March 2025

OCCASIONAL PAPER

Volume 5, Number 3

Deterring the New Pacing Threats: Opportunistic and Coordinated Aggression

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Foreword by
ADM Charles A. Richard, USN (Ret.)

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

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National Institute Press®

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

National Institute for Public Policy would like to thank the Sarah Scaife Foundation for the generous support that made this *Occasional Paper* possible.

Cover design by Stephanie Koeshall.

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Acknowledgements

Mentors, colleagues, and friends have always greatly influenced my writing and this project is no exception. I owe a debt of gratitude to a number of people and organizations that have enabled and enhanced my work. I benefitted greatly from interviewing subject matter experts including Dr. Hal Brands, Gen. Robert Kehler (Ret.), Dr. Matthew Kroenig, ADM Charles Richard (Ret.), Dr. Brad Roberts, and Dr. Robert Soofer. I would also like to thank Amb. Eric Edelman, Amb. Robert Joseph, Hon. Frank Miller, and Dr. Keith Payne for serving as Senior Reviewers and commenting on an earlier draft. The opinions in this *Occasional Paper*, and any remaining mistakes, are of course mine alone.

Foreword

While debates about U.S. defense strategy in the atomic era stretch back decades with little fundamental change in each side's foundational assumptions, the threat context in which those debates take place often changes rapidly and unexpectedly. Today, the United States and its allies are witnessing just such a transformation in the threat environment. China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran are clearly revisionist, increasingly well-armed and, most concerningly, ever more cooperative with each other. As stated by the Congressional Commission on the National Defense Strategy, "The threats the United States faces are the most serious and most challenging the nation has encountered since 1945 and include the potential for near-term major war." Contrast these adversaries' rapid military growth with the U.S. and allied response: a "bureaucracy as usual" attitude, resistance to change, halting modernization and, most prominently, risk aversion. Adversaries and even some allies believe the United States lacks the resolve and the capability needed to defend a globe-spanning network of alliances against a growing array of threats. This is not a deterrence problem. This is a deterrence crisis demanding urgent, immediate action.

The threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression involving some combination of China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran are still dangerously underappreciated in U.S. and allied governments. Put simply, the United States and its allies risk incentivizing the very conflicts they wish to deter by failing to recognize the scope and severity of the threats they face, and the subsequent changes necessary to counter these threats.

Matthew Costlow's *Deterring the New Pacing Threats* is an excellent guide to illuminating the unique dangers of opportunistic and coordinated aggression. His use of the Korean War and the Cuban Missile Crisis as case studies of

U.S. and allied officials seeking to deter opportunistic aggression, and the risks they faced in this strategy, is both novel and exactly the right approach to ground recommendations for today in the hard-learned lessons of the past. While there have been many reviews of these two events, few address the larger global context that these two events occurred in and analyze how this larger context shaped decisions for those events. I recommend national security professionals give this report a close study as I know of no other work today that weaves the different strands of policy, strategy, and operational implications together on the topics of simultaneous and sequential conflict.

We have never fully mastered the art and strategy of resisting limited conventional aggression against a partner or ally that is conducted under the threat of nuclear escalation, expansion of the scope of the war, risk of failing to deter conflict elsewhere, or some combination of all three. This work is a good step towards better understanding the problem and developing strategies that fully achieve our aims.

~ ADM Charles A. Richard, USN (Ret.)
Former Commander, United States Strategic Command

Executive Summary

While the United States and its allies have faced threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression in the past, today's emerging political and military entente among China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran is uniquely dangerous. This unprecedented set of threats consists of two peer nuclear adversaries in China and Russia, along with their regional partners, North Korea and Iran, a nuclear-armed state and a nuclear threshold state, respectively, and the increasing likelihood that their shared revisionist interests could lead to sequential or simultaneous attacks on the United States and its allies in geographically distant theaters. The United States and allies have heedlessly added to these threats by being late to recognize their severity and adapt their policies and military postures to match the expanding deterrence requirements. Absent a major shift in U.S. and allied policies and military postures, China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, or some combination, might sense a window of opportunity to advance their bellicose agendas.

In fact, perhaps the most pernicious aspect of the threat of opportunistic and coordinated aggression is that it both creates dilemmas for the United States and its allies while it simultaneously presents adversaries with a new and potentially favorable prospect for gains at acceptable cost and risk. Simultaneous or sequential aggression against an ill-prepared United States and alliance network, in short, raises the stakes and the dangers of every U.S. and allied activity. "Weakness invites aggression" is a common maxim, but how much more dangerous is it when multiple adversaries in common cause share the perception that the United States and its allies are weak?

The Unique Dangers of Opportunistic and Coordinated Aggression

The Chinese Communist Party's rhetoric and military posture leave no doubt about its aggressive intentions in the Indo-Pacific; its nuclear breakout and a favorable correlation of conventional forces around Taiwan makes the threat of opportunistic aggression especially stark. The Russian Federation appears to be increasingly reliant on its non-strategic nuclear forces against NATO, an area that it perceives a useful coercive advantage, yet its conventional forces have reconstituted during the war against Ukraine and remain resilient—providing President Putin the means to undertake opportunistic aggression should he wish. North Korea and Iran, though generally regarded as regional military powers, threaten U.S. forces and allies in the region and may pursue opportunistic aggression while the United States is occupied elsewhere—especially against a major peer adversary like China or Russia.

These individual threats are further multiplied by two factors: the growing political and military ties between adversaries, and faltering U.S. and allied efforts to modernize and grow their military forces in response. China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran all have their own unique strengths and weaknesses, and therefore have found it advantageous to exchange *quid pro quos* to their mutual benefit in areas like advanced technology, mass manufacturing, and technical expertise. China's and Russia's "friendship without limits" is perhaps the most consequential bilateral relationship that drives the threat of coordinated and perhaps simultaneous aggression against the United States and its allies. Yet, despite over a decade of Chinese, Russian, North Korean, and Iranian aggression, the U.S. defense budget has hardly kept up with inflation, much less the "pacing threat" of China named in both Trump and Biden Administration defense policy

documents. The U.S. "one major war" conventional force-sizing posture and lethargic nuclear modernization program, the latter largely a replacement rather than right-sizing effort, are clearly inadequate. In fact, they represent force asymmetries that U.S. adversaries may perceive as the most favorable military balance they are likely to encounter for the foreseeable future given U.S. and allied efforts to begin modernization and increase military spending.

This insight indicates that there are four unique aspects of opportunistic and coordinated aggression that set them apart from individual state-based threats. First, the risk of conflict may grow as adversaries that might otherwise be unwilling to risk a direct confrontation with the United States and its allies could perceive their favorable local balances of power as having greater coercive power in light of U.S. leaders being forced to balance allied needs in multiple theaters simultaneously or sequentially. Second, without changes to the U.S. conventional and nuclear force posture, the threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression will likely force U.S. leaders to prioritize between sets of allies in different geographic regions—risking alliance unity across the globe and potentially inviting further aggression. Third, without changes to the U.S. conventional force posture, the United States may need to rely more on nuclear weapons to deter or defeat opportunistic and coordinated aggression—meaning additional deterrence threats, lower employment thresholds, force posture changes, or even contemplating first use. Fourth and finally, if political goals remain unchanged then U.S. political and military leaders may need to rely on riskier conventional and nuclear strategies during a conflict that hold out potentially greater hope of a faster and favorable resolution, although at the cost of a greater risk of adversary escalation.

Learning Lessons from the Past

To gain greater insight into how U.S. political and military leaders can better prepare to deter and defeat the threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression, this *Occasional Paper* features two case studies in which U.S. officials sought to deter opportunistic aggression while engaged in a conflict and a crisis, respectively: the Korean War and the Cuban Missile Crisis. During the Korean War, U.S. and allied officials were greatly concerned about Soviet opportunistic aggression in Europe as the United States and its allies were deploying their forces to the Korean Peninsula. The Korean War case study illustrates a number of relevant lessons for U.S. policymakers today, such as: the operational difficulty of adapting military forces quickly to changing deterrence requirements; the operational restraints imposed on U.S. forces in the Korean War to keep the conflict from spreading thereby impeding a quicker potential resolution to the conflict; the costs of prioritizing one theater over another and, the contradictory signals allies can send regarding the need for the United States to both win a conflict in a distant theater while at the same time adequately reinforcing their theaters.

The Korean War provides several additional lessons learned. First, a swift victory in a limited conflict may be ideal for deterring opportunistic or coordinated aggression elsewhere, but the cost of achieving victory may risk deterrence failure in a second theater. Second, threat perceptions and military requirements are likely to change far more quickly than nuclear or conventional forces can adapt—potentially leading to pressure on the United States to adopt riskier strategies. Third, adversaries may be more likely to adopt more aggressive strategies if they believe that the United States is ill-equipped or unwilling politically to counter opportunistic or coordinated aggression.

