



PROCEEDINGS

ALLIED ASSURANCE AND EXTENDED DETERRENCE IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Allied Assurance and Extended Deterrence in a Multipolar World” hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on September 22, 2022. The symposium highlighted the results from a recent study on the topic, discussing the special responsibilities the United States has to assure allies and deter adversaries through its extended nuclear deterrence commitments—its “nuclear umbrella”—and whether U.S. extended deterrence and assurance requirements must be reevaluated to ensure their continued credibility and viability.

David J Trachtenberg

David J. Trachtenberg is Vice President of the National Institute for Public Policy and served as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy from 2017-2019.

Before turning the microphone over to our speakers, I would like to note that today is an anniversary for us, of sorts. Exactly two years ago to the day—September 22, 2020—the National Institute for Public Policy conducted its very first webinar, a symposium in honor of Colin S. Gray, an eminent strategist and co-founder of the National Institute. In fact, some of our panelists today participated in that symposium.

Colin’s insights and strategic analyses have stood the test of time. In connection with today’s discussion of extended deterrence and assurance, the perspectives he offered years ago are, not surprisingly, relevant today. He understood that the U.S. ability to extend deterrence to allies depends on the overall viability and credibility of the U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal. In fact, this has been recognized by NATO throughout its history and, most recently, in its new *Strategic Concept*, which clearly states: “The strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States, are the supreme guarantee of the security of the Alliance.”¹

In commenting on “what would deter a Soviet leadership?”, Colin noted, “U.S. and NATO defense planners are obliged to provide an answer and to build forces that could give adequate expression to the threats required by the strategy so identified.” In other words, Colin recognized the need for a tailored extended deterrence strategy and forces that are designed specifically to support that strategy.

Moreover, he noted that the existence of alliances and coalitions of democracies are not guarantees of permanent success, noting that “Once-perceived threats that have been long-deterred may be forgotten.... coalitions which cohere well enough to wage war successfully will necessarily lose much of the incentive to continue to cooperate as the common danger,

¹ See *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, June 2022, available at <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/>.



though still actively in the field, plainly becomes less menacing than are one or two coalition partners.”²

Alliances must be nurtured, especially as the conditions which led to their creation evolve. As threats change, assurances of support by others may also gain or lose credibility. Arguably, this is even more relevant today in a world in which two nuclear peer adversaries of the United States—Russia and China—seek to displace American power and overturn the existing world order.

As I noted in the invitation to this event, the United States has special responsibilities for assuring allies and deterring adversaries through its extended nuclear deterrence commitments—its nuclear umbrella. More than 30 countries around the world, including 29 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members, Australia, Japan, and South Korea are currently protected under this umbrella.

Yet regional trends, including the resurgence of a belligerent Russia, the rise of China as a nuclear peer, and North Korea’s developing nuclear weapons capabilities, have heightened doubts and concerns about the willingness of the United States to come to the active defense of its allies—especially if the possibility of doing so may escalate any conflict to the nuclear level. Consequently, the question is whether U.S. extended deterrence and assurance requirements must be reevaluated to ensure their continued credibility and viability and whether the forces supporting those requirements are up to the task.

Whether or not the United States today has an adequate deterrence strategy and the forces necessary not only to extend deterrence but to credibly assure allies is the focus of today’s discussion, which also keys off of a study my colleague Michaela Dodge has been leading. So let me now turn the floor over to Michaela.

Michaela Dodge

Michaela Dodge is a Research Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy.

Thank you to Dave for an excellent introduction and for hosting this forum. Thank you to my co-panelists for participating. And my sincerest thanks to those watching, and especially those of you who agreed to be interviewed for the study.

Challenges to U.S. extended deterrence and allied assurance are not new. But the current environment places both under significant and perhaps even unprecedented strain.

