ANALYSIS

RETHINKING DETERRENCE: HOW AND WHY*

Dr. Keith B. Payne

I am often asked 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. In the United States, there has been little interest in questions of nuclear deterrence for over three decades, but it is back with a vengeance.

Newly-minted commentators and experts now observe gravely that this trilateral context is different, and we must rethink U.S. deterrence policy. No-kidding; that much is painfully obvious.

The question is how is it new, why does that matter, and what do we need to do about it? Those are the key questions that demand serious attention.

A New Deterrence Context: New Challenges

My first comment in this regard is that there is no change in the basic principles of deterrence; they endure. And, what is significant about the emerging deterrence context is *not* primarily technical, nor the obvious fact that there will soon be three great nuclear powers involved. The most significant developments for deterrence are the following three *political* conditions:

1. the leaderships of Russia and China have the common purpose of overturning the classical liberal world order. This includes expansionist goals that each leadership defines as existential;
2. Moscow and Beijing are forming a quasi-alliance against the United States to achieve their goals; and
3. In pursuit of their goals, both Russia and China are building expansive conventional and nuclear arsenals with which to challenge long-standing U.S. *defensive* deterrence redlines.

In short, we now confront opponents' threatened use of nuclear and conventional weapons to advance their expansionist, existential goals. Russia's and China's coercive nuclear first use threats are here and now. These threats backstop their respective efforts to overturn a U.S-led world order they find *intolerable*.

If you have not read the text of Mr. Putin's partial-mobilization speech in this regard, you should. He has set up a comprehensive rationale for the employment of nuclear weapons in Ukraine, and has added that he is not bluffing. His rationale for nuclear employment may

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sound absurd to us in this room; but he appears to sincerely believe it. If so, we are in an unprecedentedly dangerous time.
I should add here that surveys show that 71 percent of the Russian public *supports* Putin's war on Ukraine. We in the U.S. should be so lucky to get that type of consensus on anything.

The nuclear first-use threats we face are not part of the familiar Cold War defensive deterrence dynamic—the so-called balance of terror. Much of our past thinking derived from a balance of terror concept of deterrence is now suspect.

For example, based on the balance of terror narrative, we generally convinced ourselves that only *irrational* leaderships could consider the first use of nuclear weapons. Very recently I heard a senior NATO official express that claim with absolute confidence.

There is great comfort in projecting onto opponents, including Putin, the Western notion that only an irrational leader would resort to nuclear weapons. It means that unless Moscow has gone mad, Putin's current nuclear threats *must be a bluff*; no sane leadership would actually risk employing nuclear weapons to change borders; doing so would be irrational. What a relief!

References to Putin being "unhinged" given his nuclear threats follow the enduring U.S. tradition of labeling opponents who engage in shocking behavior as irrational. Obviously, we define what is reasonable by our own standards. So, if opponents deviate from our norms, they must be irrational.

Such comments usually reflect only our own lack of understanding of how differently opponents can define what is reasonable. The combination of Russia's and China's commitment to revanchist goals, nuclear weapons, and nuclear first-use threats now demand that we rethink what opponents may dare to do and how best to deter in contemporary conditions. It is important to understand in this regard that all leaders likely fear nuclear war; but not all leaders appear to fear nuclear war equally.

U.S. deterrence threats now must not simply be fearsome. Just brandishing a big, ugly threat is *not* deterrence. U.S. deterrence strategies must compel opponents to conclude on their own that the violation of U.S. redlines is a *more miserable option* than their continuing to accept a world order they define as *intolerable.* In short, our deterrence threat must be tailored to be *more fearsome,* as opponents calculate alternative moves, than their continuing to accept a world order they find intolerable. Knowing how to do that demands serious analysis and is a tall order.

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

Problem No. 1: Deterrence Literacy

A problem with regard to rethinking U.S. deterrence policy is the generally modest level of U.S. deterrence literacy in every quarter of the United States; a problem that can be traced to the general lack of interest in nuclear deterrence for three decades.

To risk understatement, the extreme consequences of whether we can make deterrence work, or not, do not match the general lack of serious attention to the question.

Decades ago, Thomas Schelling, Herman Kahn, Bernard Brodie, Albert Wohlstetter, James Schlesinger, Robert Jervis, Colin Gray, Alexander George and other greats worked on this subject full time. I recall those days vividly. Nothing like that has existed for many years.

As a society, we have great apparent trouble simply understanding the realities of our past and present approaches to deterrence—much less rethinking it in new conditions. Much has been lost, and we need to relearn quickly.

There is some hope for improvement; U.S. Strategic Command is furiously rethinking deterrence theory. But the general debate on the subject at all levels of society is shockingly immature. It is far less informed than it was in the mid-1970s. That must change.