The Cuban Missile Crisis also illustrates the dilemmas that the threat of opportunistic aggression imposes on U.S. and allied officials. The 1961 Berlin Crisis cemented U.S. and allied threat perceptions of the Soviets as aggressive and, thus, during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, U.S. and allied decisions often centered around how to counter Soviet missiles in Cuba while deterring potential Soviet opportunistic aggression against Berlin. The Kennedy Administration consciously chose what it believed were less escalatory courses of action to counter Soviet missiles in Cuba to assure U.S. allies that the United States was not trigger-happy as well as to avoid a potential pretext for Soviet action against Berlin. And, while U.S. conventional and nuclear forces were generally sufficient for what was needed, the Cuban Missile Crisis highlighted the importance of forward-deployed forces with flexible force generation characteristics—i.e., the ability to increase military readiness with minimal visible change in force posture to avoid inadvertent escalation. Plus, much like the Korean War, U.S. officials during the Cuban Missile Crisis weighed often competing priorities that allies raised, namely: calling for the United States to act decisively against Soviet activity in Cuba to deter Soviet opportunistic aggression against Berlin, and, at the same time, refraining from drastic action against the Soviets in Cuba to prevent Soviet retaliation against Berlin.

The Cuban Missile Crisis also provides several lessons learned that U.S. and allied officials can apply to current efforts to deter and defeat opportunistic and coordinated aggression. First, flexible force generation capabilities provide valuable deterrence options for U.S. leaders that improve the ability to send tailored signals and reduce risks of misperceptions. Second, greater reliance on nuclear weapons in U.S. strategy, including the perceived need to employ them early in a conflict, may be the price to pay for insufficient conventional forces to deter and defeat

opportunistic aggression. Third, internal and external factors may pressure U.S. leaders to adopt riskier warfighting strategies to end an ongoing conflict on favorable terms relatively early so that other adversaries contemplating opportunistic aggression are more likely to be deterred from attacking.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Given the U.S. historical experience and the unique threats posed by opportunistic and coordinated aggression, how should the United States adapt its military posture in response? First, and most fundamentally, it must size and posture its strategic nuclear forces to be able to conduct major counterforce conflicts with both peer nuclear adversaries, China and Russia, even after absorbing a surprise first strike. Deterring and defeating opportunistic and coordinated aggression begins with demonstrating to adversaries that there is no plausible escalation pathway to general nuclear war that may result in an acceptable outcome as defined by the adversary. The United States should therefore undertake a number of near- and long-term courses of action to prepare its strategic nuclear forces for the dynamic security environment, including: uploading additional warheads on its ICBMs, procuring at least four additional Columbia class SSBNs beyond the program of record, and procuring additional B-21 bombers and placing a number of them on alert once deployed.

Regional U.S. nuclear forces will also play a critical role in deterring and defeating opportunistic and coordinated aggression. As demonstrated in the Korean War and the Cuban Missile Crisis, forward-deployed regional U.S. nuclear forces are vital deterrence and assurance tools and can, if necessary, be employed to control escalation and deny the adversary's theory of victory. Given China's and Russia's numerical advantages in this area and the difficulty

the United States faces in growing its conventional forces to deter and defeat two major adversaries simultaneously, U.S. policymakers should urgently adapt U.S. regional nuclear forces, including by: requiring the deployment of the nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) within five years, developing a nuclear-armed variant of the U.S. Army's Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon, and developing a mobile, land-based, short- to medium-range, ballistic or hypersonic system, with a low-yield warhead that is deployable in theater. A President may value multiple options under the broad category of regional nuclear weapons (battlefield up to intermediate range) to keep a conflict confined geographically and avoid homeland-to-homeland exchanges when facing opportunistic or coordinated aggression.

Both U.S. homeland and regional missile defenses are also likely to play increasingly important roles in deterring and defeating opportunistic and coordinated aggression. Improved and expanded U.S. homeland missile defenses can increase the credibility of U.S. nuclear employment deterrence threats, assure allies, and defend critical power projection capabilities. Regional missile defenses also will play important roles by complicating adversary planning for a *fait accompli*, defending critical infrastructure, and enabling U.S. freedom of maneuver. The priority short- and long-term investments U.S. officials should consider include: expanded cruise missile defense of the U.S. homeland, acceleration of the Glide Phase Interceptor against hypersonic targets, development and deployment of a distributed space-based ballistic missile defense system, and increased investments in the defense industrial base domestically and internationally for regional missile defense systems.

Finally, the United States and its allies should adapt their conventional forces to counter the threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression. Regrettably,

conventional forces are the most costly capabilities in the defense budget—perhaps the primary reason why the United States has avoided adopting a "two major wars" force-planning construct. If, as seems likely currently, the United States continues to maintain something less than a "two major wars" construct, then U.S. policymakers should consider force posture changes to best position U.S. conventional forces to deter and defeat opportunistic and coordinated aggression in cooperation with allies. The main force-planning principle in this regard is focusing U.S. efforts on those capabilities that are its comparative advantage. Stated differently, the United States should focus on deploying conventional forces that provide capabilities that regional allies do not have or perhaps do not have in the required quantities. The United States, for instance, has unparalleled long-range strike forces, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), and airlift—whereas regional allies can provide infantry and land transport capabilities that best complement U.S. forces at scale and quickly.

The threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression are indeed daunting in their scope and severity—no one doubts the challenges the United States and its allies will face in adapting their forces to counter these threats. The United States and its allies should avoid fatalism, however, because an attitude of managed decline and retrenchment is apt to accelerate the dangers rather than delay them. The answer, as ever, is ensuring that U.S. threat perceptions are grounded in reality, its forces are matched to the threats, and its will to win is apparent to adversaries and allies alike.

Chapter 1. Introduction

The United States enables and leads an international network of alliances and partnerships that has secured peace and prosperity for millions—and all of it is at risk. China, Russia, North Korea and Iran share a vision, expressed through a growing political and military entente, of ejecting the United States from their respective regions to make the world safe for their autocracy and revisionist aggression. Despite their rhetoric and actions making this goal abundantly clear, U.S. and allied officials have been slow to recognize the unprecedented threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression in this new nuclear age, and even slower to respond with the necessary preparations.

The Trump and Biden Administrations have both drawn public, though brief, attention to the possibility the United States may face simultaneous or near-successive aggression from China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, or some combination, in the emerging threat environment.[1] The growing fear within U.S. and allies' leaderships is that the United States may become engaged in conflict with one adversary to such an extent that another adversary perceives a favorable local balance of forces and seizes the opportunity to secure its revisionist aims through force, beginning a second conflict in a geographically distant theater far from the first. Or, in a distinct but related scenario, China and Russia conduct simultaneous

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[1] U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2018), p. 6, available at https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf.; and, U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2022), p. 17, available at https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF.

coordinated attacks on U.S. allies in their respective theaters—forcing the United States to either prioritize some allies over others or spread its forces so thinly that China and Russia retain local military superiority, and thus potentially increase their chances of victory.

Yet, since the United States has chosen to size its conventional forces and transport capabilities for less than a two-theater major war construct, the following question naturally arises: how could the U.S. nuclear arsenal contribute to deterring opportunistic and coordinated aggression? This question, however, is not limited to second theater considerations alone. Indeed, how the United States postures, signals with, and potentially employs nuclear weapons in a conflict against one adversary could positively affect the deterrence calculations of the second adversary contemplating opportunistic aggression. Conversely, U.S. failures—whether in strategy, capabilities, or resolve—will compound the dangers in both theaters.

In short, should the United States fail to deter opportunistic or coordinated aggression from its two peer adversaries in China and Russia, or even their two regional partners in North Korea and Iran, the consequences will quite likely not be limited to those two theaters alone—important as they are. Indeed, the United States and its allies could face the total collapse of their structure of alliances and all of the economic and security benefits associated with it. Yet, they have still been slow to respond. As the Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz stated, "Woe to the government, which, relying on half-hearted politics and a shackled military policy, meets a foe who, like the untamed elements, knows no law other than his own power! Any defect of action and effort will turn to the advantage of the enemy, and it will not be easy to change from a fencer's position to that of a wrestler. A slight blow

may then often be enough to cause a total collapse."[2] Today, and for the foreseeable future, the United States and its allies face just such a "total collapse," with little understanding of the nature of the threat or its scope.

U.S. defense officials and policymakers, therefore, face a stark three-part task: understanding adversaries' strategies, capabilities, and political will; grasping how the United States compares to its adversaries in those same factors; and, calculating how mismatches between adversary actions and U.S. counters can create the conditions for opportunistic or coordinated aggression. In other words, U.S. and allied officials must understand that there is likely a strong correlation between failing to properly tailor and support a deterrence strategy against opportunistic and coordinated aggression and the likelihood of those threats occurring. Unlike the Cold War, in which the United States faced only one peer adversary, the emerging threat environment features two peer U.S. adversaries—China and Russia—and failure to deter one may lead to a failure to deter both. In this new threat environment, U.S. mistakes or inadequacies are doubly dangerous.

