September 2023 OCCASIONAL PAPER Volume 3, Number 9

The Rejection of Intentional Population Targeting for "Tripolar" Deterrence

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National Institute Press®

Published by
National Institute Press®
9302 Lee Highway, Suite 750
Fairfax, Virginia 22031

Cover design by Stephanie Koeshall.

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Executive Summary

For more than six decades, two fundamentally different narratives regarding U.S. nuclear deterrence policy have competed in the public debate for policy primacy. This debate is important because it informs the interested public, and much of Congress, on the subject. Which narrative might guide U.S. policy is significant because each mandates different U.S. force postures and expressed threats, and likely provides different levels of deterrence effectiveness for preventing war.

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. This type of threat traditionally has been referred to as a punitive, "countervalue" approach to deterrence. In contrast, an alternative narrative is that the U.S. deterrent should focus on an opponent's military capabilities and tools of power—and avoid intentionally targeting cities. This traditionally has been called a "counterforce" approach to deterrence. Whether an opponent's cities and population should *intentionally be threatened*, or *intentionally avoided in favor of counterforce-oriented targets* has been a fundamental divide in the public debate regarding the determination of "how much is enough" for deterrence.

A countervalue approach to U.S. deterrence policy perhaps is best illustrated by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's 1964 *declared* policy that nuclear deterrence should include a threat to destroy 20 to 25 percent of the Soviet population and 50 percent of the Soviet industrial base. McNamara dubbed this "assured destruction" threat the "very essence of the whole deterrence concept." The alternative counterforce approach to deterrence policy, including the rejection of intentional population targeting, was perhaps best illustrated two decades later when

Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger stated that the United States "…consciously does not target population and, in fact, has provisions for reducing civilian casualties." Instead, "…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." This key observation by Secretary Weinberger extended a policy theme initiated by his predecessors, James Schlesinger and Harold Brown, and has continued to the present under every Republican and Democratic administration.

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

First is the fundamental contention that threats to cities and population will provide the desired *deterrent effect with relatively modest force requirements* because cities generally are not large in number, and are soft, easily targeted and highly vulnerable to nuclear attack. A second and corresponding claim is that, *unlike* a countervalue-oriented deterrent, a U.S. counterforce threat demands large 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. "first strike."

Third, a modest nuclear force requirement implies that the cost for U.S. nuclear weapons can be correspondingly modest. Capabilities beyond that needed to threaten cities and population are deemed "overkill" and a waste of scarce defense resources.

Fourth, a countervalue deterrence policy is said to be uniquely compatible with arms control 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."

Finally, because military targets and residential concentrations often are co-located, countervalue targeting advocates assert that 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 lives essentially would *not be spared* by a counterforce deterrent.

Given these projected advantages, why has Washington, on a fully bipartisan basis, moved away from a countervalue approach to deterrence for more than four decades? There are strategic, legal and moral reasons for rejecting countervalue deterrence in favor of counterforce. These too have been consistent for decades, and *their soundness continues in the contemporary "tripolar" deterrence context*.

Inadequate Deterrent Effect. An effective U.S. deterrent threat must hold at risk what opponents value most. Any threat of lesser consequence could lead the opponent to believe that, under some circumstances, the "cost" of its aggression could be tolerable—and thus would *not be deterred*. For almost 50 years, U.S. policy has been guided by the conclusion that, in this context, what the authoritarian leaders in Moscow value most highly includes military power, political control and possibly their own lives, and that these must be held at risk for effective deterrence.

In addition, U.S. national security leaders 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

threat is likely incredible in many circumstances. Every Republican and Democratic administration for four decades has rejected intentionally threatening the opponent's population in favor of counterforce-oriented approaches.

The argument that counterforce-oriented threats "destabilize" deterrence misses two points. First, they *do not demand* the level of capabilities that would be required to threaten the survivability of the Soviet (now Russian) or Chinese deterrent—and thus possibly destabilize deterrence. U.S. leaders have emphasized that such a capability is not a U.S. goal and is not possible, and have proactively limited U.S. forces to make those points manifest. Second, over the decades that the United States has emphasized a counterforce approach to deterrence and rejected the intentional targeting of cities, there has been little or no indication that this evolution of U.S. policy has "destabilized" deterrence; deterrence 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.

Cost. A countervalue 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 a countervalue deterrence strategy may well be the fatal degradation of the deterrent effect 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…" In the contemporary threat environment, an approach to deterrence at the nuclear level that is less effective in preventing regional wars would likely entail a *greater need for U.S. and allied preparation for war at the conventional level*. These likely non-nuclear force

requirements would overwhelm any prospective savings at the nuclear level.

Legal and Moral Considerations. Democratic and Republican administrations also have emphasized legal and moral reasons for rejecting a countervalue approach to deterrence—with legal reasons paralleling the moral principles of the Christian Just War Doctrine. The intentional destruction of an opponent's cities and population would violate most prominently the principles of distinction and proportionality codified in the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC) and the Department of Defense's *Law of War Manual*. Senior U.S. military and civilian officials in both Republican and Democratic administrations have confirmed the significance of these strictures in U.S. nuclear target planning, including most recently the Obama, Trump and Biden Administrations.

The frequent assertion by countervalue targeting advocates that there is no meaningful difference in the likely civilian casualties resulting from intentional countervalue vs. counterforce targeting almost certainly is wrong. Rigorous studies over decades conclude that the intentional targeting of cities and population would likely inflict much higher casualty levels than would counterforce/city avoidance targeting options. Washington's deterrence policy surely should not increase the likelihood of indiscriminate, intended civilian death and destruction—which countervalue targeting surely 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. Further, the claim that a U.S. countervalue deterrent's modest force requirements would help stop a prospective action-reaction cycle, and thereby advance arms limitation, is logically

plausible. But, the evidence of history reveals conclusively that the underlying expectation of an action-reaction dynamic led by the United States misses decades of contrary behavior: The Soviet Union's nuclear expansion generally was *not driven* by precursor U.S. nuclear programs. Now, 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. The U.S. adoption of a countervalue deterrent is hardly likely to moderate their expansionist goals or end their associated arms buildups—which serve purposes beyond reacting to U.S. force initiatives. But, a counterforce-oriented deterrent may well provide a greater incentive for opponents to negotiate at some point.