Inconvenient Truths About Deterrence Prognostication

An inconvenient truth about deterrence is that it is an uncertain business in most circumstances—these uncertainties can be reduced, but not eliminated. The most persistent myth about deterrence is that we can predict its functioning with confidence. I recently wrote an article entitled, *Deterrence is Not Rocket Science: It is More Difficult*. The validity of that title is provided by Emanuel Derman, a physicist turned Wall Street quant, in his book on financial modeling, entitled *Models Behaving Badly*. Derman says:

> 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 in any detail 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 context, *but increasing deterrence uncertainties now follow from an expanded range of "ephemeral opinions" in the emerging multilateral deterrence context*. With every new hostile entry into a deterrence context, the uncertainties and unknowns are multiplied.

Think about that truth the next time someone claims to *know* that deterrence will work just fine *without* ICBMs, the LRSO, the B83-1, or a new SLCM-N. In truth, they do not know

whether their claims are correct, wrong, or somewhere in between. The existential question is, how much risk are you willing to accept on the basis of their speculation about deterrence requirements—knowing that it *cannot* be backed by confident analysis because deterrence is never so predictable?

We are moving deeper into the world in which the words "deterrence stability" continue to be thrown around, but their meaning is unclear, as is our capacity to predict with confidence what in practice will help or hinder it. The question we face is how to act most prudently in this context.

The Analytical Challenge Ahead

So, how do we rethink deterrence policy in this emerging multilateral deterrence context? The most basic task is to reduce uncertainties by understanding, as well as possible, the factors that will drive multiple opponents' relevant decision making, including their perceptions, assumptions, goals, values, motivations, attention, determination, risk tolerances, and their levels of devotion to the stakes in contention. The functioning of deterrence will depend on the answers to these questions, but none of those answers are self-evident, and they will vary depending on the opponent, time and context.

In short, there are no all-purpose deterrents; we need to understand what individual opponents *will dare to do*, based on their own interpretation of what is necessary and tolerable. This need for understanding is not new, but anticipating deterrence outcomes is now complicated by the fact that we are not simply deterring expansionist China, revanchist Russia, and eccentric North Korea *sequentially or in isolation*. No, we must deter each simultaneously, and with each opponent watching our every move; events in one theater likely will affect the deterrence dynamics in other theaters.

During much of the Cold War, we focused on deterring a single opponent, the Soviet Union, and assumed that we could predict Moscow's basic deterrence calculations because they would largely mimic our own, i.e., mirror imaging. We also assumed that all other opponents were "lesser included cases." These Cold War conveniences made our deterrence calculations relatively easy, even simplistic. But those conveniences now are gone and wholly imprudent.

Our deterrence expectations will fail at some point if we assume that opponents define rational thought and behavior as we do, and thus we can predict how they will calculate deterrence and act. The need is to know how to hedge against the mounting uncertainties in our application of deterrence in this new context.

This is the analytical challenge we face; it is *extreme* politics, and it was Albert Einstein who said that politics is harder than physics.

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 briefly on each in order.

First. Hedging Against Prospective Sino-Russian Coordination. The United States must consider the possibility that Russian and China will coordinate their actions to advance their goals. This danger of a coordinated Sino-Russian "entente" appears to be real and growing. It 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 revisionist powers can be provoked by the perceived weakness of status quo powers, and this has led to deterrence failure. A perceived lack of U.S. preparation for two simultaneous regional wars now could embolden both Moscow and Beijing to aggression that otherwise could be deterred—undercutting U.S. extended deterrence goals.

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

The Two-War Standard Left Behind

For years, U.S. military planners designed a strategy that called for the capability to fight two major regional contingencies (MRCs) simultaneously. Yet, by 2010, the United States had shifted from the two-MRC force-sizing construct to focus on counter-terrorism and irregular warfare. That may have made sense at the time, but no longer.

Restoring the two-war force-sizing standard now appears to be logical and prudent for deterrence and extended deterrence purposes. Doing so would be prudent, but likely insufficient.

Why insufficient? Because opponents' threats of nuclear use will hang over any U.S. conflict with Russia and China. Establishing the U.S. conventional capability to counter a two-front conventional war could compel Moscow and Beijing to accept the risk of engaging in nuclear escalation, if needed, to paralyze U.S. support for allies and thereby secure Russian and Chinese "existential" goals. The United States must be able to deter coercive nuclear

escalation threats, and that means our nuclear arsenal must backstop our conventional capabilities for defensive deterrence purposes. In short, *regional* stability cannot be separated from U.S. nuclear deterrence.