The problems of opportunistic and coordinated aggression, and how the United States can deter them, have grown increasingly relevant in U.S. policymaking mainly for two reasons: China's and Russia's proclaimed "friendship without limits" that is morphing into a developing entente; and, the overtly aggressive foreign policy goals of Beijing and Moscow—even setting aside their growing partnership—backed by their expanding nuclear forces.[3] China's President Xi Jinping is not hiding

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[2] Carl von Clausewitz, author, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, translators, *On War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p. 257.

[3] "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development," *Kremlin.ru*, February 4, 2022, available at http://www.en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770.

his intention to build up China's military so that it can fulfill a long-standing Chinese Communist Party goal: the "unification," by force if necessary, of Taiwan with the mainland. As part of these efforts, China is engaged in the largest expansion of its nuclear forces in its history, including the development of low-yield theater-range nuclear weapons that appear to underpin a strategy of coercion aimed at the United States and its allies.[4] Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and continuing bellicose threats towards the United States and NATO are evidence that President Vladimir Putin's ambitions extend well beyond Russia's borders, making the possibility of a Russia-NATO war all too conceivable. The United States expects Russia's "modern nuclear arsenal" to grow even more in the coming years, along with Russia's reliance upon it—adding even more stress to U.S. nuclear deterrence calculations.[5] China's and Russia's revisionist aims and growing nuclear arsenals, when combined with their increasingly cooperative political relationship with each other, and with the lesser but still significant threats of North Korea and Iran, make the possibility of opportunistic or coordinated aggression even more salient in developing U.S. deterrence requirements.

Multiplying these threats, the United States is dangerously unprepared to counter these emerging challenges. As the congressionally mandated bipartisan 2023 Strategic Posture Commission concluded, the United States does not have sufficient conventional or nuclear capabilities to deter opportunistic or coordinated

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[4] U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2023), pp. 109-112.

[5] U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2022), p. 4, available at https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF.

aggression in the future—and this deficiency can "have the perverse effect of making such aggression more likely."[6] Correspondingly, U.S. policymakers face stark choices about the need to increase topline defense spending to accommodate the growing deterrence requirements caused by the threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression. Should they choose not to make those investments, or invest too slowly, then the United States may need to rely more heavily on its existing nuclear arsenal to deter such aggression—a point made by the Strategic Posture Commission, the 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, and other analyses.[7]

This rapidly converging set of threats should cause U.S. and allied officials to ask three fundamental questions: first, what makes the threats of opportunistic or coordinated

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[6] Madelyn R. Creedon and Jon L. Kyl, Chair and Co-Chair, *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Senate Armed Services Committee, 2023), p. 8, available at https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/americas_strategic_posture_the_final_report_of_the_congressional_commission_on_the_strategic_posture_of_the_united_states.pdf.; The 2024 National Defense Strategy Commission makes a similar point regarding U.S. conventional forces. See, Jane Harman and Eric Edelman, Chair and Vice Chair, *Commission on the National Defense Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: RAND, July 2024), p. 37, available at https://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/NDS-commission.html.

[7] Ibid., p. 31; U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, op. cit., p. 12; and, Brad Roberts, Study Group Chair and Director, *China's Emergence as a Second Nuclear Peer* (Livermore, CA: Center for Global Security Research, Spring 2023), p. 70, available at https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/CGSR_Two_Peer_230314.pdf; and, Greg Weaver, "Part I: US Deterrence Requirements in the Coming Two Nuclear Peer Threat Environment," chapter in, Greg Weaver and Amy Woolf, *Requirements for Nuclear Deterrence and Arms Control in a Two Nuclear Peer Threat Environment* (Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, February 2, 2024), p. 10, available at https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/CGSR_Two_Peer_230314.pdf.

aggression unique?; second, how has the United States approached these types of threats in the past?; and third, what relevant lessons are there from history that can apply to today? This *Occasional Paper's* structure mirrors the same approach. Chapter 2 examines why the threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression are more than just the sum of threats from individual states like China and Russia—and how these threats are made worse by U.S. and allied inaction. Chapters 3 and 4 utilize two case studies, the Korean War and the Cuban Missile Crisis, respectively, to highlight the kinds of policy, strategy, and operational difficulties that the threat of opportunistic aggression poses to U.S. political and military leaders. Finally, Chapter 5 summarizes and applies the lessons U.S. policymakers should learn from history by recommending a concrete set of actions.

One simple but revealing insight pervades this study and should be at the forefront of U.S. and allied thinking on these topics: every decision made in the effort to deter and defeat opportunistic or coordinated aggression is over higher stakes than a conflict involving only two opposing states. That is, the geographically dispersed nature of the threat of opportunistic and coordinated aggression means that each U.S. and allied decision in one theater will have direct and indirect effects on the second theater, and vice versa. Threats, actions, victories, and defeats in one theater will potentially change in real time the dynamics and prospects in the second theater. At the risk of oversimplification, imagine a gambler facing the "double or nothing" dilemma. Swift victory in one theater may reduce the risk of adversary aggression in a second theater, but pursuing victory in one theater may use resources needed for deterrence in the second theater, leading to a Pyrrhic victory in one theater at the cost of another.

There are no iron laws of history that offer a roadmap for U.S. and allied policymakers at this critical juncture.

U.S. history in the atomic era however, does offer some general insights into the nature of opportunistic and coordinated aggression, the difficulties these threats present even to a well-prepared military, and the policies and strategies that aided U.S. policymakers in analogous situations in the past. Given the unprecedented nature of the emerging two nuclear peer threat environment and the sluggish U.S. and allied response, time is of the essence and knowledge is at a premium. This *Occasional Paper* seeks to aid in some small way U.S. and allied efforts to counter the magnitude of these immediate threats with a response that is equal to the moment.

Chapter 2. Opportunistic and Coordinated Aggression Today: Greater Than the Sum of Their Parts

Although one of the main contentions of this *Occasional Paper* is that the threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression are greater than simply adding together the threats of China, Russia, etc., a study of opportunistic and coordinated aggression must necessarily begin with analysis of those individual states. The unique characteristics of each state, in fact, are what give rise to the possibility, even likelihood, of sequential or simultaneous aggression by one or more of them in theaters that are potentially thousands of miles apart.

People's Republic of China

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has chosen to leave behind former leader Deng Xiaoping's preference for China to "hide our capacities and bide our time"—instead, opting for a sprint to achieve a "world class military" by 2049.[8] PRC leaders appear optimistic, at least outwardly, that China is well-positioned to take advantage of what they perceive as a declining United States. As summarized by the U.S. Department of Defense: "PRC leaders continue to believe that global trends, especially the perceived U.S. decline, are generally conducive to their long-term interests and, at the close of 2023, saw the 'new period of turbulence and transformation' as 'posing new strategic opportunities' in

[8] U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2024), pp. 3, 5, available at https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2024.PDF.

China's development."[9] China's aggressive foreign policy is on display almost daily in the South China Sea and around Taiwan as evidenced by the growing number of dangerous intercepts of military and civilian craft at sea and in the air. China's leaders, for their part, have stated publicly and repeatedly that they will not renounce the use of force to decide the outcome of a "unification" effort to bring Taiwan under CCP rule.[10] This belligerent foreign policy is supported by People's Liberation Army (PLA) writing that emphasizes the need to seize opportunities during a crisis. Indeed, without using the words "opportunistic aggression," many PLA writings suggest "… leaders may use a crisis situation as an opportunity to further other political or economic goals that have previously seemed out of reach or especially costly."[11]

As part of China's effort to build a "world class military" that could enable opportunistic or coordinated aggression, its recent rapid expansion of its nuclear forces stands out as one of the most consequential undertakings.[12] The speed and scale of China's nuclear breakout extends to all areas of its enterprise, including the delivery systems, warheads, and related infrastructure. The Department of Defense's annual China military report noted in both 2022 and 2023 that China's nuclear expansion had exceeded its

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[9] Ibid., p. 2.

[10] U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023*, op. cit., p. 136.

[11] Alison A. Kaufman, Daniel M. Hartnett, *Managing Conflict: Examining Recent PLA Writings on Escalation Control* (Washington, D.C.: CNA, February 2016), p. 51, available at https://www.cna.org/reports/2016/drm-2015-u-009963-final3.pdf.

[12] For more on the origins and implications of this topic, see, Kyle Balzer and Dan Blumenthal, "The True Aims of China's Nuclear Buildup: Beijing's Growing Arsenal Is Meant to Dissolve America's Alliance System in Asia," *Foreign Affairs*, November 21, 2024, available at https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/true-aims-chinas-nuclear-buildup.

previous projections—indicating China's ability to rapidly alter its force posture and capabilities on a large scale.[13] The Department of Defense expects China to have over 1,000 operational nuclear warheads by 2030, and perhaps reach rough numerical parity with the United States in deployed nuclear warheads by 2035.[14] When combined with its drastic expansion in anti-access/area denial capabilities, regional missiles, and long-range strike systems, China presents a still-growing and revisionist threat to the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific.

