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Allied Assurance, Extended Deterrence, and Adjusting for the Multipolar Environment: The Way Forward¹

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The United States is facing new challenges in trying to assure allies and deter revisionist adversaries, most notably Russia, China, and North Korea. These revisionist powers are expanding their nuclear arsenals and are threatening nuclear weapons use for coercive purposes to advance their goals, particularly in a regional context.² Admiral Charles Richard, Commander of United States Strategic Command recently pointed out that “We have to account for three-party [threats]... That is unprecedented in this nation’s history. We have never faced two peer nuclear-capable opponents at the same time, who have to be deterred differently.”³ These new realities are shaping extended deterrence and assurance requirements and warrant a departure from the U.S. post-Cold War optimism about decreasing the role of nuclear weapons in international security.

U.S. Security Assurances Today: Tough Neighborhoods

Emerging regional threat developments with global implications place the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence and assurance commitments at risk, particularly given the fact that the United States adapted its force posture to reflect an anticipated, long-term, benign strategic environment starting in the 1990s. The United States has never planned for the prospect of having to deter two highly motivated and revisionist nuclear peers. During the Cold War, U.S. officials assumed that if the United States successfully deterred the Soviet Union, other lesser nuclear-armed actors would be deterred by extension. The situation today is vastly different



and a multipolar nuclear threat context creates new extended deterrence and assurance requirements, particularly given the prospect of coordination between China and Russia.⁴

The 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review (NPR)* discussed the goal of assuring allies and partners and the value of nuclear forces for extended deterrence.⁵ It stated that “Assurance is a common goal and advances our common security interests”⁶ and that it includes “sustained allied dialogues to understand each other’s threat perceptions and to arrive at a shared understanding of how best to demonstrate our collective capabilities and resolve.”⁷ The 2018 *NPR* also noted “an increased potential for regional conflicts involving nuclear-armed adversaries.”⁸ The Biden Administration’s 2022 *NPR* also emphasizes the importance of assuring allies and partners.⁹ International security developments appear to be increasing demands for U.S. assurance guarantees, including those dependent upon the U.S. “nuclear umbrella.” For example, Polish President Andrzej Duda recently stated that “The problem above all is that we don’t have nuclear weapons” and that “There is always the opportunity to participate in nuclear sharing. We have spoken to US leaders about whether the US is considering such a possibility. The topic is open.”¹⁰ The White House subsequently denied having talks with Warsaw about Poland hosting nuclear weapons.¹¹ In 2017, Shigeru Ishiba, former Japanese defense minister, said that “Japan should have the technology to build a nuclear weapon if it wants to do so.”¹² As many as 71 percent of South Koreans support a “domestic nuclear weapons program.”¹³ Song Min-soon, South Korea’s former foreign minister, argued that “It’s necessary for South Korea to move on to a self-reliant alliance from a dependent alliance,” and that “a defensive nuclear capacity, with a missile range limited to the Korean Peninsula” was “justified.”¹⁴

Practical Steps to Assure Allies

The United States would do well to remember that deterrence credibility depends on how opponents perceive the U.S. will to act, and, “Usually the most convincing way to look willing is to be willing.”¹⁵ Currently, the United States faces several emerging capability gaps that may make it look less willing than it otherwise should be for deterrence and assurance purposes; chief among them are insufficient conventional forces able to sustain two simultaneous engagements in geographically separate regions,¹⁶ insufficient missile defense capabilities, and large asymmetries in short- and intermediate-range nuclear forces. The following recommendations can help the United States chart a path to success in an increasingly volatile international security environment where assuring allies and extending deterrence appear more challenging.