Conclusion. For more than four decades, the United States has rejected intentional countervalue targeting in favor of a counterforce-oriented deterrent with graduated options. The 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 countervalue force posture, it might provide them with a motivation to negotiate; and, 4) costs less overall than a countervalue alternative given the latter's likely associated demand for greater U.S. conventional capabilities—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, a countervalue approach may entail less U.S. effort 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.

These reasons for the bipartisan U.S. rejection of countervalue 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 a countervalue approach.

Introduction

The basic principles of deterrence among nations do not change—a threat is declared but withheld for the purpose of persuading an opponent not to take an action for fear of that threat. Deterrence ultimately is intended to affect an opponent's behavior by shaping its decision making in this fashion. This does not imply physical control over the opponent or its territory; deterrence is intended to persuade the opponent to weigh the prospective costs and benefits of its options and to decide against the unwanted action.

The principles of deterrence endure, but how they are applied must adapt to any given situation. For more than six decades, two fundamentally different narratives regarding U.S. nuclear deterrence policy have competed in the public debate for policy primacy.[1] A key difference separating these two narratives is centered on the type of nuclear threat the United States should declare to help deter attacks on the U.S. homeland and on allies. Which narrative might guide U.S. policy is significant because each mandates different U.S. force postures and expressed threats; each establishes different adequacy standards for determining "how much is enough" to deter. Perhaps more importantly, each likely provides different levels of deterrence effectiveness for preventing war.

Those engaged in this debate have been referred to as "The Wizards of Armageddon" and the "Nuclear Priesthood"; their work often is filled with arcane jargon and acronyms. However, when stripped of the specialized language, the basic arguments underlying these competing narratives are not complex and have changed very little over the past six decades.

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[1] For an explanation of the assumptions and logic of these two different narratives, see Keith Payne, *Shadows on the Wall: Deterrence and Disarmament* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2020), Chapter 2.

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.[2] This type of threat traditionally has been referred to as a punitive, "countervalue" approach to deterrence. With this approach, the adequacy of U.S. forces for strategic deterrence can be calculated easily by identifying the number and types of weapons needed to threaten retaliation against some selected set of an opponent's cities.

In contrast, an alternative narrative is that the U.S. deterrent threat should focus on an opponent's military capabilities and tools of power—and avoid intentionally targeting cities. This traditionally has been called a "counterforce" approach to deterrence. It sets up a more demanding standard for the adequacy of U.S. nuclear forces for deterrence because the targets typically are more numerous and less easily held at risk.

There are, of course, variations on these two basic narratives. But, whether an opponent's cities and population should intentionally be *threatened with destruction*, or *intentionally avoided in favor of counterforce-oriented targets*, has been and remains a fundamental divide in the public debate regarding the determination of "how much is enough" for deterrence. This debate is important because it informs the interested public, and much of Congress, on the subject.

A countervalue approach to U.S. deterrence policy perhaps is best illustrated by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's 1964 *declared* policy that nuclear deterrence should include a threat to destroy 20 to 25 percent of the Soviet population and 50 percent of the Soviet industrial

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[2] Most recently, Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press have recommended that targeting population *be added* to U.S. deterrence planning. See, "US Strategy and Force Posture for an Era of Nuclear Tripolarity," *Issue Brief*, Atlantic Council, April 2023.

base.[3] Secretary McNamara dubbed this an "assured destruction" deterrence threat, which he presented as the adequacy standard for U.S. strategic nuclear forces and described as the "very essence of the whole deterrence concept."[4] (It must be noted that while McNamara declared a countervalue deterrence policy before Congress and the public, less openly he also said that the United States had more limited targeting options,[5] and that in the event of war, U.S. nuclear weapons would not necessarily be employed according to his "assured destruction" guidelines.)[6]

The alternative counterforce approach to deterrence policy—and the rejection of intentional population targeting—was perhaps best illustrated two decades later when Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger stated that the United States did not plan to "attack deliberately the

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[3] See, Alain C. Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, *How Much Is Enough?* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), p. 175; and, 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).

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

[5] 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.

[6] See, *Draft Memorandum for the President, Secretary of Defense [Robert S. McNamara] to the President [Lyndon B. Johnson]*, Subj: Recommended FY 1965-FY 1969 Strategic Retaliatory Forces, December 6, 1963, p. I-12. (Originally classified; sanitized and declassified on January 5, 1983); and, *Draft Memorandum for the President, Secretary of Defense [Robert S. McNamara] to the President [Lyndon B. Johnson]*, Subj: Strategic Offensive and Defensive Forces, January 15, 1968, p. 9. (Originally classified; sanitized and declassified on January 5, 1983).

Soviet population,"[7] and that U.S. deterrence strategy "…consciously does not target population and, in fact, has provisions for reducing civilian casualties."[8] Instead, "…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."[9]

The key observation by Secretary Weinberger that U.S. deterrence threats should focus on what the opponent "values most highly," and for Moscow's leadership that meant military power and political control, extended a theme in U.S. deterrence policy initiated by his predecessors in the Department of Defense, James Schlesinger and Harold Brown. This shift in declared deterrence policy has continued to the present under every Republican and Democratic administration.

The reasons for this decades-long, bipartisan evolution in the official descriptions of U.S. deterrence policy—from McNamara's "assured destruction" to counterforce—were explained extensively by the Nixon, Carter and Reagan Administrations. The sound reasons for this evolution away from intentional countervalue targeting should be well-known by now. But, they often seemingly are ignored or dismissed in many academic commentaries that continue to suggest that the U.S. deterrence policy is or should be

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

[8] Caspar Weinberger, *The Potential Effects of Nuclear War on Climate: A Report to the United States Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985), p. 11.

[9] Weinberger, "U.S. Defense Strategy," op. cit., 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.)

based—in whole or part—on intentionally threatening opponents' cities and populations.[10]

This study provides an assessment of the arguments presented by advocates for intentionally targeting an opponent's population as an element of U.S. deterrence policy and, by doing so, elaborates the reasons why Washington has, for decades and on a bipartisan basis, *rejected* a countervalue-oriented deterrence.

