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The Rejection of Intentional Population Targeting for “Tripolar” Deterrence

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Introduction

For more than six decades, fundamentally different narratives regarding U.S. nuclear deterrence policy have competed in the public debate for policy primacy. This debate is important because, in the United States, it informs the interested public, much of Congress, and even many in the military on the subject. The extent to which one or another of these narratives influences U.S. policy is significant because they mandate different U.S. force postures and expressed threats, and likely provide different levels of deterrence effectiveness for preventing war.

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A basic tenet of one of these narratives is that the targets the United States should intentionally threaten for deterrence effect should be, or include, an opponent's cities and civilian population.¹ This traditionally has been referred to as a punitive "counter-city" deterrent. In contrast, an alternative narrative is that the U.S. deterrent should hold at risk what opponents value most, particularly including their military capabilities and tools of power—and *avoid* intentionally targeting cities and population. This generally is referred to as a counterforce deterrent. There are variations on each of these approaches to deterrence. But whether an opponent's cities and population should *intentionally be threatened*, or *intentionally avoided* has been a fundamental divide in the public debate regarding the determination of "how much is enough" for deterrence.

A counter-city approach to U.S. deterrence policy perhaps is best illustrated by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's 1964 *declaration* that nuclear deterrence should be based on a threat to destroy 20 to 25 percent of the Soviet population and 50 percent of the Soviet industrial base.² McNamara dubbed this "assured destruction" threat the "very essence of the whole deterrence concept,"³ (in less public venues he acknowledged that U.S. planning included large-scale, counterforce targeting options).⁴

The alternative to a counter-city deterrence policy, including the rejection of intentional population targeting, was perhaps best illustrated two decades later. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger stated that the United States "...consciously does not target population and, in fact, has provisions for reducing civilian casualties,"⁵ and that, "...secure deterrence should be based on the threat to destroy *what the Soviet leadership values most highly*: namely, itself, its *military power and political control* capabilities, and its industrial ability to wage war."⁶ This statement by Secretary Weinberger about what targets should, and should not be threatened for deterrent effect reflects a policy direction initiated by his predecessors, James Schlesinger and Harold Brown. Republican and Democratic administrations have long recognized this need to "tailor" U.S. deterrence threats according to what opponents value most.

Repeating Cold War Arguments for Intentionally Threatening Civilian Populations

Advocates of targeting cities and population for deterrence have presented essentially the same arguments for over six decades. These can be summarized and examined concisely.

First is the fundamental presumption that threats to cities and population will provide the desired *deterrent effect with relatively modest force requirements* (because cities generally are few in number, soft, easily targeted and highly vulnerable to nuclear attack). For example, three decades ago, former National Security Advisor, McGeorge Bundy, with former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral William Crowe, Jr. and scientist Sidney Drell, stated with confidence, "the possibility of even a few nuclear detonations in populated areas provides ample deterrence and targeting staff should be able to make plans that produce this result against many different target sets with forces much smaller than those now in prospect."⁷ The



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presumption is that targeting population provides credible, effective deterrence—a presumption that continues in current city targeting advocacy.⁸

A second and corresponding claim is that, *unlike* a counter-city oriented deterrent, a U.S. deterrent that holds at risk opponents' highest values, including military targets, demands larger force numbers and "destabilizes" a mutual deterrence relationship by causing opponents to fear for the destruction of their own deterrent forces—giving them an incentive to strike first for fear of losing their deterrent in a U.S. pre-emptive strike.⁹

Third, the more modest nuclear force requirements said to follow from intentional population targeting implies that the cost for U.S. nuclear weapons can correspondingly be more modest.¹⁰ This claim too goes back many decades. Capabilities beyond those needed to threaten cities and population are said to be "overkill" and a waste of scarce defense resources.