Russian Federation

Russian President Vladimir Putin's foreign policy is the embodiment of opportunism and aggression. Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, and Ukraine again in 2022, have been the most recent victims of outright Russian military aggression, although much of Europe has suffered the effects of Russian actions below the level of war, including information operations, cyber attacks, and industrial sabotage.[15] Russia seems willing to partner with any state

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[13] U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2022* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2022), p. 97, available at https://media.defense.gov/2022/Nov/29/2003122279/-1/-1/1/2022-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF; and, U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023*, op. cit., p. VIII.

[14] U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024*, op. cit., p. 101; and, U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, 2022, op. cit., p. 94.

[15] On information operations, see especially, Michaela Dodge, *Russia's Influence Operations in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, April 2022), *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 2, No. 4, available at https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/OP-Vol.-2-No.-4.pdf.

that can aid it in achieving its territorial ambitions, including China, North Korea, and Iran. Perhaps more concerning are the costs the Kremlin is willing to pay to achieve its objectives. Since 2022, the U.S. Department of Defense estimates that Russia has suffered over 700,000 casualties in Ukraine, the loss of tens of thousands of military vehicles, waves of economic sanctions, a cratered ruble, and an exodus of educated elites to avoid compulsory military service.[16]

Even as Russia has expended much of its military capabilities against Ukraine, its defense industrial base has proven resilient and able to replace its losses—such that Russia was able to grow its military by 15% in 2024 over 2022 levels.[17] The Commander of United States European Command, Gen. Christopher Cavoli, testified that, "…Russia's nuclear forces have been unaffected by the conflict, and Russia retains the largest arsenal of deployed and non-deployed nuclear weapons in the world."[18] Additionally, "… Russia continues to modernize its nuclear forces, and continues to pursue efforts to develop nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missile systems, nuclear-armed hypersonic boost glide vehicles, nuclear-powered cruise missiles, nuclear-powered underwater drones, anti-

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[16] Lloyd J. Austin III, "Remarks by Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III After His 25th and Final Meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group (As Delivered)," *Defense.gov*, January 9, 2025, available at https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4025257/remarks-by-secretary-lloyd-j-austin-iii-after-his-25th-and-final-meeting-of-the/.

[17] Brad Dress, "US general says Russian army has grown by 15 percent since pre-Ukraine war," *The Hill*, April 11, 2024, available at https://thehill.com/policy/defense/4589095-russian-army-grown-ukraine-war-us-general/.

[18] Christopher G. Cavoli, *Statement of General Christopher G. Cavoli, United States Army, United States European Command* (Washington, D.C.: House Armed Services Committee, April 10, 2024), p. 2, available at https://www.eucom.mil/document/42803/useucom-gen-cavoli-cpshasc2024pdf.

satellite weapons, and orbital nuclear weapons."[19] Given Russia's significant advantage over NATO in non-strategic nuclear weapons, its rebuilt conventional forces, and its consistently revisionist foreign policy, the United States must consider Russia a prime threat to engage in opportunistic aggression at best and coordinated aggression at worst.[20]

Democratic People's Republic of Korea

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's primary goals are to maintain political control for the Kim family and deter potential U.S. and South Korean attacks, while retaining the ultimate goal of "unifying" the Korean Peninsula under North Korean rule. The DPRK continues to test nuclear-capable missiles, issue nuclear threats, and generally provoke South Korea in measures short of war.[21] Even more concerning for the United States and South Korea, however, is North Korea's apparent efforts to introduce warfighting roles for its nuclear weapons at the regional level and beyond: "The DPRK is developing and fielding mobile short-, intermediate-, and intercontinental-range nuclear capabilities that place the United States homeland and regional Allies and partners at risk."[22] Over 70 years after

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[19] Ibid., pp. 2-3.

[20] On Russia's perception about non-strategic nuclear weapon advantages, see, U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2018), p. 9, available at https://media.defense.gov/2018/feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-nuclear-posture-review-final-report.pdf.

[21] Nike Ching, "US Urges North Korea to Halt Provocations, Return to Diplomacy," *Voice of America*, January 24, 2024, available at https://www.voanews.com/a/us-urges-north-korea-to-halt-provocations-return-to-diplomacy/7455894.html.

[22] Anthony J. Cotton, *Statement of Anthony J. Cotton, Commander, United States Strategic Command* (Washington, D.C.: Senate Armed Services Committee, February 29, 2024), pp. 5-6, available at

the Korean Armistice, North Korea remains a significant regional threat to U.S. forces and U.S. allies and cannot be excluded from considerations about the potential for opportunistic aggression in the future.

Islamic Republic of Iran

Iran aspires to be a regional hegemon and has shown itself willing to employ military means to advance its revisionist ambitions. Iran continues to be the leading state sponsor of terror in the world and has supplied missiles to a range of actors, from Hezbollah in Lebanon to the Houthi rebels on the Arabian Peninsula. Its 2024 large scale missile attack on Israel demonstrated Iran's propensity for risk-taking in foreign aggression, although Israel's response against Iran and its proxies may temper Iran's immediate ambitions temporarily. Iran remains a latent nuclear power and U.S. Northern Command assesses, "Iran's burgeoning nuclear and space launch programs provide a viable pathway for developing a North America-threatening ICBM should its leaders determine that they need a more forceful means of challenging the United States."[23] Absent a significant change in leadership and regional goals, Iran is likely to remain a significant threat to U.S. forces and allies in the region for the foreseeable future.

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https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/cotton_statement.pdf.

[23] Gregory M. Guillot, *Statement of General Gregory M. Guillot, United States Air Force, Commander, United States Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command* (Washington, D.C.: Senate Armed Services Committee, February 12, 2025), p. 9, available at https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/guillot_statement1.pdf.

The Threats of Opportunistic and Coordinated Aggression

Threats from the four states outlined above, China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran, are significant in and of themselves, but each state for its own reasons has begun to invest greater political and military capital into cooperative partnerships with each other. These autocracies are developing something akin to a "division of labor" in which they trade their destabilizing products or services among themselves according to their specialties. The result, as Gen. Gregory Guillot has testified, is that "… competitors have formed strategic relationships that increase their collective ability to challenge U.S. and allied interests around the world with growing disregard of international norms or the sovereignty of nations that challenge their expansionist ambitions."[24] These cooperative relationships are concerning enough, but, as Gen. Guillot goes on to state, autocratic cooperation is becoming formalized in state-to-state agreements: "… strategic cooperation between and among our four principal adversaries has grown substantially since the beginning of the Ukraine War, increasing the risk that war with one adversary could quickly expand into war with an enemy coalition."[25]

Policymakers in the United States and allied states must collectively grasp the scope and severity that the threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression pose to their security. Deterring and defeating these threats cannot work if the United States alone, or allies alone, do not understand the uniquely dangerous nature of these threats—that will lead to a lack of preparation, unrealistic expectations and, ultimately, defeat. Regrettably, the United States and its allies have been slow to recognize and act upon the

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[24] Ibid., p. 3.

[25] Ibid., p. 6.

potentially existential implications raised by the threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression.

While the 2018 *Summary of the National Defense Strategy* mentioned the need to deter opportunistic aggression, the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* did not—although it did emphasize the highly revisionist nature of Russia's and China's leadership.[26] The 2022 *National Defense Strategy* and 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* reiterated the aggressive intentions of Russia and China while also highlighting the threat of opportunistic aggression in a second theater.[27] The 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* included the statement, "In a potential conflict with a competitor, the United States would need to be able to deter opportunistic aggression by another competitor. We will rely in part on nuclear weapons to help mitigate this risk, recognizing that a near-simultaneous conflict with two nuclear-armed states would constitute an extreme circumstance."[28] The 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* does not elaborate on what an increased U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons for deterring opportunistic aggression would look like in practice, whether that be a lower threshold for nuclear employment, increased signaling utilizing nuclear weapon systems, a higher alert rate for nuclear forces, or other such actions.

As the congressionally mandated bipartisan 2023 Strategic Posture Commission noted, China and Russia, both separately and together, present a set of challenges that the United States has not faced before, and "the risk of conflict with these two nuclear peers is increasing. It is an

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[26] U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, op. cit., p. 6; and, U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, op. cit., p. 6.

[27] U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, op. cit., p. 17; and, U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, op. cit., p. 6.

[28] U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, op. cit., p. 12.

existential challenge for which the United States is ill-prepared…."[29] U.S. Government officials are loathe to make such urgent calls for action publicly, but numerous non-government studies have come to the conclusion that unless the United States greatly increases its conventional and nuclear capabilities, deterrence may fail in more than one theater against more than one major adversary.[30] And yet, even if the United States were to make the necessary investments in its military force posture, adversaries may still perceive the U.S. public and/or its leaders as unwilling to engage in conflict with one, or possibly two, peer nuclear-armed adversaries in defense of allies in far-off lands.[31] The growing strain of isolationism in American politics, as the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission also noted, may be a dangerous signal to U.S. adversaries that they can employ their threats or use of force successfully.[32] The reluctance of U.S. officials to discuss openly, much less actively prepare for, the likelihood of adversarial opportunistic or coordinated aggression appears to be a classic case of what Roberta Wohlstetter termed "the pleasures of self-

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[29] Creedon and Kyl, *America's Strategic Posture*, 2023, op. cit., p. vii.