For decades, I have heard that adding to our conventional capabilities will reduce our reliance on nuclear deterrence. That probably was not true in the past; it certainly is not true now. Strengthening our conventional forces is necessary, but our reliance on nuclear deterrence will remain. There is no logical basis for thinking otherwise.

Second. Hedging Against Sino-Russian Coordination 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. But, 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. The challenge is to pace the requirements for U.S. strategic force survivability not against Russian or Chinese strategic forces separately, but against combined Sino-Russian capabilities.

If you think the threat of Sino-Russian joint action is 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 dismiss out of hand the likelihood of a strike against U.S. strategic forces; that supposedly is Cold War thinking. But, three developments suggest otherwise:

1. the increasing potential for Sino-Russian coordination;
2. their expanding nuclear force numbers; and,
3. their extreme dedication to expansionist, revanchist goals and the related potential for acute crises.

These three developments together compel us to think anew about the threat we use to pace our survivability and deterrence considerations.

Third. Hedging Against Sino-Russian Coordination: U.S. Deterrence Threat Options. A corresponding concern 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 effective deterrence.

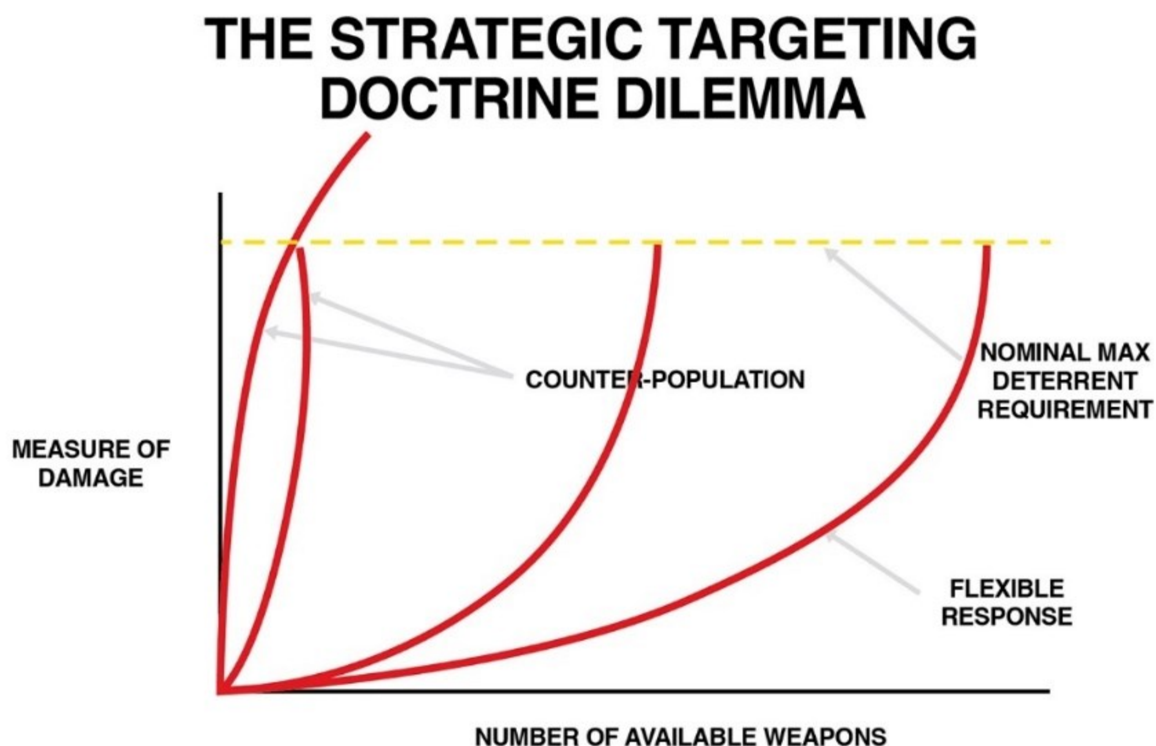
The question is whether that portion of the U.S. strategic force posture that could survive a combined Sino-Russian strategic attack would have sufficient capacity and flexibility to provide credible U.S. deterrence and extended deterrence threat options against both countries simultaneously or sequentially.

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 be sufficient to deter a Sino-Russian attack in the first place, or to deter 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 is now an acceptable measure of retaliatory capabilities for U.S. deterrence purposes. I suggest strongly that it is not an acceptable measure.

For good reason and on a fully bipartisan basis, the United States has rejected a counter-city deterrent for decades. Washington has instead pursued a "flexible response" deterrence policy intended to brandish graduated threat options and to hold at risk a range of opponents' critical assets, while avoiding intentional city targeting to the greatest extent possible. For this approach to deterrence, the U.S. force posture must include diverse, flexible options, including the capability to hold at risk opponents' military capabilities, command and control capabilities, and civilian leadership.

