to be having at least some of the intended effect of limiting Western support for Ukraine.<sup>8</sup> This strategy also is apparent in China's nuclear threats to the United States, Australia, and Japan regarding their prospective responses to a Chinese attack on Taiwan.<sup>9</sup> Both Russia and China appear to believe that limited nuclear first-use threats are a useful avenue for defeating U.S. extended deterrence strategies. In short, when regional stakes are at risk, Washington is expected to fear Russian and Chinese limited nuclear threats more than Moscow and Beijing fear making and possibly executing those threats.<sup>10</sup>

### **Defeating Russian and Chinese Strategy**

As described above, unmitigated U.S. vulnerability to nuclear attack continues to be touted by some as the key to deterrence stability, and now is advertised as the preferred basis for deterrence relations with China. Yet, continuing American societal vulnerability to Russian and Chinese nuclear attack is the key condition that underlies their coercive strategies to use limited nuclear escalation threats to advance their respective expansionist goals.

Given intentional, unmitigated U.S. societal vulnerability to Russian and Chinese nuclear attack, Moscow and Beijing appear now to calculate that their respective threats to escalate to limited nuclear war will be sufficient to paralyze direct U.S. opposition to their regional expansionism, *but not so extreme as to invite an unlimited U.S. nuclear response*. Russia and China appear to have this common strategy to defeat U.S. strategic deterrence—based on the expectation that their limited nuclear escalation threats will enable their regional expansionism given America's vulnerability to their nuclear escalation.

All U.S. allies and partners within the expansionist visions of Moscow and Beijing are at risk of Russian and Chinese confidence that they have found this coercive key to defeating U.S. extended deterrence commitments to allies. It is predicated on the U.S. vulnerability to nuclear attack that is now being presented as a reasonable basis for U.S. strategic relations with China.

Following the long-familiar mutual vulnerability policy narrative, as now applied to both Russia and China, its advocates contend that because mutual vulnerability is an unalterable



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 536 | October 19, 2022

---

reality there is no point in pursuing a defensive-oriented alternative to mutual vulnerability.<sup>11</sup> The fallacies of this position now should be obvious, but apparently are not.

First, mutual vulnerability is not, and has never been, an either/or proposition. There are differing levels of vulnerability, and those differences are key to this discussion. The importance of the possible range of levels of vulnerability has been obvious in U.S. policy for six decades.

For example, the mutual vulnerability policy narrative itself presumes that U.S. strategic forces are largely protected against attack; they must be sufficiently defended and survivable to pose a retaliatory deterrent threat, i.e., they must be able to withstand a nuclear attack. This is a limited but necessary measure of U.S. defense that must be in place for strategic deterrence, and the United States historically has pursued that protection—most notably by placing U.S. ICBMs in hardened silos, bombers on an alert status, and U.S. ballistic missile carrying submarines under the sea, and by protecting their associated command and control systems.

As this example shows, vulnerability levels can differ depending on the assets to be protected. Vulnerability also can differ depending on the size and scope of the attack against which defenses are intended to function. It may not now be feasible to defend U.S. cities comprehensively against a large-scale nuclear attack designed to destroy them. But that does not mean that all levels of useful homeland defense are infeasible.<sup>12</sup>

In the contemporary threat context, it is critical to recognize that defeating Russian and Chinese coercive, limited nuclear escalation strategies does not necessarily require the full protection of American society against a large-scale nuclear attack. Rather, the measure of protection needed to defeat Russian and Chinese coercive, limited escalation strategies may be much more modest because the defensive goal in this regard is limited. It is to preclude Moscow and Beijing from any confidence that their limited nuclear threats against the United States will have the desired coercive effect on U.S. decision making—compelling the United States to abandon long-standing security commitments to allies and partners. Providing protection against limited nuclear missile attack has long been acknowledged as feasible, including by critics of missile defense,<sup>13</sup> and the potential for “exotic” laser technology to defend against a variety of missile threats may finally be promising even greater effectiveness at lower cost.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, defenses adequate to protect against limited coercive threats would not preclude a possible Russian or Chinese large-scale strike against the U.S. homeland. But such a strike would likely ensure a devastating U.S. strategic nuclear response and understandably appears not to be part of Moscow’s or Beijing’s coercive playbook to support their respective expansionist, regional goals. Neither appears to seek martyrdom as have some past leaders.