[30] See, for instance, the recommendations in ibid.; Keith B. Payne and David J. Trachtenberg, *Deterrence in the Emerging Threat Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, August 2022), *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 2, No. 8, available at https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/OP-Vol.-2-No.-8.pdf; and, Roberts, *China's Emergence as a Second Nuclear Peer*, op. cit.; and, Greg Weaver, "Part I: US Deterrence Requirements in the Coming Two Nuclear Peer Threat Environment," chapter in, Weaver and Woolf, *Requirements for Nuclear Deterrence and Arms Control in a Two Nuclear Peer Threat Environment*, op. cit.; and, Robert Peters, *A Nuclear Posture Review for the Next Administration: Building the Nuclear Arsenal of the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, July 30, 2024), available at https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/SR287.pdf.

[31] Harman and Edelman, *Commission on the National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., pp. VI, 10.

[32] Creedon and Kyl, *America's Strategic Posture*, 2023, op. cit., pp. 4-5.

deception"—delaying difficult choices and ignoring warnings to such an extent that it makes conflict more likely and more costly.[33]

Increasingly numerous examples of adversarial cooperation are making it more difficult for U.S. and allied officials to deny the severity of the threat. Russia and North Korea, for instance, recently signed a formal mutual defense treaty, making official the apparent *quid pro quo* that allowed Kim to loan North Korean infantry to Russia to fight in Ukraine, potentially in return for "expertise that could accelerate Pyongyang's development of advanced strategic weapons."[34] Similarly, Russia and Iran recently signed a 20-year strategic partnership pact that formalized a deeper political and military relationship, to include joint training and port visits.[35]

The most prominent and consequential cooperation, of course, is Russia's and China's political rapprochement, which is leading to increasingly integrated military relations and exercises.[36] Indeed, even their respective nuclear strategies appear to be converging on a similar set

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[33] Roberta Wohlstetter, "The Pleasures of Self-Deception," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1979), pp. 54-63.

[34] On the treaty, see, "North Korea, Russia Defence Treaty Comes into Force," *AFP*, December 4, 2024, available at https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20241204-north-korea-russia-defence-treaty-comes-into-force. The quotation is from Gregory M. Guillot, *Statement of General Gregory M. Guillot, United States Air Force, Commander, United States Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command*, op. cit., p. 6.

[35] Vladimir Soldatkin and Andrew Osborn, "Putin and Iran's President Deepen Defence ties with 20-year Pact," *Reuters*, January 17, 2025, available at https://www.reuters.com/world/iranian-president-arrives-moscow-treaty-signing-with-putin-tass-says-2025-01-17/.

[36] Liu Zhen, "China's New Defence Minister Urges 'Closest' Military Relations in First Talks with Russian Counterpart," *South China Morning Post*, February 1, 2024, available at https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3250511/new-chinese-defence-minister-dong-jun-speaks-russian-counterpart.

of strategic capabilities, as articulated by then-Commander of USSTRATCOM ADM Charles Richard: "Russia and the PRC have the ability to… escalate to any level of violence in any domain, they can do it worldwide, and they can do it with any instrument of national power. We're just not used to dealing with competitions and confrontations like that. We can't do that from a regional point, alone."[37]

ADM Richard's concluding point, that challenges to the United States from China and Russia are likely to be global in nature, highlights a final reason why the threats of opportunistic or coordinated aggression are increasingly relevant to U.S. deterrence and force requirement calculations: the United States is unprepared to meet this challenge due to a lack of capabilities and potentially even a lack of political will during a time of simultaneous or sequential crises. The United States has avoided significantly altering its post-Cold War "one major war" planning construct for its conventional forces—and it is too early to tell whether the returning Trump Administration will advocate for a shift towards a "two war strategy."[38] Similar to U.S. conventional forces, the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission notes that despite roughly 10 years of evidence that the planning assumptions underpinning the current U.S. nuclear modernization program of record were no longer valid, the United States has done relatively little to alter the program of record to meet emerging deterrence requirements.[39]

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[37] Charles A. Richard, as quoted in, "2022 Space and Missile Defense Symposium," *STRATCOM.mil*, August 11, 2022, available at https://www.stratcom.mil/Media/Speeches/Article/3126694/2022-space-and-missile-defense-symposium/.

[38] On the history and consequences of this, see, David J. Trachtenberg, *The Demise of the "Two-War Strategy" and Its Impact on Extended Deterrence and Assurance* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, June 2024), *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 4, No. 6, available at https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Vol.-4-No.-6.pdf.

[39] Creedon and Kyl, *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., pp. 38-39, 43.

How then should U.S. and allied policymakers think about the threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression? Specifically, what aspects of these threats make them unique? The dangers fall in four general categories.

First, adversaries may believe that the combination of their local nuclear and conventional advantages and the overwhelming set of U.S. alliance obligations presents a window of opportunity for aggression. Adversaries that might otherwise be unwilling to risk direct confrontation with the United States and its allies could perceive their favorable local balances of power as having greater coercive power in light of U.S. leaders being forced to balance allied needs in multiple theaters simultaneously or sequentially. If adversaries believe the United States will likely be unwilling, or potentially unable, to shift enough military forces from other theaters in time to combat a *fait accompli*, then the opportunity for successful aggression at relatively minimal cost and risk may prove too tempting to pass up.

Second, without changes to the U.S. conventional and nuclear force posture, the threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression will likely force U.S. leaders to prioritize between sets of allies in different geographic regions—risking alliance unity across the globe.[40] Failure to successfully defend allies in one region might destabilize U.S. alliances in other regions and invite more aggression, creating a vicious cycle.

Third, without changes to the U.S. conventional force size and posture, the United States may need to rely more on nuclear weapons to deter or defeat opportunistic and coordinated aggression. Relying more on nuclear weapons

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[40] For more on this point, see, David Allison, Savannah Blalock, E. Paige Price, Micah Howard, Tim McDonnell, Victoria Sanchez, Stephan Varga, and Angela Weaver, *Understanding Opportunistic Aggression in the Twenty-First Century: A Project on Nuclear Issues Mid-Cadre Task Force Report* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 2024), pp. 14, 18-19, available at https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-opportunistic-aggression-twenty-first-century.

may take different forms depending on the political needs of the moment and the dynamics of a conflict, but it could involve additional deterrence threats, lower employment thresholds, force posture changes, more forces in theater, or even first use.

Fourth, U.S. political and military leaders may need to rely on riskier strategies during a conflict that hold out potentially greater hope of a faster and favorable resolution, although at the cost of a greater risk of adversary escalation. U.S. leaders may, in other less-stressing circumstances, prefer to observe certain operational restraints, such as refraining from homeland-to-homeland strikes or withholding attacks on certain classes of targets; yet, in the face of opportunistic or coordinated aggression, these normally preferable restraints may be deemed too risky or costly to observe if the United States wants to preserve enough forces in time to reinforce the second theater.

In short, the potential for Chinese and Russian opportunistic or coordinated aggression will challenge U.S. deterrence strategy and its related military capabilities in ways that planning and preparing for singular aggression do not. The unprecedented nature of this combination of major powers, China and Russia, and minor powers, namely North Korea and Iran, working in tandem against the United States and its allies, makes any lesson that might be gleaned from the history of opportunistic or coordinated aggression especially valuable for U.S. officials today. The following chapters utilize case studies toward this end.

Chapter 3. The Threat of Opportunistic Aggression During the Korean War

President Harry Truman led the United States from the conclusion of a globe-spanning conflict, World War II, to the beginning of a limited war under the nuclear shadow, the Korean War. While the Soviet Union's successful 1949 test of a nuclear device shocked many in the U.S. Government, the greater worry was the threat of Soviet opportunistic aggression while the undersized U.S. military was preoccupied on the Korean Peninsula. Even 70 years later, this conflict helpfully illustrates the many political and military challenges that U.S. leaders faced when balancing dueling national priorities: committing the military forces necessary to achieve political objectives in one theater without overcommitting and incentivizing adversary aggression in a more vulnerable second distant theater. Although historical parallels are never perfect, U.S. leaders today also face the stark possibility of opportunistic aggression, or even coordinated aggression, under the nuclear shadow, and thus will benefit from an examination of the hard-learned lessons from the past.

This chapter addresses four critical elements of the threat of opportunistic aggression in the nuclear age, and specifically in the Korean War: first, whether political and military leaders were aware before the conflict of the potential for opportunistic aggression; second, the political and military restraints used during the crisis or conflict to deter opportunistic aggression elsewhere; third, the adequacy of conventional and nuclear forces, and the trade-offs between them; and fourth, the role of allies in the formation of political objectives throughout the conflict. While all of these elements are to some extent interdependent, nevertheless, these categories are helpful in highlighting some of the major decisions facing political and military leaders that are engaged in a crisis or conflict

while simultaneously seeking to deter further aggression elsewhere. Even as the threat of *two* nuclear-armed peer adversaries facing the United States today is unprecedented, U.S. policymakers have navigated the threat of a nuclear-armed adversary's opportunistic aggression before. Historical cases, such as the Korean War, can therefore aid policymakers in gauging the kinds of political and military decisions leaders may face, as well as the military capabilities that may be most relevant.