Threatening an Opponent's Cities and Population

Advocacy for intentionally threatening an opponent's population and cities, i.e., countervalue deterrence, can be seen in many commentaries over the past six decades. The various basic arguments intended to advance this policy position have remained constant and can be summarized concisely.

First is the fundamental contention that threats to cities and population will provide the desired *deterrent effect with relatively modest force requirements*: "…a 'counter-value' strategy that targets population centres and perhaps a few regime-specific strategic targets per opponent is sufficient to deter prospective nuclear opponents."[11] Such comments simply repeat Secretary McNamara's many earlier confident expressions—referencing the Soviet population—

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[10] See the discussion in, David Trachtenberg, "Mischaracterizing U.S. Nuclear Deterrence Policy," *Information Series*, No. 542 (December 14, 2022), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/david-j-trachtenberg-mischaracterizing-u-s-nuclear-deterrence-policy-the-myth-of-deliberate-civilian-targeting-no-542-december-14-2022/.

[11] Ted Seay, *Minimum Deterrence: Examining the Examination*, British American Security Information Council, September 4, 2013, available at http://www.basicint.org/blogs/2013/09/minimum-deterrence-examining-examination.

that, "I believe that a clear and unmistakable ability to inflict 20-30% Soviet fatalities will deter a deliberate Soviet attack on the U.S. or its allies."[12] The underlying presumption is that any rational opponent will be deterred by a countervalue threat that demands a predictably limited number of nuclear forces.

Why does such a deterrent threat entail relatively modest force requirements? Because cities generally are not large in number, and are soft, easily targeted and highly vulnerable to nuclear attack. Advocates differ on the number of an opponent's cities that need to be threatened with destruction. For example, relatively early in the Cold War, a prominent commentator at the time observed: "Would the Soviets be deterred by the prospect of losing ten cities? Or two cities? Or fifty cities? No one knows, although one might intuitively guess that the threshold is closer to ten than to either two or fifty."[13] More recently, a prominent commentary suggested threatening 50 Russian cities with destruction to be the adequacy standard.[14] Correspondingly, it argued that much of the existing and planned U.S. nuclear force posture should be eliminated.[15] In short, the number of U.S. weapons needed for deterrence, according to advocates of countervalue deterrence, typically range from "several second-strike nuclear weapons" to "hundreds."[16]

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[12] *Draft Memorandum for the President, Secretary of Defense [Robert S. McNamara] to the President [Lyndon B. Johnson*], Subj: Recommended FY 1968-FY 1972 Strategic Offensive and Defensive Forces, November 9, 1966, p. 9. (Originally classified; sanitized and declassified on January 5, 1983.)

[13] Glenn Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 57.

[14] William J. Perry and Tom Z. Collina, *The Button* (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2020), p. 119.

[15] Ibid., pp. 117-123.

[16] For a list of such "counter-city" recommendations over many years see, Keith B. Payne and James R. Schlesinger, *Minimum Deterrence:*

Whether the nuclear threat is to two or 50 cities, because the number of an opponent's major cities does not increase rapidly or at all, the United States could essentially rest with its arsenal once it acquired the relatively modest capability needed to threaten an opponent's cities. There would be little need to constantly improve/increase U.S. nuclear capabilities. This first contention, understandably, is very attractive: Countervalue deterrence would provide effective U.S. deterrence with modest U.S. nuclear force requirements.

A corresponding argument is that, *unlike* a countervalue-oriented deterrent, a U.S. counterforce threat demands large force numbers and "destabilizes" a mutual deterrence relationship by causing opponents to fear for the pre-emptive destruction of their own deterrent forces—thus giving them an incentive to strike first lest they lose their deterrent in a U.S. "first strike."[17]

A third claimed advantage also is related to the first: A modest nuclear force requirement implies that the cost for U.S. nuclear weapons can be correspondingly modest. Capabilities beyond that needed to threaten cities and population are deemed "overkill" and a waste of scarce defense resources. In short, countervalue deterrence is said to be uniquely undemanding, stabilizing, and inexpensive.

Fourth, countervalue advocates also argue that, as a consequence of an "easy" set of targets and corresponding modest force requirements, a countervalue deterrence policy is said to be uniquely compatible with arms control. Because the United States can retain its deterrent force needs at lower force levels, Washington can engage in arms

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Examining the Evidence (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2013), pp. 4-5.

[17] 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.

control limits and reductions without jeopardizing its deterrence posture. It can reduce its nuclear forces as an example for others to follow.

Along these lines, a countervalue-oriented deterrent has been described as likely to help prevent a "spiraling arms race."[18] How so? Because the United States can largely avoid further force increases and need not continually expand its arsenal, opponents need *not* feel compelled to increase *their* force levels in response to U.S. increases. This condition is said to create 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." As Herbert Scoville, former Deputy Director of the CIA and Assistant Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, asserted along these lines, "…in such a climate there would be little excuse for the Russians to continue building additional ICBM sites. In a situation of stable, frozen deterrence, they would not be needed."[19]

Finally, in an apparent attempt to defend the morality of intentionally threatening an opponent's cities and population, advocates of doing so assert that 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 of U.S. deterrence threats; because military targets and residential concentrations often are co-located, a meaningful number of innocent lives essentially would *not be spared* whether a countervalue or counterforce deterrent is planned.[20]

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[18] Ibid., pp. 2, 3, 12, 13.

[19] Herbert Scoville, "Next Steps in Limiting Strategic Arms," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (March 1972), p. 11.

[20] Lieber and Press, "US Strategy and Force Posture for an Era of Nuclear Tripolarity," op. cit., pp. 3, 6, 11. See also, Federation of American Scientists, Natural Resources Defense Council, and Union of Concerned Scientists, "Toward True Security," Union of Concerned Scientists (Cambridge, MA: February 2008), pp. 17-18, available at

For six decades, these claimed advantages—effective deterrence, modest force/spending requirements, improved prospects for arms control, a stable arms relationship with opponents, and no greater "collateral damage"—have constituted the arguments for basing U.S. deterrence on threatening cities and populations. Correspondingly, they have been the basis for the largely academic criticisms of the evolution of U.S. policy *away* from McNamara's declared "assured destruction," countervalue targeting.[21] These arguments are simple to understand, which helps to explain their longevity over generations. Indeed, every new generation of commentators repeats them in the apparent belief that they are fresh, new thinking for their time.