Expand Nuclear Policy Consultations. In order to understand U.S. allies’ assurance needs in as much detail as possible, the United States ought to expand ongoing deterrence and assurance dialogues. These dialogues would serve several purposes: one, they would keep the United States apprised of its allies’ needs and perceptions, and help develop an understanding of their views of assurance requirements. Two, they would help to develop a cadre of foreign



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professionals that would be well-versed in nuclear deterrence issues and the nuances of nuclear weapons policies. These professionals would then be better able to communicate issues within their respective governments and publics, allowing the governments more effectively to communicate with their electorates in ways that would increase citizen awareness of nuclear deterrence issues and help counter malicious foreign interference and manipulation regarding nuclear policy topics. The Czech Republic's debate about a U.S. radar deployment in the 2006-2009 timeframe illustrates some of the difficulties of communicating complex national security issues to publics in an ad hoc manner.¹⁷ Three, through dialogue, allies would contribute to developing joint and hopefully better informed "strategic profiles" of adversaries.

Continue Nuclear Weapons Modernization. Even though few allied countries have a detailed understanding of U.S. nuclear weapons programs or the infrastructure that supports them, many consider ongoing U.S. nuclear weapons modernization important for both extended deterrence and allied assurance. They worry about inconsistency in the signals that the United States sends by expressing the rationale for weapon programs, only to cancel them when the next presidential administration is elected.

Continue to Develop Missile Defense Capabilities. The United States ought to continue to develop its missile defense capabilities. While missile defenses will not supplant nuclear deterrence and assurance anytime soon, they are nevertheless an important component of allied assurance. This applies both to homeland and regional missile defense systems.

Do Not Change U.S. Declaratory Policy. Changing U.S. nuclear declaratory policy to reflect "sole purpose" or "no first use," especially amid Russia's brutal war in Ukraine, would make the United States risk being seen as irresolute by adversaries and alienate allies. Adversaries could interpret the change as proof the United States was deterred by their actions, while allies could interpret this as the United States not being willing to accept the risk of its commitments to them, undermining U.S. extended deterrence and assurance goals (and potentially U.S. nonproliferation goals). Maintaining the status quo (i.e., a measure of ambiguity regarding the timing and scope of U.S. nuclear use) in U.S. declaratory policy helps in this regard. The Biden Administration's NPR says that, for the time being, it will not adopt a "no first use" or "sole purpose" declaratory policy.¹⁸

Maintain Sufficient Conventional Capabilities and a Robust Production Base. The U.S. Department of Defense has felt the pressure of decreasing resources for recapitalization and modernization. Maintaining sufficient forces that can be deployed to Europe without compromising the U.S. posture in Asia (and vice-versa) will continue to be important for assurance and extended deterrence. The United States should have the capacity to forward deploy additional forces in both theaters quickly and simultaneously if the security situation deteriorates. The war in Ukraine highlights the difficulties of supplying a partner nation in the middle of a conflict and



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the importance of prepositioning systems to the theater beforehand. It also underscores the need for maintaining a healthy and responsive defense industrial base.

Do Not Forget that Allies Are Assured by a Range of Activities. Extended deterrence and assurance guarantees are not generated by just military capabilities but encompass a range of actions from nominating ambassadors in a timely manner, to high-level visits, to joint military exercises, professional exchanges, and public messaging coordination. The United States ought to take advantage of all the tools at its disposal to maximize synergies inherent in coordinating supportive activities well.

Nurture the Development of Nuclear Policy Expertise Among Allies. The United States must nurture and develop nuclear policy expertise among its allies. Continued bilateral and multilateral discussions and strategic dialogues are one way of doing so. Facilitating and supporting expert visits to nuclear sites and bases that host nuclear weapon systems is another way of developing policy expertise. This requires allies willing to invest resources and manpower in the endeavor; the United States cannot accomplish this task on its own.

Revitalize the U.S. Nuclear Warhead Production Complex. The United States must have a flexible and resilient nuclear warhead infrastructure. All administrations since the end of the Cold War have supported this (largely unfulfilled) objective. With China rapidly increasing the size of its strategic nuclear arsenal and Russia developing a suite of systems unregulated by any arms control treaties, this requirement is becoming more pressing. While few experts in allied states pay attention to the status of the U.S. nuclear infrastructure, it is inseparable from judging the credibility of extended deterrence and assurance guarantees.¹⁹ A warhead issue the United States cannot address in a timely manner could undermine allied belief in the U.S. ability to respond to negative trends in the security environment quickly and thereby degrade the credibility of U.S. commitments to allied security.