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



This graphic illustrates that as the number of available retaliatory weapons and options decline, the United States moves further away from "Flexible Response" and towards a "Counter-Population" deterrent. That is not a road we want to travel.

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 our *de facto* deterrence policy is incredible, morally intolerable and legally problematic.

Fourth. Hedging Against Sino-Russian Coordination at the Theater Nuclear Level. Given the potential for Sino-Russian coordination, the United States must also now hedge against the opponents' simultaneous regional nuclear first use threats. Our extended deterrence goals demand this hedging. This is not a trivial detail; it is critical. Recall that past great power wars—from the Peloponnesian and Punic Wars, to World Wars I and II—were triggered by disputes over allies and regional hegemony.

Should Moscow or Beijing calculate that the United States lacks either the will or the capability to respond *in a limited and discriminant way* to their regional nuclear first use, extended deterrence will likely be undermined, and the risks of regional aggression will grow.

Is the United States currently prepared to deter Sino-Russian regional nuclear threats, without unduly risking escalation to a potentially suicidal strategic nuclear level? The significant imbalance in theater nuclear capabilities suggests otherwise.

To hedge against this 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 SCLM-N would reflect a rejection of deterrence in favor of "war-fighting." This vapid argument has been resurrected from the 1980s and fails Deterrence 101. It misses the likely deterrence credibility requirement for such U.S. forces in the emerging threat environment.

***Fifth. 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, it is even more problematic in the emerging multilateral context because deterrence requirements will be different and uncertain across time and place.

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. That old convenience is now gone.

The narrower our measure of deterrence adequacy, the greater is the presumption that opponents' future decision making is known and will not vary, and that the future will unfold as expected. If you are confident you can predict the future in this way, then you can confidently predict the functioning of and the minimal requirements for U.S. deterrence; if not, then not, and our measures of deterrence adequacy must be broad and flexible.

The uncertainties of deterrence increase the difficulty of identifying well-informed adequacy measures for deterrence. These uncertainties drive the great need to hedge as best we can against setting deterrence adequacy standards *too narrowly*.

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 sufficient for defining "how much is enough?" The underlying conditions have shifted dramatically since the New START Treaty, so must our measures of adequacy. The implications of this harsh reality are profound.

In short, needed now are multiple, simultaneous measures of adequacy that take into account the variation in deterrence requirements across opponent, time, and place.

This is not a plea for more nuclear weapons, per se. But we must address "how much is enough?" for deterrence in the emerging, dynamic threat environment. Answering that question anew must *precede* many other moves, including any resumption of arms control negotiations.

Sixth. Hedging Against the Possibility of Deterrence Failure. Finally, the expansion of uncertainties applies both to *how* and *whether* deterrence will work as we hope. Pointing to the need to prepare for the possibility of deterrence failure sounds extraordinary *only* because we are so accustomed to the comforting belief that a nuclear balance of terror works predictably, reliably, even easily vis-à-vis any rational opponent.

That comforting belief is problematic on so many levels. We can, with serious effort, greatly reduce deterrence uncertainties, 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.

To the extent that the United States does not now hedge against the possibility of deterrence failure, it is unprepared for the realities of the multilateral deterrence context. The implications of this harsh reality are profound.

The most obvious implication, perhaps, is the potential value of even limited active and passive strategic defenses to help reduce the prospective 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 notions that: 1) unmitigated U.S. societal vulnerability to Russia and China is a necessary component of strategic stability; 2) defenses are destabilizing; and, 3) they can provide no meaningful protection against attack. Each of these Cold War maxims is now likely wrong. The question is: what will we do a about that?. My guess is very little, but time will tell.

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 existential revisionist goals and intense hostility toward the United States presents some unprecedented challenges. This context expands the uncertainties and unknowns regarding the functioning of deterrence—which remains essential for U.S. and allied security. 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.

Identifying the 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 deterrence context I have described here today.

We do not know precisely how deterrence will be tested in the future; we can only hedge as best we can against a wide range of plausible contingencies. That hedging becomes much more complicated and demanding in the new multilateral context. For that reason, I find it very troubling that the 2022 NPR eliminates hedging as a formal role for nuclear weapons.

I will close by noting that the "greatest generation" of deterrence scholars did the heavy lifting of thinking through deterrence issues for their time—I identified them earlier. Their work—no kidding—helped to preserve peace throughout the Cold War.

As much as we hoped that nuclear weapons and deterrence issues were a distant memory of the Cold War, they are again front and center. As distracted by other matters as we may be, it is time for a new generation to get back to this serious work.

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