A key point to note is that these purported advantages largely follow from the contentions that threatening cities and population would: 1) provide effective deterrence at relatively lower force requirements; and, 2) allow the United States essentially to refrain from adding further to its nuclear arsenal once that standard is met, and thereby foster arms limitation. Given these projected advantages, it may be asked why the United States, on a fully bipartisan basis, has *moved away* from a countervalue approach to deterrence for more than four decades?

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http://www.ucsusa.org/assets/documents/nwgs/toward-true-security.pdf; and, Wolfgang Panofsky, "The Mutual Hostage Relationship Between America and Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 51, No. 5 (October 1973), pp. 110-113.

[21] See for example, Seymour Melman, "Limits of Military Power," *The New York Times*, October 17, 1980, p. A-31.

Why Not a Countervalue Deterrence Strategy?

For decades, the evolution of U.S. declarations regarding deterrence policy has emphasized that the nuclear threat intended to deter Moscow is *not* based on an intentional threat to destroy Russian cities and population and, indeed, that U.S. targeting would seek to *avoid* cities. There are strategic, legal and moral reasons for rejecting countervalue deterrence in favor of counterforce. These, too, have been consistent for decades and *continue to apply fully in the contemporary "tripolar" deterrence context in which the United States and allies face aggressive threats from two authoritarian, great powers, Russia and China*.

Inadequate Deterrent Effect

First is the underlying conclusion, noted above, that an effective U.S. deterrent threat must hold at risk what opponents value most. Any threat of lesser consequence could lead the opponent to believe that, under some circumstances, the "cost" of its aggression could be tolerable—and thus would *not be deterred*. As 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."[22] For more than four decades, U.S. policy has been guided by the conclusion that, in this context, what Moscow values most highly includes its

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[22] *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.

military power and political control assets.[23] These must be held at risk for deterrence.

Approximately a decade earlier, in what became known as the Schlesinger Doctrine, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger revised McNamara's definition of "assured destruction" to include multiple graduated threat options and the threatened "destruction of the political, economic, and military resources" critical to the Soviet Union.[24] This was done, in part, because U.S. national security leaders concluded that Moscow was *highly unlikely to believe* that the United States actually would engage in McNamara's assured destruction threat when the destruction of Russian cities on behalf of allies would likely ensure the destruction of U.S. cities.[25]

That is, nuclear deterrence is dependent on an opponent's belief that, following some extreme provocation, the United States might well respond with nuclear weapons. Yet, deliberate U.S. population targeting *was deemed unlikely to provide credible deterrence in many plausible circumstances, particularly in response to attacks on allies*.[26] This concern has been acknowledged by U.S. and allied leaders for decades as a reason not to rely on

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[23] See for example, Ibid., p. 6.

[24] See for example, National Security Council, *National Security Decision Memorandum-242, Policy for Planning the Employment of Nuclear Weapons*, January 17, 1974, p. 2. (Declassified February 20, 1998.)

[25] In 1979, Henry Kissinger pointed publicly to the incredibility of a massive U.S. nuclear deterrence threat on behalf of allies. See for example, "The Future of NATO," in, *NATO, The Next Thirty Years*, Kenneth Myers, ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), p. 8.

[26] See *NSSM-169*, (1973 "Foster Committee"; Declassified 1997). At, *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1969-1976*, Vol XXXV, *National Security Policy 1973-1976*, Department of State (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 2014), pp. 19-20, 49-82, available at https://static.history.state.gov/frus/frus1969-76v35/pdf/frus1969-76v35.pdf.

countervalue threats for deterrence.[27] As Secretary Schlesinger noted at the time, nuclear deterrence threats on behalf of allies, "demand[s] both more limited responses than destroying cities and advanced planning tailored to such lesser responses."[28]

The now-declassified 1974 Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy (NUWEP), corresponding to the Schlesinger Doctrine, stated explicitly, "It is not the intent of this policy guidance to target civilian population per se. Accordingly, planning directed toward the above objectives will not include residential structures as objective targets…. Every reasonable effort will be made to limit attacks in the vicinity of densely populated areas."[29] Here was a direct repudiation of McNamara's population fatalities metric for determining "how much is enough" for deterrence. The Schlesinger Doctrine redefined the adequacy of the earlier U.S. "assured destruction" threat to focus instead on Moscow's military capabilities, internal political control, and post-war recovery.[30]

Shortly thereafter, President Carter's Secretary of Defense, Harold Brown, and other U.S. senior leaders directly addressed the question, "What does it take to deter?" and emphasized that, "…we are trying to deter the Soviet leaders from aggressive actions and specifically from

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[27] The corresponding case for "discriminate" U.S. deterrence options has been voiced for decades. See for example, The Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy (Chaired by Fred Iklé and Albert Wohlstetter), *Discriminate Deterrence* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1988), p. 2.

[28] See James Schlesinger, *Annual Defense Department Report, FY 1975* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, March 4, 1974), p. 38.

[29] Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Policy For The Employment Of Nuclear Weapons*, April 3, 1974, pp. 5, 7.