Fourth, a counter-city deterrence policy is said to be uniquely compatible with arms limitation because Washington needs not continually expand its arsenal and opponents need *not* feel compelled to increase *their* force levels in response to U.S. increases. This condition is said to foster a "stable" arms and deterrence relationship in which there is no "action-reaction" dynamic driving an arms race, i.e., no U.S. moves compel opponents to increase their own arsenals in a "spiraling arms race."¹¹ Commentators have long treated this purported action-reaction dynamic as an objective fact,¹² and continue to do so.

Finally, because, it is argued, military targets and residential concentrations often are co-located, the level of civilian death and destruction is not meaningfully different whether cities are targeted intentionally, or an opponent's military installations are the targets—innocent civilian lives, it is said, would *not be spared* by counterforce-oriented deterrence,¹³ i.e., there is no moral difference between counter-city and counterforce targeting.

Given these projected advantages, why has Washington for more than four decades, and on a fully bipartisan basis, rejected intentionally targeting cities as its deterrence policy? There are strategic, legal and moral reasons for *rejecting* counter-city deterrence in favor of counterforce. These too have been consistent for decades. With the addition of China to the great power nuclear deterrence dynamic, the contemporary "tripolar" deterrence context is considerably different from that of the Cold War, but the reasons for continuing to reject intentional population targeting for deterrence remain sound regardless of whether Washington faces two, three or more nuclear powers similar to Russia and China.

The Bipartisan Case Against Targeting Civilian Populations for Deterrence

Inadequate Deterrent Effect. An effective U.S. deterrent threat must hold at risk what contemporary hostile leaderships value most because they are the audience that must be deterred. Any threat of lesser consequence could lead the opponent to believe that, under some circumstances, the "cost" of its aggression could be acceptable—and thus would *not be deterred*. For almost 50 years, bipartisan U.S. policy has been guided by the conclusion of multiple serious studies that what the authoritarian leadership in Moscow values most highly includes military power, political control and possibly their own lives, and that *these* must be held at



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risk for effective deterrence. For example, the “Scowcroft Commission” reported in 1983: “Deterrence is the set of beliefs in the minds of the Soviet leaders, given their own values and attitudes... It requires us to determine, as best we can, what would deter them from considering aggression, even in a crisis—not to determine what would deter us.”¹⁴ These include most prominently its military power and political control assets.¹⁵ In such cases, intentionally threatening opponents’ general civil populations is unlikely to hold at risk what opponents value most; rather, their general populations are considered instruments of the state, to be expended as necessary.

That the Chinese Communist Party shares this authoritarian perspective is suggested by its past and present brutality vis-a-vis China’s general population. Mao Tse-Tung, for example, reportedly wrote approvingly of a nuclear war with the United States. “For our ultimate victory, ... ‘for the total eradication of the imperialists, we [i.e., the Chinese people] are willing to endure the first [U.S. nuclear] strike. All it is a big pile of people dying.’”¹⁶ Mao reportedly described the loss of hundreds of millions of Chinese lives in a nuclear war as, “no great loss.”¹⁷ In short, a U.S. deterrent threat to target population is unlikely to be most effective against the contemporary authoritarian opponents confronting the United States and allies.

The argument of those who advocate intentionally targeting cities, that counterforce-oriented threats “destabilize” rather than strengthen deterrence, misses two points. First, counterforce threats *do not demand* the level of capabilities that would be required to threaten the survivability of the Soviet (now Russian) or emerging Chinese deterrent—and thus, as advocates of city targeting argue, destabilize deterrence. U.S. leaders have emphasized repeatedly that such a capability is not a U.S. goal and is not possible against Russia or China, and have proactively limited U.S. forces to make those points manifest.¹⁸ Secretary Schlesinger, for example, was clear in this regard: “...we do not have and cannot acquire a disarming first-strike capability against the Soviet Union. In fact, it is our decided preference that neither side attempt to acquire such a capability.”¹⁹ Second, the United States has for decades emphasized a counterforce-oriented approach to deterrence and rejected the intentional targeting of cities. Yet, there has been little or no indication that this U.S. policy has “destabilized” deterrence; it appears to have held through crises and regional conflicts. This does not “prove” that a counterforce-oriented deterrent holds no potential to destabilize deterrence, but the burden of proof surely is on those who claim with such certainty that it does so.