Threat Perceptions of Opportunistic Aggression

In the years leading up to the Korean War, U.S. political and military leaders generally agreed that the Soviet Union was expansionist by nature and opportunistic, but still hindered by its massive losses from World War II. The 1948 Soviet-backed *coup d'état* in Czechoslovakia and Berlin Blockade helped convince U.S. and European allied officials of the need to form an official alliance that ultimately resulted in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949. The Soviet Union, also in 1949, successfully tested its first atomic device and ended the U.S. monopoly on that technology. In short, U.S. officials were highly attuned to potential Soviet aggression well before the Korean War, but their focus was predominantly on Europe.

As Frank Pace, Secretary of the Army during 1950-1953, explained concerning U.S. views of the Soviet Union at the time, "We believed at that time [immediately post-World War II] that there was a very reasonable chance that this fellow was going to lick his wounds and get all the pieces back together again. The last thing that any of us could imagine was engaging in some kind of war with Russia as early as 1950."[41] In keeping with that general assessment,

[41] Alfred Goldberg and Harry B. Yoshpe, *Interview with Frank Pace, Secretary of the Army 1950-1953* (Washington, D.C.: OSD Historical Office, May 13, 1974), p. 12, available at

before the outbreak of the Korean War, President Truman and the Joint Chiefs of Staff were united in their desire to withdraw the "constabulary" force of approximately 50,000 U.S. troops on the Korean Peninsula as quickly as possible without provoking Soviet aggression or appearing to abandon a partner.[42] President Truman had made it a top priority post-World War II to shrink the U.S. military budget to better enjoy the peace dividend while the Soviet Union was regrouping. Indeed, Truman's Assistant Secretary of Defense Marx Leva stated that he did not believe the U.S. defense budget would have grown at all under Truman if not for the Korean War—an event that sparked major funding increases for U.S. military forces around the world, not just Korea.[43]

In Secretary of State Dean Acheson's January 12, 1950, speech before the National Press Club, he infamously did not include Korea in his description of a "defensive perimeter" that ran from the Aleutian Islands of Alaska, through the Ryukyu Islands of Japan, and down to the Philippines.[44] While this speech in and of itself was not a factor in Kim-il Sung's desire to invade South Korea, it was a prominent example of the secondary strategic importance the Truman Administration afforded the Korean

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https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/oral_history/OH_Trans_PaceFrank5-13-1974.pdf?ver=2014-05-28-135107-660.

[42] James F. Schnabel and Robert J. Watson, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, Volume III: 1950-1951, The Korean War, Part I* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Joint History, 1998), pp. 7-8.

[43] Alfred Goldberg, Samuel A. Tucker, and Harry B. Yoshpe, *Interview with Marx Leva, Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, and Assistant Secretary of Defense* (Washington, D.C.: OSD Historical Office, March 8, 1974), p. 39, available at https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/oral_history/OH_Trans_LevaMarx3-8-1974.pdf?ver=2014-05-28-132815-603.

[44] Dean Acheson, "Crisis in Asia—An Examination of U.S. Policy," *The Department of State Bulletin*, Vol. XXII, No. 551 (January 23, 1950), p. 116, available at https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=osu.32437010893382&seq=122.

Peninsula.[45] It is, therefore, unsurprising that both Gen. Douglas MacArthur and Gen. Matthew Ridgway understood when they were Commanders in Chief of Far East Command that, even in the midst of the Korean War, their first priority mission was to defend Japan from a potential Soviet invasion, with the secondary concern being the achievement of a successful outcome of the war in Korea.[46]

When North Korea invaded South Korea in June 1950, with what U.S. and allied leaders assumed was Soviet backing, threat perceptions concerning the Soviet Union began to change rapidly and concern for the prospect of opportunistic aggression grew.[47] Gen. Hamilton A. Twitchell, Chief of Staff at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) HQ, remembered the feeling that since the Soviets had shown themselves to be aggressive in Korea, they could certainly be aggressive against Europe.[48]

Indeed, U.S. leaders often cast U.S. intervention in the Korean War as an act of deterring opportunistic aggression

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[45] Kim had been pressing Stalin for his blessing to invade South Korea well before 1950. See, for example, Sergey Radchenko, *To Run the World: The Kremlin's Cold War Bid for Global Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024), pp. 134-136.

[46] Maurice Matloff, *Oral History Interview with General M. B. Ridgway* (Washington, D.C.: OSD Historical Office, April 18, 1984), pp. 6, 7, 14, available at https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/oral_history/OH_Trans_RidgwayMatthew4-18-1984.pdf?ver=2014-09-19-081000-687. See also, Matthew B. Ridgway, *The Korean War* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1967), pp. 164-165.

[47] On Soviet views of North Korea's invasion plans, see, Radchenko, *To Run the World*, op. cit., pp. 134-138.

[48] Maurice Matloff, Alfred Goldberg, and Robert Watson, *Oral History Interview with General Hamilton A. Twitchell* (Washington, D.C.: OSD Historical Office, July 5, 1984), pp. 26-27, available at https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/oral_history/OH_Trans_TwitchellHamilton7-5-1984.pdf?ver=2014-05-28-140052-920.

itself. President Harry Truman laid out his logic for intervention in terms of deterrence, stating:

> I felt certain that if South Korea was allowed to fall Communist leaders would be emboldened to override nations closer to our own shores. If the Communists were permitted to force their way into the Republic of Korea without opposition from the free world, no small nation would have the courage to resist threats and aggression by stronger Communist neighbors. If this was allowed to go unchallenged it would mean a third world war, just as similar incidents had brought on the second world war. It was also clear to me that the foundations and the principles of the United Nations were at stake unless this unprovoked attack on Korea could be stopped.[49]

His Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, thought similarly: "To back away from this challenge, in view of our capacity for meeting it, would be highly destructive of the power and prestige of the United States. By prestige I mean the shadow cast by power, which is of great deterrent importance."[50] General Eisenhower, then-President of Columbia University, stated plainly that "We'll have a dozen Koreas soon if we don't take a firm stand."[51]

Political and military threat perceptions thus changed dramatically in the space of only a few months, perhaps even weeks, from relatively little concern over Soviet aggression abroad in the near future to an overriding concern over direct Soviet aggression in one area and

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[49] Harry S. Truman, as quoted in, Schnabel and Watson, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, Volume III: 1950-1951, The Korean War, Part I*, op. cit., p. 32.

[50] Dean Acheson, as quoted in, ibid., p. 33.

[51] As quoted in, David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 781.

Soviet-supported aggression in other areas simultaneously. The United States and its allies were ill-equipped militarily to adapt to these rapid changes in the perceptions of the type and scope of the threats. This unpreparedness extracted a significant cost during the Korean War, as is evident in the next section, because U.S. leaders felt compelled to impose restraints on their military operations to avoid a further expansion of war that they could not afford, politically or militarily.

Political and Military Actions to Avoid Opportunistic Aggression

The reasons why U.S. political leaders issued specific deterrence signals or imposed restraints on the military varied depending on the course of the conflict and the perceived danger of war expanding beyond the Korean Peninsula. President Truman, for instance, wrote in his diary on June 30, shortly after the beginning of the conflict, about his decision to intervene: "Must be careful not to cause a general Asiatic war."[52] Truman's concern was not hyperbolic given that only months earlier, in February 1950, the Soviet Union and the newly formed People's Republic of China had signed a mutual defense treaty.[53] Thus, at the beginning stages of the war, there was an acute awareness of the need to keep China, and thus potentially the Soviet Union, out of the Korean War as active participants, lest it draw in Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan or the nascent Japanese government in defense of the Northern Territories, below the Soviet-claimed Kuril Islands.

The Truman Administration, and later the Eisenhower Administration, wanted to confine the Korean War geographically to the Peninsula, a policy that involved a

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[52] McCullough, *Truman*, op. cit., p. 783.

[53] Radchenko, *To Run the World*, op. cit., p. 134.

mixture of demonstrations of resolve and restraint. For instance, shortly after the initial North Korean attack against South Korea, the United States sought to demonstrate its resolve, and secondarily to deter opportunistic aggression, by deploying nuclear-capable B-29 bombers to Europe and the Pacific that could, at least theoretically with the addition of specialized equipment, reduce the time needed to respond to a Soviet attack if Moscow intervened directly in Korea.[54] Later, in 1951, President Truman publicly addressed Soviet and Chinese leaders and warned them that disregarding the tacit agreement that kept U.S. bombers out of China in exchange for keeping Chinese and Soviet planes out of Korean airspace would "escalate" the conflict to their detriment.[55] Beyond these specific demonstrations of force, the Truman Administration generally sought to convey the message that U.S. forces fighting in Korea were a tangible and costly signal of American resolve to defend free nations against Communist takeover—in short, the conflict itself was meant to demonstrate resolve and enhance deterrence elsewhere.[56]

While the Truman Administration's demonstrations of resolve were noteworthy deterrence signals, it is what the Truman Administration chose *not to do* that featured more prominently in its strategy to avoid Soviet opportunistic or coordinated aggression with the PRC. During the summer of 1950, the Truman Administration faced two competing priorities that demanded greater levels of U.S. military capabilities: reinforcing allies in Europe as part of the newly-formed North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the Korean War. President Truman was unwilling to initiate a

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[54] Roger Dingman, "Atomic Diplomacy during the Korean War," *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Winter 1988-1989), pp. 55-60.