[30] See the discussion in, Donald Rumsfeld, *Annual Defense Department Report FY 1978* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, January 17, 1977), p. 68. See also, William R. Van Cleave and Roger Barnett, "Strategic Adaptability," *Orbis*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Fall 1974), p. 666.

nuclear war. We therefore need to form a judgment on what it is that is so valuable to them that they would be left in no doubt that, whatever kind of nuclear attack they might launch, the U.S. response would leave them worse off in terms of those assets that they consider valuable…it is important for U.S. forces to be able to threaten retaliation against the assets that the Soviet leaders appear to prize…"[31] and, "…what the Soviets consider most important to them."[32] As already noted, this was determined to include most prominently, "their nuclear and conventional forces and the hardened shelters that protect their political and military control centers, as well as their own lives."[33] The Carter Administration's pertinent 1978 *Nuclear Targeting Policy Review* also expressed skepticism about the deterrence effectiveness of threatening to destroy "large amounts of Soviet population and industry" especially in scenarios of less than full-scale nuclear war.[34]

The Carter Administration's related nuclear policy direction was contained in the now-declassified Presidential Directive-59.[35] It extended and expanded the policy evolution, advanced earlier by the Schlesinger

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[31] See, the prepared statement by Harold Brown in, United States Senate, Committee On Armed Services, Hearing, *MX Missile Basing System And Related Issues*, 98th Congress, 1st Session (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1983), pp. 6-7. See also, R. James Woolsey, "US Strategic Force Decisions for the 1990s," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Winter 1989), p. 82.

[32] See, the testimony by Harold Brown in, U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Nuclear War Strategy*, Hearings, 96th Congress, 2nd Session (Top Secret hearing held on September 16, 1980; sanitized and printed on February 18, 1981). (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1981), p. 10.

[33] Brown, *MX Missile Basing System And Related Issues*, op. cit., p. 7.

[34] See, the declassified summary of the 1978 Department of Defense, *Nuclear Targeting Policy Review,* led by Leon Sloss, p. 3, available at https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/6144730/National-Security-Archive-Doc-28-U-S-Department.pdf.

[35] Presidential Directive/NSC-59, *Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy*, July 25, 1980, available at https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/pd/pd59.pdf.

Doctrine, to increase the flexibility of U.S. nuclear employment planning and provide U.S. deterrence options specifically geared to the priorities and values of the Soviet leadership. In short, based on a series of then-classified studies on the subject,[36] likely the first of their kind, the Carter Administration concluded that targeting flexibility and threatening Soviet military capabilities and tools of power were keys to effective, credible deterrence.[37]

Secretary of Defense Weinberger, expanding further on this theme (and in direct rejection of countervalue deterrence) observed: "We disagree with those who hold that deterrence should be based on nuclear weapons designed to destroy cities rather than military targets. Deliberately designing weapons aimed at populations *is neither necessary nor sufficient for deterrence*."[38] He went on to affirm that a countervalue threat would not likely provide credible deterrence, especially for the protection of U.S. allies, and that the United States sought *not* to maximize the threat to cities, *but to avoid such targeting*.[39]

This aligning of U.S. deterrence strategies to an opponent's values and circumstances so as to best support the deterrence of war is the meaning of "tailored deterrence."[40] The 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* continued to apply this deterrence policy principle. For example, it

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[36] See, Harold Brown's summary in, *Nuclear War Strategy*, op. cit., pp. 8–11. See also, Leon Sloss and Marc Dean Millot, "U.S. Nuclear Strategy in Evolution," *Strategic Review*, Vol. 12, No, 1 (Winter 1984), p. 24.

[37] See the testimony by Secretary Brown and the "Administration's Responses to Questions Submitted Before the Hearing," in, *Nuclear War Strategy,* op. cit., pp. 10, 16, 25, 29-30.

[38] Caspar Weinberger, *Department of Defense Annual Report to Congress, Fiscal Year 1985* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, February 1, 1983), p. 55. (Emphasis added.)

[39] Ibid. (Emphasis added.)

[40] For the earliest post-Cold War elaboration on the need to "tailor deterrence" see, Keith Payne, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), pp. 125-129.

concluded regarding North Korea, "For North Korea, the survival of the Kim regime is paramount. Our deterrence strategy for North Korea makes clear that any North Korean nuclear attack against the United States or its allies and partners is unacceptable and will result *in the end of that regime*."[41]

Here, then, is the first reason every Republican and Democratic administration for more than four decades has rejected a countervalue approach to deterrence in favor of counterforce-oriented approaches: Threatening population is unlikely to hold at risk what America's authoritarian opponents value most, i.e., their military power, political control and, possibly, their own lives. Their general populations consist of instruments of the state. In such cases, intentionally threatening the general civil population is unlikely to be as effective a deterrence strategy. This point appears to warrant the rejection of such threats as the basis for deterrence in those cases most pertinent to U.S. deterrence goals.

The countervalue advocates' corresponding, long-standing argument—that a counterforce-oriented deterrent could fatally "destabilize" deterrence—misses two points. First, such an approach *does not demand* the level of capabilities that would be required to threaten the survivability of the Soviet (now Russian) or Chinese deterrent. On those many occasions when U.S. leaders have explained the shift away from a countervalue deterrent, they have emphasized that the capability to destroy the opponent's deterrent is not a U.S. goal and is not possible, and have proactively limited U.S. forces to make those

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[41] Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, February 2018, pp. 31, 33, available at https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872877/-1/-1/1/EXECUTIVE-SUMMARY.PDF. (Emphasis added.)

points manifest for any opponent to see.[42] 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."[43]

A second point in this regard is that the United States has emphasized publicly for more than four decades that its approach to deterrence includes counterforce options and rejects the intentional targeting of cities. While it is not possible to claim full knowledge of the effect this had, and now has on Russian or Chinese incentives to launch nuclear weapons, there has been little or no indication for nearly a half century that this evolution of U.S. policy has destabilized deterrence; nuclear deterrence appears to have held through crises and regional conflicts. This history over decades does not "prove" that a U.S. counterforce-oriented deterrent holds no potential to destabilize deterrence, but the burden of proof now surely is on those countervalue advocates who claim with such certainty that it does so.

Cost

When in office, Henry Kissinger said that advocates of countervalue targeting cared not about deterrence effectiveness, but only about the approach to deterrence that "guarantees the smallest expenditure," and that he considered the intentional targeting of population to be "the

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[42] 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.

[43] James Schlesinger, *Annual Defense Department Report FY 1976 and FY 197T* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, February 5, 1975), pp. I-15-I-16.

height of immorality."[44] A countervalue deterrence strategy may entail more modest nuclear force requirements and costs, as its advocates claim, and the United States must, of course, be cost-conscious in all its defense spending. But the priority goal is to deter nuclear war to the extent possible, not finding a rationale for the smallest U.S. force posture.