The rise of revisionist nuclear powers warrants a reassessment of U.S. nuclear posture. Pundits sometimes call changes to U.S. nuclear forces that are not reductions or qualitative freezes destabilizing or escalatory. This is just not so. Secretary Schlesinger’s Limited Nuclear Options were a U.S. answer to the Soviets reaching nuclear parity with the United States. The Soviets having such a capacity undermined the credibility of U.S. extended

² Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace and Victory: Strategy and Statecraft for the Next Century* (New York, NY: Simon & Shuster, 1990), p. 255.

deterrence and assurance. Rather than being destabilizing, Limited Nuclear Options helped to assure allies and extend deterrence.

What do select regional experts think about U.S. assurances and extended deterrence given the rise of other revisionist nuclear powers? It seems to me we have good news and bad news.

The good news is that interviewed experts from allied countries, in Europe or Asia, generally perceive the U.S. commitment to their country's security as credible and strong. In the short to medium term, most of them do not feel that the United States needs significantly different nuclear and missile defense capabilities, other than those currently funded by Congress.

For assurance, allies in Europe primarily seek NATO's conventional presence, particularly allies closer to Russia's border. Speaking of Russia, the outcome of its war in Ukraine will shape future allied assurance requirements. They could increase or decrease, but demands on the United States will not go away entirely. And of course, allies in the Indo-Pacific region are paying attention to the conflict, too.

Another piece of good news is that the United States did not fundamentally change its declaratory policy in the upcoming *Nuclear Posture Review*. I think allied governments were quite relieved by this development.

The bad news is that ruptures and cracks in U.S. assurance and extended deterrence are appearing and could grow more serious if not properly tended to.

Allies (and adversaries) see that the United States would have an extremely hard time handling two simultaneous conflicts with near peers in different theaters. Allies worry about U.S. attention to one operational theater taking resources away from the other. Although there is a growing recognition that allies in one region need to cooperate with allies in the other region, the competitive element remains. Given our defense budgets, while it is not quite a zero-sum game, it is not a free for all either.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine makes war more real and concerns over military capabilities more pressing. A related challenge is the West's inability to support an industrial-scale war. Weapon stocks and ammunition are being depleted, and it will be a while before our industrial base catches up. In a direct conflict with a peer or near peer adversary, would we have the necessary time to mobilize like we did during the First and Second World Wars? How much would we have to pay for delays? We know it would be very difficult to mobilize in the nuclear sphere where our infrastructure atrophied. And U.S. inferiority in short- and intermediate-range nuclear weapons potentially makes nuclear escalation a more attractive option for our adversaries.

Some capabilities in development that allied experts consider important for extended deterrence and assurance are subject to the vagaries of the U.S. political process—for example, the nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile. Americans appear to underappreciate the importance of consistency for allied assurance. On the other hand, there is no virtue in consistency should a matter be on the wrong track. Regardless, more generally, allied experts worry about the implications of political polarization on the U.S. ability to

spend blood and treasure on behalf of allied countries. Rhetorical scars left by some of President Trump's statements on alliances run deep.

Regarding the U.S. response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, some experts were unnerved by the initial slow rate of the U.S. response to Ukrainian pleas for help. They interpreted it as the United States being self-deterred from providing help to the Ukrainians. The Biden Administration's statements on what the United States won't do in response to Russia's invasion were rather unhelpful from an assurance perspective. The message for some was—if you fold fast, you are on your own. Admittedly, allies building up their own capacities to resist would not be an entirely bad thing and it would make our job in Washington, DC a little easier. But I'm not sure that us giving allies a message to resist long enough or be on your own is really the one we want to project.

In Europe, we can observe a dynamic that should worry us in the long run. Mistrust is growing among European leaders. We have those who continue to talk to Putin and even call the conversation "friendly" and those who go above and beyond to defeat him. The dynamic undermines European security integration. It means requirements for U.S. assurances will not diminish anytime soon. It also bodes poorly for what promises to be a more challenging conflict with China.

I think I ended up giving you more bad news than good news. But perhaps I will be more pleasantly surprised than otherwise. And we could all use some pleasant surprises because winter is coming.

