



THE REJECTION OF INTENTIONAL POPULATION TARGETING FOR “TRIPOLAR” DETERRENCE

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “The Rejection of Intentional Population Targeting for ‘Tripolar’ Deterrence” hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on November 17, 2023. The symposium keyed off a jointly authored Information Series article that examined the history of U.S. nuclear targeting policy and the arguments against targeting civilian populations for deterrence that have enjoyed strong bipartisan support for decades.

David J. Trachtenberg

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The issue of nuclear targeting has once again become an item of contemporary interest. In a recent jointly authored National Institute *Information Series* article, several of our panelists explained the history of U.S. nuclear targeting policy and the fallacy of moving away from counterforce targeting for deterrence and back toward the deliberate targeting of “soft targets” such as cities and urban-industrial areas. Links to this *Information Series* and the more detailed National Institute *Occasional Paper* on which it was based were provided in the email invitation to this webinar.

One school of thought that has reappeared lately suggests that the United States should intentionally threaten to target an opponent’s cities and civilian population with nuclear weapons as a means of ensuring deterrence. Indeed, as two advocates of this policy recently wrote, “the United States should reconsider its current prohibition on deliberately targeting enemy civilians with nuclear weapons—a policy that prohibits counter-city targeting even in retaliation for a major Chinese or Russian nuclear attack on the US homeland.... In an era of rapid adversary nuclear enhancements, this ‘counterforce-only’ approach to nuclear planning is a recipe for large nuclear requirements and a likely three-party arms race”¹

Now, as the authors of the NIPP *Information Series* note, these arguments are not only reminiscent of Cold War thinking but are grounded in flawed reasoning that is easily refutable. For example, the notion that a counterforce targeting posture invariably leads to an increase in nuclear requirements and an excessive and costly nuclear weapons buildup is belied by the fact that a minimum deterrence, countervalue approach is more likely to undermine deterrence and require a significant expansion in conventional forces that would be exorbitantly expensive.

In addition, the notion that counterforce targeting will drive an arms race with Russia and China ignores the fact that both adversaries have been engaged in a massive expansion of their own nuclear arsenals well in advance of the current U.S. nuclear modernization

¹ Keir Lieber and Daryl G. Press, “US strategy and force posture for an era of nuclear tripolarity,” *Atlantic Council Issue Brief*, April 2023, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/us-strategy-and-force-posture-for-an-era-of-nuclear-tripolarity/>.



program. It also dismisses decades of evidence that disproves the discredited notion of an action-reaction dynamic fueled by U.S. nuclear developments.² Moreover, the belief that adopting a counter-city targeting approach will moderate either Russia's or China's extensive nuclear buildups lacks any empirical justification.

And, of course, as some of our panelists have noted, the deliberate targeting of civilian populations runs counter to “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.”³ How such an approach can be considered morally superior to any attempt to limit damage to innocent non-combatants strains credulity.

I also find it troubling that a double standard exists regarding the desirability of minimizing civilian casualties in conflict. As I have noted previously, “When it comes to the employment of conventional forces in U.S. military operations, there is little debate or argument over the importance and necessity of reducing inadvertent civilian casualties and damage to property... to the maximum extent possible.”⁴ One need look no farther than the current conflict in the Middle East to understand the near-universal agreement with this principle. Yet when it comes to nuclear weapons, those who favor the deliberate targeting of civilian populations stand this commonsense principle on its head. The inconsistency in their position is striking.

Recently, the arguments raised by some of our panelists in their joint article were challenged as “persistent myths” in a lengthy rebuttal by an author who argued that “the United States should abandon targeting nuclear forces, their command-and-control systems, and an adversary's leadership” because “targeting those forces does not enhance deterrence—but it does create serious risks and costs.” He noted, “I do not believe the Law of Armed Conflict provides sound guidance for nuclear targeting....”⁵

In light of these assertions, the discussion today will seek to separate the myths from the facts.