The ultimate price of a countervalue deterrence strategy may well be the fatal degradation of the deterrent effect 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…"[45] Indeed, in the contemporary threat environment, an approach to deterrence at the nuclear level that is less effective in preventing regional wars would likely entail a much *greater need for U.S. and allied capabilities for war at the conventional level*. If so, the non-nuclear force requirements that would attend a countervalue approach to nuclear deterrence would likely overwhelm any prospective savings at the nuclear level.

Legal and Moral Considerations

Democratic and Republican administrations also have emphasized legal and moral reasons for rejecting a countervalue approach to deterrence—with legal reasons for rejecting countervalue deterrence paralleling moral

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[44] National Archives, *Nixon Presidential Materials*, NSC Institution Files (H-Files), Box H-108, Minutes of Meetings Verification Panel Minutes, Originals 3-15-72 to 6-4-74. Declassified and available in the Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1969-1976, Vol. XXXV, National Security Policy, 1973-1976 (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 2014), p. 105.

[45] Quoted in, Joe Gould, *Defense News*, September 15, 2016, available at http://www.defenssenews.com/articles/us-service-chiefs-lament-budget-squeeze.

reasons.[46] The intentional destruction of an opponent's cities and population would violate most prominently the principles of distinction and proportionality codified in the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC) and the Department of Defense's *Law of War Manual*.[47] These legal principles are drawn directly from the Just War Doctrine that has dominated Catholic and Protestant requirements for the just use of force for centuries.[48]

The legal and moral principle of distinction mandates that the employment of force distinguish between combatant and non-combatants for the purpose of avoiding intentionally harming the latter. The principle of proportionality requires that any potential unintended civilian harm be justified by the critical need and just reason to strike a target, i.e., proportional to the need to employ force for a just reason. In short, the execution of a countervalue deterrent would purposely violate the legal and moral principle of distinction, and almost certainly the principle of proportionality.

Some advocates of countervalue targeting mistakenly suggest that only "doves" are committed to these legal/moral principles.[49] Whether "hawks" or "doves," within DoD avoiding the targeting of civilian populations

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[46] For an insightful discussion see, Brad Roberts, "Nuclear Ethics and the Ban Treaty," in, Bard Nikolas Vik Steen and Olav Njolstad, *Nuclear Disarmament: A Critical Assessment* (New York: Routledge, 2018), available at https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/Nuclear-Disarmament-A-Critical-Assessment.pdf.

[47] 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.

[48] For a review of the Just War Doctrine and its principles, see, William O'Brien, *The Conduct of Just and Limited War* (New York: Praeger, 1983), pp. 1-70.

[49] Lieber and Press, "US Strategy and Force Posture for an Era of Nuclear Tripolarity," op. cit., p. 11.

and objects has long been taken very seriously and given great credence in planning (including by the author of this article)—it is *not* window dressing or pretense.

Senior U.S. military and civilian officials deeply involved in U.S. deterrence policy and efforts, in both Republican and Democratic administrations, have confirmed the goal of avoiding the targeting of cities.[50] Following the now decades-old targeting reviews, Air Force Maj. Gen. Jasper Welch observed that the United States, "took residential areas off the target list explicitly—and provided even for residential avoidance under certain circumstances, where one would reduce the effectiveness of the strike in order to avoid residential areas."[51] Gen. Bernard Rogers, then Commander in Chief of NATO forces, made precisely the same point regarding U.S. regional 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."[52]

Extending this fundamental point, the Obama Administration specifically rejected reliance on a countervalue threat for deterrence and said instead that all U.S. plans will "seek to minimize collateral damage to civilian populations and civilian objects. The United States will not intentionally target civilian populations or civilian

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[50] See for example, John Harvey, Frank Miller, Keith Payne, Brad Roberts, "Are Belligerent Reprisals Against Civilians Legal?" *International Security*, Vol. 46, Issue 2 (Fall 2021), pp. 166-172.

[51] Quoted in Gregg Herken, *Counsels of War* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985), pp. 261-262.

[52] 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.)

objects."[53] The Trump Administration's 2020 *Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States* included the same policy,[54] as did the Biden Administration's 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, stating, "…long standing U.S. policy is to not purposefully threaten civilian populations or objects, and the United States will not intentionally target civilian populations or objects in violation of the LOAC." [55]

It is important to note that the frequent assertion by countervalue targeting advocates that there is no meaningful difference in civilian casualty levels entailed by intentional countervalue vs. counterforce targeting strategies almost certainly is wrong. Various studies over decades, including by authors seemingly *opposed to a counterforce-oriented deterrent*, conclude that the intentional targeting of cities and population would likely inflict much higher casualty levels than would counterforce/city avoidance targeting options.[56] The prospect of nuclear war

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[53] See, Department of Defense, *Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States Specified in Section 491 of 10 U.S.C.*, RefID: 6-9963D19, June 12, 2013, pp. 4-5, available at https://fas.org/blogs/security/2013/06/nukeguidanc/.

[54] See, Department of Defense, *Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States-2020* (Specified in Section 491 (a) of Title 10 U.S.C.), available at https://www.nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Final-Documentation-1.1.pdf. For an excellent exposition of this report see, Robert Soofer and Matthew Costlow, "An Introduction to the 2020 Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States," *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2021), pp. 2-8.

[55] Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2022), p. 8, available at https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF.

[56] 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,

is horrific by any count, but there is a clear potential distinction between intentional countervalue and counterforce targeting in this regard.