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 536 | October 19, 2022

---

In short, in the context of mutual strategic deterrence continuing to prevent opponents' large-scale nuclear strikes for their fear of large-scale nuclear retaliation, U.S. defenses intended to protect against limited escalation threats may be a key to defeating Russian and Chinese coercive nuclear escalation strategies.

In contrast to the long-familiar assertions that mutual vulnerability is a reality, not a policy, and that no meaningful measure of homeland defense is possible, U.S. homeland defenses may now provide two extremely useful functions: 1) help defeat great power opponents' coercive strategies of limited nuclear escalation; and, 2) provide protection for U.S. society against limited, accidental, or unauthorized nuclear attacks.

Second, another long-familiar assertion of those now advocating the extension of a mutual vulnerability policy to China is that U.S. defensive efforts would likely only compel China to expand its nuclear arsenal to overcome U.S. defenses, and thereby nullify any possible value of U.S. defensive efforts. This argument, based on the "action-reaction" explanation of arms racing, again harkens back to the 1960s.<sup>15</sup>

Russia and China could indeed respond to U.S. defensive efforts by adding to their arsenals so as to overwhelm U.S. defenses. But that possibility is not germane to the potential value of defending the U.S. homeland against limited Russian and Chinese nuclear escalation threats. The goal of U.S. defenses in this case is not to protect U.S. society comprehensively against an unlimited nuclear attack. That will remain the job of strategic deterrence until defensive technologies are available to enable that defensive goal. The defensive goal discussed here is to help deny Moscow and Beijing confidence in the coercive effects of their limited nuclear escalation threats—to degrade those threats and thereby help to defeat their expansionist strategy. This goal does not necessitate the comprehensive protection of U.S. society against unlimited nuclear attacks. Were Moscow and Beijing to respond by expanding their nuclear arsenals to defeat those defenses, doing so would not restore the credibility of their limited nuclear escalation strategies; it simply would add to the prospective size of the large-scale attack necessary to overcome U.S. defenses—a Russian and Chinese attack option that U.S. strategic deterrent forces should continue to deny, as is presumed in a mutual vulnerability policy.

In short, the familiar "action-reaction" critique of U.S. homeland defense is well-worn, but that critique has no bearing on the potential value of defending the homeland against limited escalation threats to defeat the Russian and Chinese expansionist strategy.

## Conclusion

The aged mutual vulnerability policy narrative is a legacy of the Cold War. The most fundamental propositions of this policy narrative remain evident in contemporary U.S. policy



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 536 | October 19, 2022

---

vis-à-vis Russia, i.e., mutual vulnerability is treated as an either/or proposition and is considered the basis for nuclear deterrence stability with Russia. Some commentators now advocate the extension of this mutual vulnerability policy to U.S. relations with China, based on precisely the same policy narrative inherited from the Cold War.

Yet, vulnerability is not an either/or proposition, and contemporary threat conditions now argue strongly for U.S. defensive measures sufficient to mitigate homeland vulnerability against the limited, coercive nuclear threats that appear to be key to Russian and Chinese coercive strategies for regional expansion. Such U.S. defensive measures are not a silver bullet to restore credible extended deterrence for allies and partners, but they may be critical.

For decades, mutual vulnerability advocates have argued against U.S. homeland defenses by claiming that there is no meaningful alternative to societal vulnerability, and that the value of any U.S. defensive efforts will be negated as Russia, and now China, simply add to their arsenals to overwhelm U.S. defenses. Yet, given the different prospective levels of vulnerability, and the defensive goal suggested here, those aged arguments have no logical traction in this discussion. In the emerging threat environment, the measure of defense needed to protect against limited nuclear escalation threats may help preserve international stability and peace by denying Russia and China their preferred strategy for expansion, while also providing a level of protection against rogue state missile threats and the prospect of accidental or unauthorized launches. Those are not small advantages.

<sup>1</sup> The conceptual parameters and policy application of MAD are elaborated in detail in Keith B. Payne, *The Great American Gamble: Deterrence Theory and Practice* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2008), chapters 2-5.