Finally, U.S. national security leaders, civilian and military, concluded long ago that Moscow was *highly unlikely to believe* that the United States actually would engage in the destruction of Russian cities, particularly on behalf of allies, when doing so would likely ensure the destruction of U.S. cities. Such a deterrence threat is likely incredible in many circumstances, now including vis-à-vis China—alternative options are essential for more credible deterrence.

Cost. A counter-city deterrence strategy may entail more modest nuclear force requirements and costs, as its advocates claim, but the priority goal is to deter nuclear war to the extent possible, not finding a rationale for the smallest, least expensive U.S. force posture.



The ultimate price of an incredible counter-city deterrence strategy may well be the fatal degradation of the deterrent effects upon which the United States and its allies rely. And, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark Milley has rightly observed, “The only thing more expensive than deterrence is fighting a war...”²⁰ In addition, in the contemporary threat environment, the United States already must strengthen its non-nuclear forces for regional defense. Moving to a potentially incredible, less effective counter-city nuclear deterrence policy would likely entail the need for *much greater U.S. and allied preparation for war at the conventional level*. This *further* expansion of U.S. non-nuclear force requirements would overwhelm any prospective savings enabled by counter-city deterrence at the nuclear level.

Legal and Moral Considerations. Democratic and Republican administrations also have emphasized legal and moral reasons for rejecting a counter-city approach to deterrence – with legal reasons paralleling the moral principles of the centuries-old Just War Doctrine. The intentional destruction of an opponent’s cities and population would violate most prominently the principles of distinction and proportionality drawn from the Just War Doctrine and codified in the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC) and the Department of Defense’s *Law of War Manual*.²¹

Some advocates of counter-city targeting wrongly suggest that only “doves” are committed to these legal/moral principles.²² Within DoD, however, avoiding the targeting of civilian populations and objects has long been taken very seriously and given great credence (including by the authors of this article) – it is *not* window dressing or pretense. For example, in 1986, Gen. Bernard Rogers, then Commander in Chief of NATO forces, made precisely this point regarding U.S. nuclear targeting: “I place certain restraints on myself in regard to collateral damage. *I will not fire a nuclear weapon into a city*. I am concerned about those targets that are militarily significant, that we need to strike because it will have an impact on the battlefield, but which are close to cities. I will not strike those targets if a large percentage of civilians are going to be killed.”²³ For over four decades, every Republican and Democratic administration has publicly confirmed the continuing significance of this stricture on U.S. nuclear target planning, including most recently the Obama, Trump and Biden Administrations.

The frequent assertion by counter-city targeting advocates that there is no meaningful difference in the likely civilian casualties resulting from intentional population targeting vs. counterforce targeting almost certainly is wrong. Rigorous studies over decades have concluded that the intentional targeting of cities and population would likely inflict *much higher* civilian casualty levels than would counterforce/city avoidance targeting options. The difference could be many millions of civilian lives.²⁴ As Secretary Schlesinger observed, “...one can reduce those collateral mortalities significantly, if that is one of the attacker’s objectives.”²⁵ Washington’s deterrence policy surely should not increase the likelihood of indiscriminate and disproportional civilian death and destruction – which intentional city targeting undoubtedly would do.