² See, for example, Hon. David J. Trachtenberg, Dr. Michaela Dodge, and Dr. Keith B. Payne, *The “Action-Reaction” Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 2021), available at https://nipp.org/monographs_cpt/the-action-reaction-arms-race-narrative-vs-historical-realities/.

³ Keith B. Payne, John R. Harvey, Franklin C. Miller and Robert Soofer, “The Rejection of Intentional Population Targeting for ‘Tripolar’ Deterrence,” *Information Series*, No. 563 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 26, 2023), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-john-r-harvey-franklin-c-miller-and-robert-soofer-the-rejection-of-intentional-population-targeting-for-tripolar-deterrence-no-563-september-26-2023/.

⁴ David J. Trachtenberg, “Mischaracterizing U.S. Nuclear Deterrence Policy: The Myth of Deliberate Civilian Targeting,” *Information Series*, No. 542 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 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/.

⁵ James Acton, “Two Myths about Counterforce,” *War on the Rocks*, November 6, 2023, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2023/11/two-myths-about-counterforce/>.

Keith B. Payne

President of the National Institute for Public Policy and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Forces Policy

Thank you, Dave, for that introduction.

The renewed push by some academics for intentional population targeting was inevitable. Their stated goal is to provide a rationale for rejecting new U.S. nuclear programs in response to the rapid expansion of opponents' nuclear capabilities and threats.

Their policy recommendation is that Washington respond to the Russian and Chinese nuclear threats and buildup by adopting a deterrence strategy that intentionally threatens an opponent's population (or more euphemistically, its "society") as the basic strategic deterrent. This mode of deterrence would mandate a limited target set for U.S. forces, which would, in turn, allow the United States to skip new nuclear capabilities in response to Russian and Chinese expanded nuclear capabilities and threats. City targeting advocates essentially redefine down the force requirements for U.S. nuclear deterrence—the problem of new threats is thus solved without the call for robust, new U.S. forces.

Advocates of population targeting present this as new thinking for a new era. But it is not possible to overstate what nonsense is that characterization; the arguments heard today for intentionally targeting population date back to the early 1960s.

For example, in 1963 Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara defined the requirements for deterrence in terms of the destruction of Soviet population and industry, i.e., "assured destruction." He called this the "very essence of the whole deterrence concept." McNamara's population and industry targeting standard became synonymous with deterrence. For decades, commentators criticized Democratic and Republican administrations' policy moves away from McNamara's "assured destruction" deterrence standard as being for nuclear warfighting, *not* deterrence. This was, and remains, a wholly vapid criticism given the deterrence goals of those moves.

McNamara and others in DoD, along with academic commentators, argued that the assured destruction definition of deterrence served five related purposes. It would:

1. Deter Moscow's extreme provocations;
2. Limit U.S. force requirements by limiting targeting requirements;
3. Give Washington the basis for denying military requests for nuclear weapons beyond the assured destruction standard;
4. Avoid an action-reaction arms race by stopping U.S. nuclear programs from triggering an action-reaction arms race cycle; and,
5. Create stable deterrence. If U.S. forces are limited to city targeting, opponents will not feel the need to strike first for fear of suffering a U.S. first strike against their deterrent forces. So there will be secure mutual stability.

These were *powerful claims*. They provided a seemingly sophisticated basis for limiting spending and forces. Recent advocacy of population targeting repeats precisely these same arguments from the 1960s—nothing has been added, changed or lost.

I will take a few minutes to discuss why these arguments for population targeting are as misleading and bogus now as they were in the 1960s.

First, Washington does not have the privilege of threatening just whatever target set it wants for deterrence: the enemy gets the *only* vote regarding what must be threatened for deterrence, and how. Thinking otherwise conflates what we would like with what is necessary.

In short, the U.S. deterrent must be able to threaten what opponents care about most. A less severe deterrence threat would give them room to calculate that some provocation of Washington could be worth the risk. Threatening what opponents value most has rightly been the bipartisan standard for U.S. deterrence policy for 50 years. It is a key element of tailoring deterrence, and the beginning of wisdom on deterrence.