A 2001 study by the Natural Resources Defense Council showed that a "countervalue" strike with up to 192 weapons could "approach" 60 million casualties in an exchange with Russia, while a large "counterforce" strike employing approximately 1,300 weapons could inflict 11-17 million casualties.[57] Other studies find the potential for *much higher* casualty levels (including approximately 100 million) from intentional population targeting and *far fewer* casualties in potential counterforce targeting scenarios (possibly including fewer than one million).[58] As Secretary Schlesinger observed, "…one can reduce those collateral mortalities significantly, if that is one of the attacker's objectives."[59]

The consequences of nuclear employment are shaped by many factors, including weather patterns, and how, where, and what types of nuclear weapons are involved, particularly including the elevation of nuclear detonations. But there clearly can be "selective" deterrent options

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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. Prominent Yale professor Bruce Russett recommended a "countercombatant" nuclear threat as a deterrence approach that could meet distinction and proportionality principles in practice. See Bruce Russett, "Assured Destruction of What? A Countercombatant Alternative to Nuclear MADness," *Public Policy*, Vol. 22 (Spring 1974), pp. 121-138.

[57] See, McKinzie, et al., *The U.S. Nuclear War Plan: A Time for a Change*, op. cit., pp. x, 125.

[58] United States Senate, *Briefing* [by Secretary of Defense Schlesinger] *on Counterforce Attacks*, op. cit., p. 33.

[59] Ibid., p. 26.

designed to distinguish combatants and non-combatants,[60] particularly including intentionally avoiding residential centers as a critical step. The distinction likely could avoid literally scores of millions of potential casualties. In short, there is a legal/moral difference in this regard that points toward the need for continued U.S. rejection of intentional countervalue targeting—particularly when a counterforce-oriented threat is likely to be more effective as a deterrent.

The potential for escalation to intolerable levels of civilian casualties cannot be removed as a possibility from nuclear or non-nuclear war. But Washington's deterrence policy surely must not lead the way to, and increase the likelihood of, indiscriminate civilian death and destruction—which countervalue targeting surely would do.[61]

Arms Race/Arms Limitation

Finally, the claim that a U.S. countervalue deterrent's more modest force requirements would help stop a prospective action-reaction cycle, and thereby advance arms limitation, is logically plausible. But the evidence of history reveals conclusively that the underlying expectation of an action-reaction dynamic, led by excessive U.S. arms and driving the opponent to similarly excessive arms, misses decades of contrary behavior by Washington and Moscow. This action-reaction thesis, commonly referred to as an objective truth,[62]

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[60] "Selective" counterforce targeting is a term used by Secretary Schlesinger. See, *Briefing on Counterforce Attacks*, op. cit. p. 3.

[61] This is the key point presented in, Albert Wohlstetter, "Bishops, Statemen, and Other Strategists on the Bombing of Innocents," *Commentary* (June 1983), p. 17.

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

has been discredited by rigorous studies.[63] The Soviet Union's nuclear expansion, for example, generally was not driven by precursor U.S. nuclear programs.

Independent experts conducted a then-classified, comprehensive study for the Office of the Secretary of Defense entitled, *History of the Strategic Arms Competition: 1945-1972*. The study highlighted the inadequacy of the supposed action-reaction dynamic to explain the history of U.S. and Soviet strategic buildups during the Cold War: "No consistent pattern can be found….*No sweeping generalizations about action-reaction cycles* or inexorable Soviet designs or the momentum of science and technology can survive detailed examination of the sequence of events..."[64] Another rigorous study similarly rejected the action-reaction thesis and instead concluded that Moscow's nuclear arms buildup was largely the result of "self-stimulation."[65]

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*,"[66] Donald Rumsfeld's similar observation that, "…it should now be obvious that the Soviets have taken the initiative in a wide range of

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[63] 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; and, *History of the Strategic Arms Competition: 1945-1972*, Part II, Alfred Goldberg, ed., with contributions by Ernest R. May, John D. Steinbruner, and Thomas W. Wolfe (Washington, D.C.: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, March 1981), p. 811.

[64] Ibid., pp. 810-811. (Emphasis added.)

[65] 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.

[66] See Schlesinger, *Annual Defense Department Report, FY 1975*, op. cit., p. 29. (Emphasis added).

programs, that restraint on our part (whatever its reason) has not been reciprocated—and is not likely to be,"[67] and Harold Brown's famous remark that, "When we build, they build; when we stop building, they nevertheless continue to build"[68]

More recently, critics of U.S. nuclear policy have replayed the familiar action-reaction criticism against the nuclear arms plans initiated by the Obama Administration and continued by the Trump Administration: "…our actions motivate further weapons building on their side, as the action-reaction cycle of nuclear arming spins onward in a replay of the Cold War."[69] Yet, again, the actual history of U.S. and Russian nuclear programs—as numerous Obama Administration officials have emphasized—demonstrates conclusively that Russia's expansive and continuing nuclear buildup was *not preceded* by U.S. causal actions; rather, it was ongoing years prior to the relatively gradual U.S. nuclear modernization program—a program that the Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, Gen. Anthony Cotton, describes as still in its "beginnings."[70] Dr. John

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[67] Donald Rumsfeld, *Annual Defense Department Report FY 1978* (Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, January 17, 1977), p. 64.

[68] 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.

[69] David Cortright, "Pope Francis and the U.S. bishops are correct: We cannot engage in a new nuclear arms race," *America: The Jesuit Review*, April 16, 2020, available at https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2020/04/16/pope-francis-and-us-bishops-are-correct-we-cannot-engage-new-nuclear. See also, Michael T. Klare, "Now Is Not the Time to Start an Arms Race," *The Nation*, March 31, 2020, available at https://www.thenation.com/article/world/coronavirus-cold-war-race/.

[70] 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

Harvey, Principal Deputy to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear and Chemical and Biological Defense Programs in the Obama Administration, observed in this regard that the United States "is not a stimulator of the arms race," and called assertions to the contrary "blatant fabrications." He noted that the U.S.-led, action-reaction narrative is a "mantra" that has "not one ounce of credibility."[71]

What is clear now is that Moscow and China arm themselves to support their aggressive, expansionist agendas that are intended to subordinate the West and reorder the international system, not according to a mechanistic "action-reaction" dynamic led by the United States.[72] The U.S. adoption of a countervalue deterrent is hardly likely to moderate their expansionist goals or inspire their interest in reversing their associated arms buildups intended to advance those goals.

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, the notion that the United States, for the sake of an imagined arms control

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https://www.airandspaceforces.com/strategic-command-modernization-nuclear-forces-delay/.