[55] Ibid., p. 75.

[56] See, for instance, Harry S. Truman, as quoted in, Schnabel and Watson, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, Volume III: 1950-1951, The Korean War, Part I*, op. cit., p. 32.

full-scale mobilization of the United States to meet these simultaneous demands and thus chose to prioritize European allies, while committing to keeping a steady level of forces in Korea to fight for the best possible outcome.[57] Indeed, the only major increase in U.S. forces in Korea came in response to Gen. MacArthur's warning in 1950 that a protracted war in Korea would incentivize the Soviet Union to act aggressively elsewhere while the United States was preoccupied.[58]

Put simply, the Truman Administration had to choose between two opposing strategies that sought the same goal: deterring opportunistic or coordinated aggression while achieving its goals in Korea. The first strategy was to increase forces in Korea to seek a short sharp victory, but at the potential cost of risking allied dissent and potential deterrence failure in Europe. The second strategy was to prioritize reinforcing allies in Europe, but at the potential cost of risking a defeat or stalemate in Korea and the subsequent damage in the eyes of allies and adversaries about U.S. capability and will. President Truman chose the latter—electing to pursue only a limited conflict in Korea with all the political and military restraints that entailed, even if it meant military disadvantages for U.S. forces.

Perhaps the most prominent tacit restraint that kept the conflict confined to the Korean Peninsula was the U.S., PRC, and Soviet practice of keeping fighters and bombers out of each others' airspace. That is, while the United States had complete air superiority over the Korean Peninsula, its pilots were under strict orders not to attack or bomb Chinese mainland targets—a practice that China

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[57] Maurice Matloff, *Oral History Interview with General M. B. Ridgway, Part II* (Washington, D.C.: OSD Historical Office, April 19, 1984), pp. 19-20, available at https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/oral_history/OH_Trans_RidgwayMatthew4-19-1984.pdf?ver=2014-05-28-135246-783.

[58] Ridgway, *The Korean War*, op. cit., p. 36.

reciprocated as Mao Zedong did not seek to escalate the conflict more than he already had.[59] This unspoken agreement also benefitted the United States by keeping the Japanese homeland free from Chinese or Soviet attacks—an important consideration as the United States was still occupying Japan itself.[60] As noted, however, the U.S. military was unable to prosecute the war as effectively as it wanted to, such as by striking Chinese bases used to deploy troops into Korea, for fear that it could incentivize Chinese or Soviet formal entry into the war.

Adequacy of Conventional and Nuclear Forces

One of the key reasons that the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations perceived opportunistic or coordinated aggression as significant threats was the inadequacy of U.S. conventional and nuclear forces to meet the suddenly increasing deterrence and assurance requirements. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Omar Bradley, for instance, warned President Truman that the United States could not commit the necessary military forces to Korea without either mobilization within the United States or failing to meet commitments in other parts of the world.[61] As described earlier, the constabulary force of U.S. soldiers in Korea was ill-equipped for even a limited war while reserves from the United States were inadequately trained and too few in number to have a significant effect on a relevant timescale.

Additionally, there was the matter of U.S. defense priorities. Given the recent formation of NATO and

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[59] Ibid., p. 146.

[60] Ridgway, as quoted in, Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1969), p. 651.

[61] Schnabel and Watson, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, Volume III: 1950-1951, The Korean War, Part I*, op. cit., p. 39.

President Truman's decision to prioritize reinforcing Europe against what was perceived as a newly urgent threat of a Soviet attack, all the new forces that were being drafted and trained in the United States were primarily being sent to Europe. U.S. military leaders, with the exception of Gen. MacArthur, generally saw "no prospect" of getting the required divisions in the proper time frame to Europe if the Soviets had invaded.[62] Indeed, the Korean War so altered U.S. and allied threat perceptions that, in November 1951, the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved a plan to essentially triple the number of personnel and authorized air wings in the U.S. Air Force within fewer than four years—an incredible influx of resources over time.[63] Even with a series of massive investments across the military, however, the second Supreme Commander of Allied Powers for the Korean War, Gen. Matthew Ridgway, who was later the Secretary of the Army beginning in 1953, believed that in 1952-1953, the military forces available to NATO were "wholly inadequate to meet a sudden, full-scale attack by the Soviets…."[64] Indeed, the calls from U.S. forces in Europe, and Berlin especially, were exceptionally dire. Gen. Maxwell Taylor, then U.S. Commander, Berlin (USCOB) and later Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, wrote to the Truman Administration that "the position of the United States Commander, Berlin, is now militarily untenable."[65]

Moreover, if the United States was going to attempt to provide significant forces to two different theaters on opposite sides of the globe, then its leaders sought to do so

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[62] Matloff, *Oral History Interview with General M. B. Ridgway*, op. cit., pp. 31-32.

[63] Trevor Albertson, *Winning Armageddon: Curtis LeMay and Strategic Air Command, 1948-1957* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019), p. 47.

[64] Matloff, *Oral History Interview with General M. B. Ridgway*, op. cit., p. 24.

[65] Ingo Trauschweizer, *Maxwell Taylor's Cold War: From Berlin to Vietnam* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2019), p. 45.

at the most strategically important and defensible location. But, as Gen. Ridgway noted, at the outset of the Korean War the Joint Chiefs of Staff were reluctant to supply all the troops and material that Gen. MacArthur requested for Korea since force levels in the United States were already low, slow to grow, and potentially better deployed to more defensible and higher priority theaters like Europe.[66] Both U.S. political leadership and the Joint Chiefs of Staff hoped to avoid, in essence, the worst of both worlds: "inadequate forces" for both theaters.[67]

This concern about inadequate forces led to a number of operational restraints and friction within the military. For instance, Gen. Ridgway recounts how Gen. MacArthur had repeatedly requested permission to attack targets in the PRC, across the Yalu River, to improve the U.S. military position, but the Truman Administration opposed this action because it could start "World War III" by incentivizing the Soviets to enter the conflict against ill-prepared U.S. forces. Indeed, then-Chief of Staff of the Air Force, Gen. Vandenburg, also opposed such operations because they would "so weaken us [through attrition and losses] that we will not be able to respond or build up for two years thereafter in case something breaks out in Europe."[68] Operational difficulties were not confined solely to deterring opportunistic or coordinated aggression, either. President Truman ordered the 7th Fleet into the Taiwan Strait to ensure that neither the PRC attacked Taiwan nor that Chiang Kai-shek attacked mainland China, perhaps on the urging of Gen. MacArthur.[69]

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[66] Ridgway, *The Korean War*, op. cit., pp. 34-36.

[67] Matloff, *Oral History Interview with General M. B. Ridgway*, op. cit., p. 34.

[68] Ibid., p. 15; see also Ridgway, *The Korean War*, op. cit., pp. 49-50.

[69] Doris Condit and Alfred Goldberg, *Interview with Governor W. Averell Harriman* (Washington, D.C.: OSD Historical Office, May 29, 1975), pp. 23-24, available at

The Truman Administration also sought to signal U.S. resolve and enhance assurance via the movement of nuclear-capable bombers, and even atomic weapons, overseas—actions not without numerous operational difficulties.[70] As Commander of Strategic Air Command (SAC), Gen. Curtis LeMay during that time was concerned that the bombers needed for missions in the unforeseen Korean War would be unavailable for their original intended mission: deterrence and defeat of the Soviet Union.[71] At that time the U.S. nuclear arsenal was still not large by any means and U.S. nuclear war plans had practically no hedge to accommodate unforeseen requirements on a finite number of bombers.[72] Indeed, the Korean War even drove some of the earliest operational U.S. planning on how and when to transfer the authority over nuclear-capable bombers from a regional commander to the SAC Commander should general atomic war have broken out—a not insignificant planning issue.[73]

The Impact of Allied Perceptions on U.S. Leadership

The risk of opportunistic or coordinated aggression weighed heavily on the minds of allied leaders as the United States committed troops to Korea and tried to stand up NATO simultaneously. Dean Acheson, and the State Department more broadly, believed the risk of

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https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/oral_history/OH_Trans_HarrimanAverell5-29-1975.pdf?ver=2014-05-28-130706-200.

[70] Doris E. Condit, *Interview of Robert A. Lovett* (Washington, D.C.: OSD Historical Office, June 7, 1976), pp. 26-27, available at https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/oral_history/OH_Trans_LovettRobert6-7-1976.pdf?ver=2014-09-19-080949-827.