This is a key point because multiple studies going back to the 1960s conclude that Moscow values most highly its military capabilities, political power and control, and war recovery capabilities. This is understandable given Russia's history and vast multi-ethnic empire. These are the values that must be held at risk for deterrence; Washington does not have the luxury of choosing a target set that conveniently minimizes U.S. force requirements rather than the target set that makes deterrence as effective as possible—particularly as nuclear threats to the West expand and intensify.

Targeting cities or society now for deterrence actually would place priority on U.S. arms limitation goals rather than on deterrence. This is an extreme diversion from long-established, bipartisan policy and likely would increase the probability of deterrence failure and war.

Second, a consistent claim by city targeting advocates is that by not acquiring additional nuclear arms for deterrence, the United States will not trigger opponents' responsive buildups—precluding an “action-reaction arms race” cycle before it begins.

Yet, we know that past arms competitions have not been the result of an action-reaction cycle led by the United States. The most comprehensive, serious Cold War studies concluded that the United States did not lead an action-reaction arms race. Rather, Moscow was “self-stimulated” by its own nuclear requirements that followed from its own unique strategy demands, i.e., preparing to fight and win a nuclear war should one occur.

This inconvenient reality regarding Soviet arms racing was reflected in Harold Brown's famous quip: “Soviet spending...has shown no response to U.S. restraint—when we build, they build, when we cut, they build.”

Asserting that limiting U.S. forces now by targeting cities or society will prevent an action-reaction arms race is deeply mistaken when Russia and China have been racing for years, while Washington has largely sat on the sidelines enjoying a post-Cold War “strategic holiday” and wondering what went wrong. The proposition of an action-reaction arms race now led by Washington is political fiction at its finest.

Third, the argument that deterrence via U.S. city targeting is more stable than deterrence via threatening opponents' military forces has been popular for decades. But this argument, despite its constant repetition, is, frankly, illogical and ahistorical.

The claim is built on the proposition that, if the United States has counterforce capabilities, an opponent will be driven to strike first to pre-empt Washington striking first. This problem supposedly is solved by rejecting U.S. counterforce capabilities.

Yet, unless the opponent is irrational, it is not going to launch a nuclear war that will surely result in its own destruction for fear of a possible U.S. attack that would be destructive. That would be equivalent to jumping off the cliff intentionally for fear of being pushed off, and thereby ensuring the most catastrophic outcome. Irrational, reckless behavior is, of course, possible. But the entire edifice of deterrence theory is based on the proposition that opponents will prioritize self-survival. Consequently, this argument for intentional city targeting is inconsistent with any notion of deterrence stability, while advanced as the preferred route to deterrence stability.

Finally, I would like to address very briefly a point that city targeting advocates continually distort, with seeming intent: that is the casualty levels associated with their city targeting recommendation vs. those of counterforce targeting.

In an apparent effort to deflect culpability for an inherently immoral targeting policy, advocates of city targeting continually claim that intentionally targeting cities or society for deterrence would not meaningfully increase civilian casualties over a counterforce targeting policy. So, their proposed approach to deterrence is no more morally culpable than others.

They attempt to prove this supposed truth by projecting the casualties from an essentially unlimited counterforce strike seemingly designed to inflict high civilian casualty levels. Predictably, they conclude that the civilian casualty levels from such a strike would be high. No kidding.

This projection may be true, but it is misleading because it fails to take into account that a U.S. counterforce strike would be limited by the requirements for distinction and proportionality, which could reduce civilian casualties significantly. Unlike city targeting advocates and their casualty models, the Pentagon does not have the luxury of ignoring the targeting restrictions of distinction and proportionality. Anyone with relevant experience in DoD knows that full well.