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Stephan Frühling

Stephan Frühling is a Professor at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at The Australian National University in Canberra.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you from the middle of the night here in Kyoto.

This is an important topic at an important time. Calling the strategic environment uncertain and complex has become a trope, but I think there are today more short-term uncertainties that will have long-term consequences for deterrence and reassurance than we have seen in a long time, including the ultimate outcome of the war in Ukraine, the economic and political future of China after Xi's appointment to his unprecedented third term, and the outcome of the U.S. mid-term elections and what they will portend about the future of U.S. domestic politics.

As a start, I'd like to offer some views on how U.S. deterrence and reassurance look from Australia and how these factors impact our defence debate—which is somewhat different than NATO as a collective, Japan or South Korea. For the fundamental condition of Australia is geographic distance from allies as well as threats, and for most of the time since the second World War, that was a source of security not insecurity for us.

Unlike U.S. allies in Eastern Europe, Japan or South Korea, we are thus not (yet) a frontline state. I'll get to that 'yet' a bit later, but first want to draw out a few deep-seated consequences of this situation.

First, it is true that at a fundamental level, the U.S. alliance addresses Australia's trauma of 1942, when Australia was left in the lurch by Britain with the failure of the "Singapore Strategy." In recent months my colleagues and I have spoken to about 200 Australians from all walks of life to draw out what they see in the alliance, and 1942 is almost the only frame through which the military relevance of the alliance is conceived in the Australian public.

But for the last 70 years that level of threat wasn't credible. So, the basic logic for Australia was that if the United States remained engaged in Asia, we wouldn't have to face an existential threat—or put in different terms, if we faced an existential threat it would only be because the alliance was not reliable any more.

This means that conflict would come to Australia because the United States is in conflict in Asia, rather than the other way around.

Hence, deterrence/reassurance is not that useful a lens to take to Australian views of alliance. Rather, Australia's concerns are more about entrapment and the political and other cost of supporting U.S. strategic engagement further north in the Indo-Pacific. If deterrence is relevant, it is in relation to Australia's interest in deterrence of conflict in the Indo-Pacific in general, and reassurance more on U.S. general policy in the Indo-Pacific in general, not about U.S. action in relation to any specific Australian interest or threat to Australia in particular.

Second, the lack of a direct existential threat means that historically and even today, there is little engagement amongst policymakers or analysts regarding the more operational and capability aspects of U.S. nuclear posture and strategy. There is no nuclear threat to Australia that doesn't arise from our support to the United States in the first place, which explains why there's no need for reassurance on that specific front.

Traditionally, Australians have thus been looking at U.S. nuclear policy through the lens of the nuclear or international order and what it says about U.S. commitments in general—so like other capitals, Canberra was concerned about the possibility of No First Use being adopted by the Obama, and then Biden Administrations. But the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* and its nuances about limited use options had little resonance here.

You will struggle to find many in Canberra who has a view on the relevance of the sea launched SLBM, or integration of conventional–nuclear targeting, for Australia's security, although both could be quite consequential for conflicts that we might become engaged in. Certainly, there is nothing like the concern about stability-instability dynamics arising from Chinese and U.S. nuclear force levels that one can see in Japan for example. This doesn't mean questions of nuclear strategy aren't relevant for Australian policy, for example for the U.S. long-range bomber deployments that are now finally starting up in a more regular way in Northern Australia, but these aspects are not really on the Australian policy radar yet in the way they are in other allied capitals.

Third, entrapment rather than abandonment remains the main Australian concern, which you can see in regular polling conducted by the Lowy Institute for International Policy.