Arms Race/Arms Limitation. At this point in history, the U.S. priority is meeting the requirements for credible deterrence – not adopting a definition of deterrence force adequacy that instead prioritizes the least U.S. capability and likely would degrade deterrent effect. The



claim that a counter-city deterrent's modest force requirements would help stop a prospective action-reaction cycle, and thereby advance arms limitation, is logically plausible. But, the underlying expectation of an action-reaction dynamic led by the United States misses decades of contrary evidence. Rigorous historical studies, for example, conclude that The Soviet Union's nuclear expansion generally was *not driven* by precursor U.S. nuclear programs;²⁶ rather, Soviet arms racing was the result of "self-stimulation."²⁷ These studies confirm James Schlesinger's comment that, "The Soviets have proceeded with development of many strategic programs *ahead of rather than in reaction to what the United States has done*,"²⁸ and Harold Brown's famous remark that, "When we build, they build; when we stop building, they nevertheless continue to build"²⁹

Today, Moscow and China arm themselves to support their aggressive, expansionist agendas intended to reorder the international system, not according to a mechanistic "action-reaction" dynamic led by the United States. Their nuclear arms buildups have preceded the current U.S. nuclear modernization program by a decade or more—a program that will not increase U.S. strategic force numbers and is described by the Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, Gen. Anthony Cotton, as still in its "beginnings."³⁰ The U.S. adoption of a counter-city deterrent is hardly likely to moderate Russian or Chinese expansionist goals or end their associated, long-standing nuclear arms buildups,

In addition, a modernized, counterforce-oriented U.S. deterrent may well provide a greater incentive for opponents to negotiate at some point. This possibility is suggested by numerous Russian responses to U.S. pleas for arms control limits. For example, then Kremlin Chief of Staff and former Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov remarked: "When I hear our American partners say: 'let's reduce something else,' I would like to say to them; excuse me, but what we have is relatively new. They [the United States] have not conducted any upgrades for a long time. They still use Trident [submarine-launched ballistic missiles]."³¹ More recently, Russian President Putin emphasized, "that we have more such nuclear weapons than NATO countries. They know about it and never stop trying to persuade us to start nuclear reduction talks. Like hell we will... Because, putting it in the dry language of economic essays, it is our competitive advantage."³² The United States resting with a population targeting approach to deterrence is hardly likely to inspire such an opponent's interest in negotiations—doing so would likely achieve Moscow's goal without any limits on Russia.

In the current nuclear threat environment, Moscow violates arms control agreements with seeming impunity; Russia and China engage in explicit and implicit nuclear threats against the United States and allies, pursue unprecedented nuclear arms buildups, and mock or ignore U.S. pleas for arms control. In this context, Washington surely should continue to pursue diplomacy to reduce threats. But the notion that, for the sake of imagined arms limitations, the United States should resort to the targeting of civilian populations,³³—a deterrence policy lacking credibility in critical scenarios—seems obtuse in the extreme.

Conclusion. For more than four decades, the United States has rejected the intentional targeting of population in favor of a counterforce-oriented deterrent with graduated options.



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This policy provides an approach to deterrence that: 1) is likely to be more effective and credible vis-a-vis America's authoritarian opponents, including for extending deterrence to allies; 2) has the potential to be aligned with legal and moral principles; 3) is highly unlikely to prevent arms limitations that contemporary opponents otherwise would embrace and follow—indeed, unlike a counter-city oriented force posture, it might provide them with a motivation to negotiate; and, 4) costs *less overall* than a counter-city alternative given the latter's likely much greater requirement for strengthening U.S. conventional capabilities than already exists—and/or the price of deterrence failure. Ultimately, the functioning of deterrence is of existential importance for the United States and allies; its value is literally priceless.

In contrast, targeting population may entail less U.S. effort/cost at the nuclear level, but likely would: 1) degrade the needed deterrent effect in key scenarios; 2) intentionally plan for the gross violation of legal/moral strictures; 3) *increase* overall defense costs; and, 4) not facilitate otherwise available arms limitation agreements at this point in history. The priority goal of "tailoring" deterrence is to secure the most effective deterrent to war possible given legal, moral, financial, and threat realities, not to degrade deterrence and flaunt those realities.