<sup>2</sup> "The healthy fear of devastation...makes deterrence relatively easy." Robert Jervis, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 94, No. 4 (Winter 1979-1980), pp. 617-618.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, "Nuclear Myths and Political Realities," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 84, No. 3 (September 1990), p. 740.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Halle, "Does War Have a Future?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (October 1973), p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> George Perkovich, *Engaging China on Strategic Stability and Mutual Vulnerability, The U.S. and Chinese governments, for the foreseeable future, will have the resources to keep each other's society vulnerable to nuclear mass destruction*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 12, 2022, available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/10/12/engaging-china-on-strategic-stability-and-mutual-vulnerability-pub-88142>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the statements by the former Russian President and current Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, in Daniel Stewart, "Medvedev says 'NATO would not intervene directly' if Russia used nuclear weapons against Ukraine," *MSN News*, September 27, 2022, available at <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/medvedev-says-%C2%ABnato-would-not-intervene-directly%C2%BB-if-russia-used-nuclear-weapons-against-ukraine/ar-AA12hZnv?li=BBnb7Kz>.



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 536 | October 19, 2022

---

<sup>8</sup> See Lt. Gen. Henry Obering III (ret.) and Robert Joseph, “Putin’s nuclear threats worked against Biden – we must act before China gets the same idea,” *New York Post Online*, June 21, 2022, available at <https://nypost.com/2022/06/21/putins-nuclear-threats-worked-against-biden-us-must-act-against-china/>; see also, Joseph Bosco, “China and Russia escalate to intimidate; America de-escalates to accommodate,” *The Hill Online*, August 23, 2022, available at <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3611282-china-and-russia-escalate-to-intimidate-america-de-escalates-to-accommodate/>.

<sup>9</sup> See the discussion in Keith B. Payne, David Trachtenberg, Matthew Costlow, and Christopher Ford, *Special Issue: Deterring China in the Taiwan Strait*, *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2022, pp. 22-24.

<sup>10</sup> As Colin Gray often observed, all leaders may fear nuclear war, but not all leaders fear nuclear war equally. This observation captures the implicit presumption underlying Russian and Chinese strategies of nuclear coercion.

<sup>11</sup> Perkovich, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> For a recent helpful discussion of the potential value of homeland defense see, Matthew R. Costlow, *Vulnerability is No Virtue and Defense is No Vice: The Strategic Benefits of Expanded U.S. Homeland Missile Defense*, *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 2, No. 9 (September 2022).

<sup>13</sup> See for example, *Remarks by Secretary of Defense William Perry at the Regional Commerce and Growth Association of St. Louis, Missouri*, September 28, 1995, Federal News Service, 11-12; and, Arms Control Association, *Background Paper, New Star Wars Plan: Unnecessary Destruction of the ABM Treaty*, February 1991, p. 1. See also the statement by William Graham, Science Advisor to Presidents Reagan and Bush in, “Former Science Advisor Sees Bright Future for Missile Defense,” *Defense Daily* (Special Supplement), October 31, 1991, p. S-1.

<sup>14</sup> See for example, Ilan Berman, “The Logic of Israel’s Laser Wall,” National Institute, *Information Series*, No. 526 (June 23, 2022). See also, Loren Thompson, Lockheed Martin Laser Breakthroughs Could Signal A Turning Point For Missile Defense,” *Forbes*, October 13, 2022, available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lorenthompson/2022/10/13/lockheed-martin-laser-breakthroughs-could-signal-a-turning-point-for-missile-defense/?sh=e7d07332cf0b>.

<sup>15</sup> George Rathjens, “The Dynamics of the Arms Race,” *Scientific American* (April 1969). Reprinted in, *Arms Control: Readings From Scientific American* (San Francisco, CA: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1973), pp. 177-187. Most recently see, Perkovich, *op. cit.*

The National Institute for Public Policy’s *Information Series* is a periodic publication focusing on contemporary strategic issues affecting U.S. foreign and defense policy. It is a forum for promoting critical thinking on the evolving international security environment and how the dynamic geostrategic landscape affects U.S. national security. Contributors are recognized experts in the field of national security. National Institute for Public Policy would like to thank the Sarah Scaife Foundation for the generous support that makes the *Information Series* possible.

The views in this *Information Series* are those of the author(s) and should not be construed as official U.S. Government policy, the official policy of the National Institute for Public Policy or any of its sponsors. For additional information about this publication or other publications by the National Institute Press, contact: Editor, National Institute Press, 9302 Lee Highway, Suite 750 | Fairfax, VA 22031 | (703) 293- 9181 | [www.nipp.org](http://www.nipp.org). For access to previous issues of the National Institute Press Information Series, please visit <http://www.nipp.org/national-institute/press/informationseries/>.

© National Institute Press, 2022