[71] Dr. John Harvey, quoted in, David Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge, and Keith Payne, *The "Action-Reaction" Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities*, *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 2021), p. 9. See also, Peter Rough and Frank A. Rose, "Why Germany's nuclear mission matters," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, translated by Brookings Institution, June 9, 2020, available at https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/06/09/why-germanys-nuclear-mission-matters/.

[72] See the lengthy historical study in this regard in, Trachtenberg, Dodge, and Payne, *The "Action-Reaction" Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities*, op. cit.

agreement, should now go back to an approach to deterrence that likely does not threaten what these authoritarian opponents value most, and lacks credibility for extended deterrence, is obtuse in the extreme.

In addition, a U.S. counterforce-oriented deterrent may well prove both more credible and effective in precluding opponents' use of nuclear weapons to further their expansionist goals, and also provide a greater incentive for opponents to negotiate at some point. This potential incentive is illustrated well by the response of then Kremlin Chief of Staff and former Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov to Washington's pleas for arms control: "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]."[73] 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."[74] The United States resting at a countervalue deterrence force posture is hardly likely to inspire such an opponent's interest in negotiations.

This discussion certainly is not to suggest that Washington abandon diplomacy and negotiations, but the priority goal at this point in history is to deter nuclear war. The U.S. priority is meeting the requirements for credible deterrence—not adopting a definition of deterrence force

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

[74] 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/71445.

adequacy that instead prioritizes the least U.S. capability for the sake of arms limitations that almost certainly are illusory. As famed American diplomat George Kennan observed of the arms control illusions of the 1930s: "The evil of these utopian enthusiasms was not only, or even primarily, the wasted time, the misplaced emphasis, the encouragement of false hopes. The evil lay primarily in the fact that these enthusiasms distracted our gaze from the real things that were happening."[75]

Tailoring

A recent article repeats the aged contention that the United States should include population targeting in its deterrence policy—essentially for the sake of arms limitation.[76] The authors claim that doing so would reflect the tailoring of deterrence to contemporary "circumstances."[77] In fact, as recommended, doing so would reflect the goal of tailoring U.S. deterrence policy for the purpose of facilitating arms limitation—not to provide the most effective deterrent possible in an increasingly dangerous threat environment. The call for tailoring deterrence in a manner that would likely degrade deterrent effect in order to advance an arms limitation agenda turns the goal of tailoring deterrence—a goal endorsed on a fully bipartisan basis—on its head. The new threat environment, with two hostile, authoritarian great powers issuing nuclear threats, is significantly different from the Cold War bipolar context.[78] It increases

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[75] George F. Kennan, *Realities of American Foreign Policy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 22-23.

[76] Lieber and Press, "US Strategy and Force Posture for an Era of Nuclear Tripolarity," op. cit., pp. 2, 8, 9, 12, 13.

[77] Ibid., p. 3.

[78] See the discussion in, Keith B. Payne and David J. Trachtenberg, *Deterrence in the Emerging Threat Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters, Occasional Paper,* Vol. 2, No. 8. (Fairfax, VA: National

the need for tailoring U.S. strategies for optimum deterrent effect but does not change the fundamental differences distinguishing countervalue- and counterforce-oriented approaches to deterrence.

Conclusion

Countervalue advocates continue to repeat aged arguments in favor of targeting population, but generally do not address in any depth the likely disadvantages and regrets of their favored policy. It is not difficult to comprehend the basic reasons why, for decades and on a fully bipartisan basis, the United States has rejected intentional countervalue targeting in favor of a counterforce-oriented deterrent. Those reasons essentially are the inverse of the manifest flaws of intentional countervalue targeting.

While there are uncertainties associated with deterrence and nuclear weapons, the counterforce/city avoidance-oriented policy with graduated options set into motion in the mid-1970s is likely far better suited to the contemporary, "tripolar" deterrence context. It 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 control agreements that contemporary opponents otherwise would embrace and follow—indeed, unlike a countervalue force posture, it might provide them with a motivation to negotiate; and, 4) may cost less overall than a countervalue alternative given the latter's likely associated demand for greater U.S. conventional capabilities—and/or the price of deterrence failure.

Institute Press, August 2022), available at https://nipp.org/papers/deterrence-in-the-emerging-threat-environment-what-is-different-and-why-it-matters/.

Ultimately, the functioning of deterrence is of existential importance for the United States and allies; its value is literally priceless.

In conclusion, Washington's policy goal must be to minimize the risk of nuclear war via the most effective deterrence approach possible—an approach that is affordable and compatible with moral/legal strictures. That appears to be a counterforce/city avoidance-oriented deterrent. In contrast, a countervalue approach may entail less U.S. effort at the nuclear level, but likely would: 1) degrade the needed deterrence 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. Secretary Weinberger summarized both its inadequate credibility for deterrence and moral failings by noting concisely that "to attack deliberately the Soviet population…would be neither moral nor prudent."[79]

Many commentators continue to believe that intentional countervalue attack planning either is, or should be, U.S. deterrence policy; but it has not been U.S. policy for decades. The reasons for the bipartisan U.S. rejection of countervalue deterrence were clear and persuasive in the past. 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 a countervalue approach.

[79] Weinberger, "U.S. Defense Strategy," op. cit., pp. 680-681.

About the Author

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Dr. Payne has served in the Department of Defense as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Forces Policy and as a Senior Advisor to the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). He received both the Distinguished Public Service Medal and the OSD Award for Outstanding Achievement.

Dr. Payne also served as a Commissioner on the bipartisan Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States and is a co-author of the Commission's final report (2009). He also served in Democratic and Republican administrations as a member of the Secretary of State's International Security Advisory Board, and as Chair of U.S. Strategic Command's Senior Advisory Group, Policy and Strategy Panel. He is an award-winning author, co-author, or editor of over 250 published articles and 40 books and monographs, some of which have been translated into German, Russian, Chinese, Japanese or Spanish. Dr. Payne's articles have appeared in major U.S., European and Japanese professional journals and newspapers. His most recent book is, *Chasing a Grand Illusion: Replacing Deterrence with Disarmament* (National Institute Press, 2023).

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