These reasons for the bipartisan U.S. rejection of intentionally targeting populations for deterrence were clear and persuasive in the past. With the addition of China to the familiar U.S.-Russian deterrence dynamic, the new "tripolar" threat environment is significantly different from the Cold War bipolar context. But the critical advantages of a counterforce/city avoidance-oriented deterrent *remain*, as do the severe failings of intentionally targeting population.

¹ Most recently, professors Keir Lieber and Daryl Press recommend targeting cities for the "most extreme circumstances." See, "US Strategy and Force Posture for an Era of Nuclear Tripolarity," *Issue Brief*, Atlantic Council, April 2023, p. 3.

² Robert McNamara, *Draft Memorandum for the President, Secretary of Defense to the President [Lyndon B. Johnson]*, Subj: Recommended FY 1966-FY 1970 Programs for Strategic Offensive Forces, Continental Air and Missile Defense Forces, and Civil Defense, December 3, 1964, p. 4 (Sanitized and declassified on January 5, 1983).

³ Robert S. McNamara, *The Essence of Security: Reflections in Office* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 52-53.

⁴ See, Franklin Miller, "Tailoring U.S. Strategic Deterrent Effects on Russia," in Barry Schneider and Patrick Ellis, eds., *Tailored Deterrence* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: USAF Counterproliferation Center, 2011), pp. 41-56.

⁵ Caspar Weinberger, "U.S. Defense Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (Spring 1986), pp. 680-681.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 682. (Emphasis added.) See also, Caspar Weinberger, U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Strategic Doctrine*, Hearings, 97th Congress, 2nd Session (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1983), pp. 14-22. (Emphasis added.)

⁷ McGeorge Bundy, William J. Crowe, Jr., and Sidney D. Drell, *Reducing Nuclear Danger* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1993), p. 95.

⁸ See, Lieber and Press, "US Strategy and Force Posture for an Era of Nuclear Tripolarity," *op. cit.*, p. 3.



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⁹ For an early discussion of this concern see, Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 233-234, 236, 239. More recently, see, Lieber and Press, “US Strategy and Force Posture for an Era of Nuclear Tripolarity,” op. cit., pp. 3, 9.

¹⁰ For example, see Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 117. More recently, see, Lieber and Press, “US Strategy and Force Posture for an Era of Nuclear Tripolarity,” op. cit., pp. 3, 5, 8, 12.

¹¹ See, Lieber and Press, “US Strategy and Force Posture for an Era of Nuclear Tripolarity,” op. cit., pp. 2, 3, 12, 13. The classic article asserting a U.S.-led, action-reaction arms race is, 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.

¹² See for example, Walter Pincus, “The First Law of Nuclear Politics: Every Action Brings Reaction,” *The Washington Post*, November 28, 1999, p. B-2.

¹³ See, for example Wolfgang Panofsky, “The Mutual Hostage Relationship Between America and Russia,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 51, No. 5 (October 1973), pp. 110-113. More recently, see, Lieber and Press, “US Strategy and Force Posture for an Era of Nuclear Tripolarity,” op. cit., pp. 3, 6, 11.

¹⁴ *Report of the President’s Commission on Strategic Forces* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, April 1983), p. 3, available at <http://web.mit.edu/chemistry/deutch/policy/1983-ReportPresCommStrategic.pdf>.

¹⁵ See for example, *Ibid.*, p. 6. See also the testimony by Secretary Brown and the “Administration’s Responses to Questions Submitted Before the Hearing,” in, *Nuclear War Strategy*, Hearings, 96th Congress, 2nd Session (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1981), pp. 10, 16, 25, 29-30. (Classified hearing held on September 16, 1980; sanitized and printed on February 18, 1981.)

¹⁶ See, Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2005), pp. 413-414.

¹⁷ See, Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* (New York: Random House, 1994), p. 125.

¹⁸ See, for example, statements by Harold Brown and Gen. Brent Scowcroft in, *MX Missile Basing System and Related Issues*, op. cit., pp. 17-18. See also, *Report of the President’s Commission on Strategic Forces*, op. cit., p. 18. These self-limits continue to the present.