The Australian public debate about Indo-Pacific security has moved on from the “choice between Washington and Beijing” in which it was framed 10 years ago. Perception of China as a threat has doubled since 2018, so that 75 percent of Australians now consider it very or somewhat likely that China will become a military threat to Australia in the next 20 years. But at the same time the increase of support for basing U.S. forces in Australia has been much smaller, to 63 percent in 2022. Support for the ANZUS alliance has recovered from the Trump slump to what it was under Obama, but 77 percent—more than ever—agree that the alliance makes it more likely that Australia will be drawn into a conflict in Asia that is not in Australia’s interests.³ In general, proponents as well as opponents of the alliance in Australia share a fundamentally transactional, cost-benefit approach to the thinking about cooperation in the Alliance that is quite distinct.

Now what does this mean for Australian policy today under the new Albanese government? First, the government is broadly comfortable with the rather more sober depiction of the strategic environment of the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, so there is continuity there and congruence with U.S. and Japanese views. It has launched a force structure review, as the main concern is whether we are moving fast enough to address this, and essentially everyone in Canberra agrees we’re not.

I think there are signs that, at least in a force structure context, Australia might be moving closer to adopting a conflict over Taiwan as an explicit pacing threat scenario—and Defence Minister Marles has spoken about the need to contribute more to regional deterrence.

Does this mean everything is fine and well in relation to U.S. deterrence and reassurance of Australia? I think that Australia was quite relieved about the withdrawal from Afghanistan, however messy, and Washington’s global leadership for support to Ukraine does reassure insofar as it points to enduring U.S. military and diplomatic strengths. But I think there are also challenges, which also stem from the fact that in a multipolar world, the credibility of U.S. deterrence and reassurance will have to rest not just on U.S. military capability and credibility, but also its ability to provide leadership for effective coalitions and alliances.

The first challenge, and one that the current administration could in principle address, is the lack of a shared strategic framework for deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. For Australia, that’s a problem if one wants to start shifting some of those deep-seated public concerns I mentioned before. But it’s also a problem for the ability to strengthen deterrence itself. At the political-strategy level, strategic ambiguity over Taiwan makes it really hard for allied defence policy to coalesce around a shared understanding of the most challenging threat. And also at the operational-force structure level, it is clear that there are debates in the United States about the balance of stand-in forces vs long-range strike. Often those acknowledge allied equities in passing, but they’re not debates that genuinely include the allies.

Partly this is probably due to the United States not being certain about its own preferences and the depth of its own commitment, but I think it also points to some deep-

³ For Lowy Institute Polling results, see <https://poll.lowyinstitute.org/>.

seated and longstanding gaps in the political-military alliance infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific, that I don't think is fit for purpose for a world where successful deterrence and reassurance has to rest on political-military allied integration. I think that from an Australian perspective, the creation of a substantial Chinese military base in the Solomon Islands, which is now a real possibility, could very much turbo-charge this as a problem. The Obama Pivot took pains not to frame China as a threat, then we had Trump, and I'm not sure that we see enough movement on this alliance-institutional front under the Biden administration to really reassure about the depth of U.S. commitment to the region on the one hand, or that Washington is taking into account allied perspectives on the risks of escalation on the other.

The second challenge, and more problematic one that is even harder to address, is about the reliability of the United States as an ally when a substantial part of the U.S. population continues to support Trump as the leader of the Republican party, and internal politics in that party seem to be a competition in the uglier aspects of "America First." At the policy level, I don't think this concern necessarily has put a cap on the level of integration in the Alliance—but it is certainly now creeping into force structure debates, including in the context of the current Australian review, as a fundamental issue. It is hard to work out what the practical implications might be for a country as small as Australia, but it does reinforce the importance of looking after our own patch of the world first and foremost. And amongst the public, when asked about whether Australia should develop its own nuclear weapons, 36 percent of Australians in the Lowy Poll this year were at least somewhat in favour—twice as much as in 2010. So, while geographic remoteness continues to mute security concerns for Australia, and Australians are perhaps less acutely concerned about U.S. deterrence and reassurance in the short term, the confidence that this will remain so in the longer term is definitely waning as well.