There is little doubt that counterforce targeting with required distinction and proportionality limitations would entail far fewer civilian casualties than intentional city or society targeting. Yet, advocates of city targeting appear so desperate to deflect culpability for their morally insufferable proposal that they engage in this misrepresentation of reality to deflect blame. This analytical slight-of-hand has been going on for decades and continues.

The moral quandary for those now pushing a return to population targeting is so strong that one noted advocate shifted, *in a matter of weeks*, from publicly recommending deterrence via targeting opponents' societies to deterrence through the targeting of conventional military targets—with the suggestion that this latter approach is somehow original to him.⁶ In fact, the notion of targeting conventional forces is a long-familiar element of a counterforce approach to deterrence.

⁶ James Acton, "Two Myths About Counterforce," *War on the Rocks*, November 6, 2023, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2023/11/two-myths-about-counterforce/>.

In summary, the return of advocacy for intentional city targeting was inevitable—it tells Washington to do almost nothing in response to a dramatically more dangerous nuclear threat environment. Doing almost nothing is what many in Washington always prefer with regard to nuclear weapons—no matter the threat realities.

The choice confronting Washington in this regard is not simplistic, but it is straight forward: 1) build the forces needed to sustain deterrence in the face of multiple, mounting threats; or, 2) take the extreme risk of not doing so based on the empty arguments advanced by city targeting advocates—that is the choice Russia and China have presented to U.S. leaders. The proper answer here is not difficult.

I will conclude with four very short points:

1. The arguments advanced for a population-targeting approach to deterrence are no different now than they were 60 years ago. They conceal a mode of deterrence that is immoral and insufficiently effective.
2. The fact that they are current shows, yet again, that in Washington, the defeat of bad ideas is never permanent—with every new generation they return and need to be put down again.
3. Democratic and Republican administrations deftly put down this particularly bad idea beginning 50 years ago. This built on the work of great individuals at the time, including Dr. John Foster, James Schlesinger, and Harold Brown.
4. The question now is whether clear heads in contemporary Washington can once again provide this badly needed service to the nation. In that regard, I am eager to hear from others on today's panel.

Thank you. I look forward to hearing from the rest of the panel.

John Harvey

former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Defense Programs and former Director of the Policy Planning Staff of the National Nuclear Security Administration

Introduction

My plan is to walk you through a few specific points with regard to our joint paper⁷ to provide further clarification, and a few debating points, on several issues addressed.

⁷ Keith B. Payne, John R. Harvey, Franklin C. Miller and Robert Soofer, “The Rejection of Intentional Population Targeting for ‘Tripolar’ Deterrence,” *Information Series*, No. 563 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 26, 2023), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-john-r-harvey-franklin-c-miller-and-robert-soofer-the-rejection-of-intentional-population-targeting-for-tripolar-deterrence-no-563-september-26-2023/.

Oftentimes in these papers, there is a disclaimer along the lines of “not every co-author agrees with every word in this paper, but on balance . . .” I will highlight one or two areas where “not every co-author agrees,” mostly myself, but let me add that these are minor points and in no way detract from the main point regarding the case for rejecting intentional targeting of population. I will also offer some additional points in bolstering several of our arguments.

The paper highlights key arguments for why we reject counterpopulation (CP) targeting:

- Less credible, unlikely to provide desired deterrence effect;
- More, not less, costly over the long term; and,
- Inconsistent with U.S. legal and moral obligations, not to mention the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC).

On the other hand, CP advocates argue that Counterforce (CF) targeting:

- Destabilizes a mutual deterrence relationship;
- Is not suited to arms limitation or preventing an arms race;
- Will produce comparable casualties to a CP nuclear strike.

Our joint paper addresses each of these criticisms.

Counterforce vs Countervalue

Many of you will note that not once in this paper will you find the term “countervalue.” We refer to the more precise term: “counterpopulation” targeting. But this has been a point of such confusion in the academic community that I must say a few words about it.