¹⁹ James Schlesinger, *Annual Defense Department Report FY 1976 and FY 1977* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, February 5, 1975), pp. I-15-I-16.

²⁰ Quoted in, Joe Gould, *Defense News*, September 15, 2016, available at <http://www.defensenews.com/articles/us-service-chiefs-lament-budget-squeeze>.

²¹ Office of General Counsel, Department of Defense, *Law of War Manual*, June 2015 (updated July 2023), available at <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Jul/31/2003271432/-1/-1/0/DOD-LAW-OF-WAR-MANUAL-JUNE-2015-UPDATED-JULY%202023.PDF>.

²² See, Lieber and Press, “US Strategy and Force Posture for an Era of Nuclear Tripolarity,” op. cit., p. 11.

²³ Quoted in, Bob Furlong and Macha Levinson, “SACEUR Calls for Research on a European ABM System,” *International Defense Review* (February 1986), p. 151. (Emphasis added.)

²⁴ See for example, Matthew McKinzie, et al., *The U.S. Nuclear War Plan: A Time for a Change* (New York: National Resources Defense Council, June 2001), pp. ix-xi, 125-126; United States Senate, Subcommittee on Arms Control, International Law and Organization of the Committee on Foreign Relations, Hearing, *Briefing* [by Secretary of Defense Schlesinger] on *Counterforce Attacks*, 93rd Congress, 2nd Session, September 11, 1974, pp. 12-22; Congress of the United States, Office of Technology Assessment, *The Effects of Nuclear War*, OTA-NS-89 (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, May 1979), pp. 94-95; and, William Daugherty, Barbara Levi, and Frank von Hippel, “The Consequences of ‘Limited’ Nuclear Attacks on the United States,” *International Security*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Spring 1986), pp. 3-35.

²⁵ United States Senate, *Briefing* [by Secretary of Defense Schlesinger] on *Counterforce Attacks*, op. cit., p. 26.



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²⁶ See for example, Albert Wohlstetter, *Legends of the Strategic Arms Race*, USSI Report 75-1 (Washington, D.C.: United States Strategic Institute, September 1974); Colin S. Gray, *The Soviet-American Arms Race* (Farnborough Hants, England: Saxon House, 1976), pp. 12-57; *History of the Strategic Arms Competition: 1945-1972*, Part II, Alfred Goldberg, ed., with contributions by Ernest R. May, John D. Steinbrunner, and Thomas W. Wolfe (Washington, D.C.: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, March 1981), p. 811; and, Jean-Christian Lambelet, Urs Luterbacher, and Pierre Allan, "Dynamics of Arms. Races: Mutual Stimulation vs. Self-Stimulation," *Journal of Peace Science*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1979), p. 64.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ See, James Schlesinger, *Annual Defense Department Report, FY 1975* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, March 4, 1974), p. 29. (Emphasis added.)

²⁹ Quoted in, U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, *The Soviet Propaganda Campaign Against the US Strategic Defense Initiative* (Washington, D.C.: Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, 1986), p. 8.

³⁰ Quoted in Chris Gordon, "Still 'In the Beginnings' of Nuclear Modernization, STRATCOM Has Low Margin for Delay," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, September 8, 2023, available at <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/strategic-command-modernization-nuclear-forces-delay/>.

³¹ "Russia today is not interested in U.S.-proposed arms reduction -Sergei Ivanov (Part 2)" *Interfax*, March 5, 2013, available at <https://wncastview-com.mutex.gmu.edu/wnc/article?id=30010953>.

³² Vladimir Putin's remarks, *Plenary session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum*, June 16, 2023, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/714452>.

³³ See, for example, Lieber and Press, "US Strategy and Force Posture for an Era of Nuclear Tripolarity," op. cit., pp. 2, 3, 12, 13.

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