David Lonsdale

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Lessons from the Cold War

As we grapple with the challenges of extended deterrence in the third decade of the 21st Century, I propose that it will prove profitable to return to some ideas and concepts developed during the Cold War. I do so, conscious of the fact that there has been a deliberate attempt in some influential quarters to consign Cold War ideas to the dustbin of history. Perhaps most notably, President Obama publicly stated that he wanted "to put an end to Cold War thinking." This attitude is problematic because the core challenges of extended deterrence were worked through during the first nuclear age. The hard intellectual graft was done as the world first tried to make strategic sense of nuclear weapons.

Indeed, it was partially in response to the challenges of extended deterrence that U.S. nuclear strategy developed from the relative simplicity of Massive Retaliation (first enunciated in 1954). If we track the trajectory of U.S. nuclear strategy during the Cold War, we see an ever-growing quest for flexibility, credibility, and strategic utility. From the early days of Massive Retaliation, U.S. nuclear strategy developed along the lines of limited nuclear options (LNOs), Flexible Response, countervailing, and finally culminating in escalation control in the early 1980s. All these developments required an increase in nuclear operational capability.

Declining Credibility

Unfortunately, much of the good work in nuclear strategy has been lost in recent years. To cite Galadriel in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, “some things that should not have been forgotten were lost.” This was especially evident during the Obama administration. In an effort to reignite the disarmament agenda, the 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) sought to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security policy. And, although the Obama administration did not ultimately adopt the sole purpose criterion, they came close. Ultimately, this left the United States with a far less flexible declared nuclear policy. Moreover, with such a negative attitude to these weapons, the United States was left looking like a reluctant nuclear power. Taken together, these developments potentially undermined the credibility of U.S. nuclear deterrence, especially when faced with complex extended deterrence security challenges.

Thankfully, some of the damage done under Obama was rectified during the Trump administration. In this respect, the 2018 NPR was a significant step in the right direction. Perhaps with an eye to the communication aspect of credible deterrence, the 2018 NPR signaled an increased emphasis on nuclear weapons in national security, “there is no higher priority for national defense.” Allied to an enhanced modernization program and discussion of post-deterrence operations, the tenor of the Trump Administration was far more robust in terms of nuclear strategy. There was, however, one glaring problem with the 2018 NPR: the explicit insistence that the review “is not intended to enable, nor does it enable, nuclear war-fighting.” As a strategic theorist, my response to such a statement is “why not?”. As will be argued below, prudent operational nuclear planning is in tune with the nature of strategy, enhances the credibility of deterrence, provides essential options should deterrence fail, and fulfils a moral obligation under the Just War rubric.

As might be expected, especially in light of recent geostrategic events, the newly released 2022 NPR takes a middle ground between the 2010 and 2018 variants. Whilst still advancing the aim of reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. strategy and seeking to bolster arms control efforts, the new review acknowledges the increased threat environment and its implications for extended deterrence. In particular, it is noteworthy that the 2022 review emphasizes the importance of flexibility and even discusses “achieving objectives” as a role for nuclear weapons in the event of deterrence failure. The review offers no real details on what operational objectives could be sought in nuclear conflict. It does, however, include the

reasonably robust statement that “the United States would seek to end any conflict at the lowest level of damage possible on the best achievable terms.” Still, despite containing this rather 2018-esque statement about nuclear use, the 2022 NPR also spends quite a bit of time discussing arms control, crisis stability, managing escalation risk, and the desire to work towards a sole purpose declaration. One is left with the impression that the Biden Administration is a nuclear sceptic reluctantly coming to terms with the harsh realities of the contemporary geostrategic world.

The Need for Prudent Operational Planning

Before I provide a rationale for the United States to readopt a robust operational planning stance on nuclear strategy, I would like to acknowledge the work of Keith Payne and our late friend and colleague, Colin Gray. Keith and Colin led the debate on what was then called “nuclear warfighting” in the ‘70s and ‘80s, and in doing so helped lay the intellectual groundwork for this important development in nuclear strategy.