By the way, this is not the only area where academics get it wrong, e.g., many university professors often characterize deterrence in terms of two concepts: denial and punishment. Denial is OK—we do indeed seek in deterrence to utterly convince adversaries that they cannot achieve war aims via the use of nuclear weapons.

But punishment is problematic. When I was in the DoD involved in nuclear planning, terms like punishment, revenge, retribution were verboten. The lawyers went ballistic if they found such terms in a planning document. Punishment is not a legitimate war aim.

Academic papers often ignore the role of nuclear weapons in “damage limitation,” a component of U.S. nuclear policy and strategy. Notwithstanding statements by James Schlesinger quoted in the paper, arguing that we had no hope of achieving a disarming first strike against the then-Soviets, nor presumably now against Russia, there are other countries where such a capability could be achieved. This argues that appropriate options be included in strike packages. And I would offer that in a shooting war with Russia with nuclear overtones, folks would be thinking hard about options to offer a president who seeks to minimize damage to the United States and its allies.

Back to CF vs CV. What do I mean by CF targeting? Specifically:

- *Counterforce targets* include conventional and nuclear forces whether stationary or on the move, associated infrastructure, industry that supports these forces, and

national political/military control. Nuclear CF targets include ICBM silos, mobile ICBMs, submarine bases, strategic bomber bases, elements of the nuclear command and control system, ballistic missiles and bombers enroute to targets and air and missile defenses.

I think many, but not all, of my community might agree with this definition. Not so clear regarding CV targets. Consider the following:

- *Countervalue targets* include certain installations, industry or economic assets that do not directly support an adversary's war fighting potential. For some, it includes intentional targeting of cities and population centers which is not/not legitimate under the LOAC.

One of the key areas of confusion is that academics often conflate CV and CP to mean the same thing. CP is actually a subset of CV. The nuance here is that there could be installations that do not directly support warfighting potential, are not intentional targeting of population or civilian infrastructure but, for other reasons, could still be very high value installations for an adversary leadership. Certain of these could well be legitimate targets once appropriate assessment of necessity, proportionality and discrimination is carried out.⁸ Even if few installations on today's U.S. target list meet the CV definition, future assessments of the value structure of future adversary leaders might determine otherwise. I would not like to rule out this possibility by casting our entire deterrence strategy as CF-only.

Is CF Destabilizing?

The issue here is that the substantial prompt hard-target-kill capability posed by modern ICBMs causes those on the other end of those ICBMs to worry about a disarming first strike, driving a posture which includes options for early ICBM launch. This does indeed introduce an element of instability in deterrence relationships. The paper states along the lines:

There has been little or no indication that US policy has destabilized deterrence. This does not prove that a CF-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.

As one who has spent a significant portion of his working days on the important yet non-career-enhancing strategy of advancing survivable ICBM basing modes, and as one who participated in official nuclear exercises where the overriding factor was to ensure that a president could communicate a launch order to forces in the tens of minutes before enemy

⁸ For example, the president's 1974 Nuclear Employment Policy (NSDM 242) identified as a critical deterrence factor "(d)estruction of the political, economic, and military resources critical to the enemy's postwar power, influence, and ability to recover at an early time as a major power." Determining what was meant by impeding long-term "recovery," and identifying associated targets, was not, as I understand, straightforward, although a good argument could be made that it did not fit within the CF rubric. Some targets that may indeed have been identified may not have met the LOAC criteria. In any case, "impeding recovery as a major power" has not, to the best of my knowledge, been an explicit deterrence goal in subsequent presidential guidance.

ICBMs arrived at U.S. silos, I can attest that, when one looks at these concerns from both sides, they do indeed introduce an element of instability in otherwise stable deterrence. There is no way around it.

Whether a president would ever carry out an early launch of ICBMs is an open question; my hunch is that ride-out would be preferred. Still, it's important for deterrence that Russia understand that the capability for early launch exists and is exercised whether or not any president would ever order it. Schlesinger's words are unlikely to be given much credence by an adversary who, quite rightly, is concerned not about words but capabilities.