Abrogate the NATO-Russia Founding Act. Russia's aggression in Ukraine and coercive nuclear threats to NATO members are inconsistent with the Act, which calls for "refraining from the threat or use of force against each other as well as against any other state, its sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence in any manner inconsistent with the United Nations Charter and with the Declaration of Principles Guiding Relations Between Participating States contained in the Helsinki Final Act."²⁰ The United States empirically knows the valuable, stabilizing, and reassuring effects its permanent military presence has on allies. It also can be cheaper than a rotational presence. Yet, the Act currently precludes it, even as Russia aggressively undermines the stability of the European security order. In light of Russia's actions, the United States and NATO should not be bound by an agreement that the other side ignores.



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Develop U.S. Regional Expertise and Understanding of Adversaries and Allies. The United States must continue to develop regional expertise to foster an understanding of domestic politics in allied countries, an endeavor that took somewhat of a back seat amid its focus on terrorism and counterinsurgency operations in the past years.

Conclusion

Implementing these steps would go a long way to extending deterrence and strengthening the credibility of the U.S. commitment to allied security in a multipolar environment. Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine has made it clear that there are emerging deterrence and assurance gaps in the current U.S. and allied force postures. According to Admiral Richard, "The war in Ukraine and China's nuclear trajectory – their strategic breakout – demonstrates that we have a deterrence and assurance gap based on the threat of limited nuclear employment."²¹ This observation is particularly relevant for regional scenarios involving U.S. allies in which asymmetries between U.S. and adversaries' short- and intermediate-range nuclear arsenals are the largest and most concerning.

For now, the United States appears to have done a good enough job for extended deterrence and assurance. No allies are seriously pondering developing indigenous nuclear weapons programs, and proposals to make a separate peace with Russia and China at U.S. expense are still largely relegated to fringe parts of the political spectrum in allied countries. But challenges, uncertainties, and questions are emerging just below the surface. As they mount, the United States will have to work harder to extend deterrence and convince allies and adversaries of the credibility of its commitment to allied security. Such a process will require larger defense spending than what the United States has been willing to invest after the end of the Cold War, more focused consultations and strategic dialogues with allies, and potentially new nuclear weapons and missile defense capabilities in the future. It will also require a recapitalization of the U.S. nuclear weapons complex so that it truly would be flexible and resilient and provide the United States with an ability to respond to unforeseen challenges and problems on a reasonable timescale. These are no small tasks, but failing in them could undermine the U.S. global alliance system and thus entail immeasurable cost.

¹ This *Information Series* is based on the author's *Occasional Paper* entitled, *Multipolarity, Extended Deterrence, and Allied Assurance* and on interviews with experts conducted in preparation for the *Occasional Paper*. See Michaela Dodge, *Alliance Politics in a Multipolar World, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 2, No. 10 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 26, 2022), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/OP-Vol.-2-No.-10.pdf>.

² For an elaboration on this point see Keith Payne and David Trachtenberg, *Deterrence in the Emerging Great Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2022), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/OP-Vol.-2-No.-8.pdf>.



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⁴ Keith Payne and David Trachtenberg, *Deterrence in the Emerging Great Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters*, *op. cit.*

⁵ Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, 2018, pp. 22-23, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PD>.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 22.

⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 22-23.

⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 7-8.

⁹ Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, 2022, p. 1, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

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¹⁶ For an elaboration on this point see Keith Payne and David Trachtenberg, *Deterrence in the Emerging Great Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2022), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/OP-Vol.-2-No.-8.pdf>.

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¹⁸ Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report 2022*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁹ NATO’s 2022 *Strategic Concept* states that “The strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States, are the supreme guarantee of the security of the Alliance.” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Strategic Concept*, June 29, 2022, p. 8, available at <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/>.

²⁰ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation Signed in Paris, France*, May 27, 1997, available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm.



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