As already noted, there are four main drivers for prudent operational planning. First, it chimes with the nature of war and strategy. As clearly indicated by the master theorist of war, Carl Von Clausewitz, “it is inherent in the very concept of war that everything that occurs *must originally derive from combat.*” Clausewitz recognized that even when battle does not occur (including, we might say, in a deterrence relationship), the outcome is premised on calculations of what would happen should battle have been fought. In this sense, it is a conceptual anathema to decouple deterrence from credible operational capabilities. If anyone is thinking that Clausewitz’s theory, written in the 19th Century, does not relate to nuclear weapons, it is worth noting that Bernard Brodie, the father of the nuclear age, described Clausewitz’s book, *On War*, as the greatest book ever written on the subject. The nature of strategy is universal, encompassing all forms of military power, including nuclear weapons.

Second, flexible operational capabilities likely enhance credibility. If all you have on the table is annihilation or surrender, an adversary may reasonably assume that you will not choose the former on an issue that is less than vital to your national security interests (often evident in extended deterrence). In more ambivalent security scenarios, one requires the ability to wage controlled, limited, survivable forms of nuclear war. In this way, a flexible operational posture gives deterrence more substance, the underpinning threat becomes more tangible. To somewhat labour the point, with more concrete options in play, one’s resort to nuclear weapons looks more plausible, and therefore more credible.

Third, to put it bluntly, deterrence may fail. As much as we may desire to live in a world in which deterrence holds and aggression does not occur, it is strategically irresponsible to ignore the possibility of deterrence failure. Consequently, the United States must be prepared for nuclear war to the extent feasible. As noted, to their credit the 2018 and 2022 NPRs ventured into post-deterrence possibilities. Whilst a welcome development, this was a limited foray that seemed not to go beyond the confines of damage limitation, intrawar deterrence, and a somewhat vague reference to positive war termination. Beyond these

admirable goals, the United States must have the capability to positively manage escalation and seek to achieve policy objectives in nuclear conflict. Without the conscious pursuit of policy objectives, strategy ceases to function as a rational instrument of politics. To be clear, the United States must have a theory of engagement for nuclear war. By a theory of engagement, I mean *successful engagement with enemy forces to attain military objectives in the pursuit of policy goals*. Precisely what that attainment would look like is entirely dependent on the specific scenario faced, most especially the nature of the enemy and the policy objectives sought. On the general point, Bernard Brodie is compelling when he wrote, "So long as there is a finite chance of war, we have to be interested in outcomes; and although all outcomes would be bad, some would be very much worse than others."⁴

Finally, it can be argued that prudent planning for flexible response options is a moral requirement under the Just War tradition. Amongst other criteria, for a war to be considered just there must be a reasonable prospect for success. Surely, the latter requires a theory of engagement. Moreover, for the *jus in bello* criteria of proportionality and discrimination to be fulfilled, it is axiomatic that nuclear war be fought in a controlled and competent fashion.

Concluding Thoughts

I do not claim that the lessons of the Cold War can be simply mapped onto the current security environment without adaptation. Every security challenge is unique and must be approached with an eye to the particular. Nor is it claimed that the unique characteristics of nuclear weapons can be ignored. Their enormous destructive potential must be respected and clearly taken into account. Nonetheless, the nature of strategy is universal, and much of the code of extended deterrence was decrypted in the first nuclear age. As we engage with an ever more complex security environment in the 21st century, it is vital that we retain that which should not be forgotten. In particular, we should respect the lineage of flexibility, credibility and strategic utility. Most evidently, this requires serious operational planning and flexible response options. To cite Herman Kahn, who taught us to think about the unthinkable, when faced with the strategic challenge of nuclear weapons there has to be an alternative beyond annihilation and surrender. A mature and confident operational capability oriented around flexible response options provides such an alternative. God willing, it would provide the credibility required to ensure a robust deterrence posture; and in the face of deterrence failure would help support the continuation of strategy and the prospect for protecting our way of life.

⁴ Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, January 15, 1959), p. 278, available at https://www.rand.org/pubs/commercial_books/CB137-1.html.