All that said, over the past few decades both U.S. and Russian forces have evolved in way that mitigates first strike concerns. I can go into that in the Q&A if desired.

Casualties

The CP folks argue that there won't be much difference in the number of casualties that would occur under either targeting strategy. The paper cites studies by, among others, the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC), the former Office of Technology Assessment, and the Princeton folks, to include Frank von Hippel and his colleagues, who would differ. And they're right. Consider two cases:

- A strike with 200 modern warheads on cities with the primary goal of killing people and destroying civilian urban/industrial infrastructure.
- A counter-nuclear attack on ICBM silos, SSBN bases, and bomber airfields carried out in accordance with the LOAC.

In the first case, in order to kill the maximum number of people the strike would no doubt include ground bursts producing substantial fallout that would kill not just city folks, but folks in ex-urban areas as well. Estimates range from 50-70 million casualties from such an attack.

A counter-nuclear strike would use many more warheads to cover several hundred silos, two SSBN bases, and a few strategic bomber airfields. Except for the bases, many of these warheads would explode in ICBM fields not generally co-located with population centers. To minimize fallout, the necessary destruction could be achieved at burst heights greater than the fireball radius. If the fireball does not touch the ground, it cannot entrain dirt, ground debris, etc. into large clouds that deposit lethal radioactivity as they move across the Russian (or U.S.) landmass. Estimated casualties in such a strike: in the range of 10-12 million.

Now one can argue if the difference between 10 million and 50 million casualties has any meaning at all. I believe it does. In any case, such calculations show the fallacy of those who argue that city-killing and counterforce strikes produce essentially the same results.

Cost of Strengthened Deterrence to Conventional Conflict

One other area where I might quibble with my colleagues is whether any specific nuclear strategy will have a substantial impact on the resources needed to bolster conventional

forces. For example, CP savings resulting from some truncation of the strategic modernization program currently underway are likely to be dwarfed by needed spending on conventional forces.

The most likely path to peer nuclear conflict involves escalation from an ongoing regional conventional conflict. Increased forward-deployment of U.S. conventional forces, and forward stationing of weapons and equipment, could help to deter such conflict in the first place by the ability to bring force to bear more quickly and reduce reliance on vulnerable reinforcement routes. The goal is to prevent *faits accomplis*.

In recent years, progress has been made in NATO Europe, but more could be done there and in Asia.⁹ Weapons and command and control assets must be sufficiently hardened to moderately-severe nuclear environments, and U.S. regional commands, supported by Strategic Command, must adapt their plans to fight the war once nuclear weapons have been introduced to the conventional battlefield. Additional deployment of new types of U.S. conventional and non-strategic nuclear forces, to include possibly a precision-strike hypersonic glide vehicle and a modern nuclear, land-attack sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N), would strengthen conventional, strategic and extended deterrence. As an example, fielding new long-range precision conventional strike, in certain cases, could replace a low-yield nuke in responding to limited first use, providing additional flexibility to the president. On this last point, adversary limited nuclear first use should not automatically lead to a U.S. nuclear response. Fulsome consideration of the multiple pathways to such use, however, will help to provide the president with the detailed information, consultative mechanisms, pre-planned options, and hardware needed to respond appropriately, whether nuclear or otherwise.

We must do all this independent of any specific nuclear employment strategy.

Let me stop here. Thanks for your attention.

⁹ For details about the European Reassurance Initiative, renamed the European Deterrence Initiative, see White House Fact Sheet, June 3, 2014, available at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/03/fact-sheet-european-reassurance-initiative-and-other-us-efforts-support->. For more recent initiatives on US defense contributions to Europe see, DoD Fact Sheet, June 29, 2022, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3078056/fact-sheet-us-defense-contributions-to-europe/>. For recent initiatives to bolster NATO's rapid response force, and its first time deployment after Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, see NATO issue paper, "NATO Response Force," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, July 11, 2022, available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49755.htm.