[71] Albertson, *Winning Armageddon*, op. cit., pp. 28-42.

[72] Ibid., pp. 28-34.

[73] Ibid., p. 56.

opportunistic Soviet aggression during the Korean War might fluctuate based on the "momentum of events" during the war.[74] That is, Acheson feared that Soviet aggression in a distant theater away from the Korean War "would call for the use of more military power than we could then deploy"—a doubly dangerous condition in that it offered a temptation to the Soviets and a quandary for the United States in how to respond.[75] As U.N. forces successfully drove North Korean forces back toward the 38th Parallel, the British protested vehemently both Gen. MacArthur's rhetoric about expanding the Korean War to the Chinese mainland and the possibility of advances past the 38th Parallel, as both risked general war with the Soviet Union.[76] Thus, in December 1950, British Prime Minister Clement Attlee arrived for a meeting with President Truman to discuss the Korean War generally but, more specifically and privately, to urge President Truman to curtail U.S. involvement in Korea in favor of focusing on the defense of Europe—a major switch in British policy that, up until China's overt intervention, was staunchly behind U.S. efforts in the Korean War.[77]

These and other allied private protestations led the Truman Administration to prioritize reinforcing Europe militarily while the Eisenhower Administration focused on ending the war quickly, but acceptably, to accomplish the same goal. Both administrations sought to walk the policy tightrope of assuring allies the United States was a reliable security guarantor and was willing to expend blood and treasure in cooperation with them, as evidenced in Korea, but would not commit too much blood and treasure elsewhere such that it risked deterrence failure in their immediate vicinity.

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[74] Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, op. cit. p. 421.

[75] Loc. cit.

[76] Dingman, "Atomic Diplomacy during the Korean War," op. cit., p. 70.

[77] Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, op. cit., p. 481.

Lessons and Conclusions

As is evident from this case study, the threat of opportunistic or coordinated aggression increases the risks and potential costs of every plausible U.S. course of action. A limited war in Korea, a scenario for which the United States was unprepared, proved difficult in and of itself; when combined with the real possibility of Chinese direct and formal entry into the Korean War and/or Soviet aggression in Europe, the threats and costs to the United States and its allies became magnified. What further lessons can U.S. policymakers draw from the Korean War that may be relevant to the emerging two nuclear peer threat environment? Three stand out as especially relevant.

1. *Victory in a limited conflict may be ideal for deterring opportunistic or coordinated aggression, but the cost of victory may be deterrence failure in a second theater.*

As Gen. MacArthur stated repeatedly, a quick victory in Korea would be a potent demonstration of U.S. power, potentially deter future aggression, and allow troops to be redeployed more quickly to other higher priority areas. Yet, as Gen. Ridgway, Gen. MacArthur's successor, noted in his history of the Korean War, "It is clear that the nation's top civilian and military leaders, using a wider-angle lens, with deeper sources of information on the atomic situation in the Soviet Union, and with more comprehensive estimates of the possible consequences of general war in Europe, had a much clearer view of the realities and responsibilities of the day. In their view, the kind of 'victory' sought by the Theater Commander, even if it were attained in Korea, would have incurred overbalancing elsewhere."[78] Victory in the Korean War might have been Pyrrhic if it led to Soviet aggression against a nascent NATO. Stated more broadly, the scholar Colin S. Gray noted, "Ends, or goals, are not all

[78] Ridgway, *The Korean War*, op. cit., p. 149.

that matter, because the cost of reaching them can be so high that they are not worth securing."[79]

Pursuing anything less than complete victory while facing opportunistic or coordinated aggression would be an especially difficult task for U.S. political and military leaders whose strategic culture, the history and norms that influence their decision-making, is so suffused with a spirit of accepting "nothing less than full victory."[80] Indeed, Gen. Ridgway recognized how a "limited war" was a grating concept for the American mind: "Americans are not inclined by temperament to fight limited wars. As in the boxing ring, they want nothing less than a knockout. What red-blooded American could oppose so shining a concept as victory? It would be like standing up for sin against virtue."[81]

How can U.S. policymakers apply this lesson in today's context? First, they can recognize the importance of forces in being, i.e., those military forces immediately available for unexpected contingencies, and what can realistically be expected of them given other U.S. commitments around the world, potentially with higher priorities. While a decisive victory in one theater may indeed improve the prospects of deterring opportunistic or coordinated aggression in other theaters, the pursuit of victory may also cause the United States to spread its forces too thin and ultimately result in the worst case scenario: failure in all theaters. This is not to say that U.S. policymakers must always eschew lesser

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[79] Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace & Victory* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), p. 12.

[80] The quote is from Gen. Eisenhower's D-Day order but mirrors the U.S. goal of unconditional surrender in World War II and other unconditional goals in U.S. history. On this point, see, Colin S. Gray, *Defining and Achieving Decisive Victory* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2002), available at https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1822&context=monographs.

[81] Ridgway, *The Korean War*, op. cit., p. 144.

priority theaters in the face of threats of opportunistic or coordinated aggression; only that they must understand the nature of the conflict and its purpose, à la Clausewitz.[82] In short, there may be acceptable outcomes short of total victory in a limited war, such as denying the adversary victory, or achieving strategic advantage, that better hedge against the possibility of opportunistic or coordinated aggression in other theaters.

2. *Threat perceptions and military requirements are likely to change far more quickly than nuclear or conventional forces can adapt – potentially leading to accepting riskier strategies.*

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously stated, "You go to war with the Army you have—not the Army you might want or wish to have at a later time"—something that was certainly true of the Korean War.[83] As noted already, the Truman Administration felt compelled to fight a limited war in Korea because the military simply could not provide enough resources in the relevant time frame necessary to *both* reinforce NATO and achieve total victory in Korea. Indeed, even after almost three years and nearly a tripling of the U.S. defense budget, President Eisenhower rejected calls to increase the resources devoted to the Korean War to compel a quicker satisfactory conclusion to the conflict; he saw too much risk that such an increase would disrupt the NATO military buildup and anger essential allies in Europe.[84] This dynamic points to the importance of

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[82] "The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature." Clausewitz, *On War*, op. cit., p. 100.

[83] Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown* (New York: Penguin Group, 2011), p. 645.

[84] On the defense budget, see, Doris M. Condit, *The Test of War: 1950-1953* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 1988), p. 500. On

available military forces at the time of conflict and, even more so, the importance of military forces already in theater. If time is of the essence, as it almost certainly would be in facing the threat of opportunistic or coordinated aggression, then forces in theater would have an outsized role in determining what political goals the United States could realistically pursue and on what time frame.

Another important aspect of forces in being is the flexibility of the U.S. nuclear force. Even granting that the U.S. nuclear force was still in its relative infancy during the time of the Korean War and far smaller than it is today, U.S. policymakers can still draw critical lessons from the difficulties encountered by the U.S. Strategic Air Command. For example, Gen. LeMay, SAC Commander, wrote in 1949, just before the outbreak of the Korean War, "The size of our [nuclear] striking force is so closely tailored to fit the task with which it is charged that we have little or no margin of safety within which we can absorb the effects of a successful enemy attack. Under these circumstances, it would appear economical and logical to adopt the objective of completely avoiding enemy attack against our strategic force by destroying his atomic force before it can attack ours."[85] In other words, Gen. LeMay recommended a strategy of preemption to his political superiors because the fragility and inflexibility of his forces meant he could not achieve the political objectives assigned to him in case of an attack on the United States—there simply was not enough of a hedge within the existing force at the time.

What might this insight mean for U.S. policymakers today? In the face of opportunistic or coordinated aggression, especially after an attack on U.S. forces, the United States may be forced to prioritize, adopt riskier strategies, or both, to achieve the same political objectives.

Eisenhower's views, see Dingman, "Atomic Diplomacy during the Korean War," op. cit., p. 85.

[85] As quoted in, Albertson, *Winning Armageddon*, op. cit., p. 14.

That is, if U.S. policymakers believe prioritizing some theaters or allies over others, or adopting riskier strategies like nuclear first use, are unacceptable, then they should invest in procuring sufficiently flexible nuclear and conventional forces that can withstand attacks and still achieve set political objectives. This is, of course, the costlier option financially and politically; but that fact must be weighed against the absence of these investments and the resulting likelihood of deterrence failure, plus those financial costs and the potential domestic and international political costs.

3. *Adversaries are likely to adapt their strategies if they believe that the United States is ill-equipped or unwilling politically to counter opportunistic or coordinated aggression.*

If adversaries perceive the United States as either unwilling or unable to engage in one conflict while deterring others, then they may have added incentive to pursue more aggressive strategies at the expense of the United States and its allies, or to pursue strategies that the United States is less able to counter. There is evidence from the Korean War that supports this finding. For instance, Nie Rongzhen, People's Liberation Army (PLA) acting Chief of Staff, stated that the United States was likely unwilling to employ nuclear weapons against China in North Korea because it was "deterred by possible Soviet nuclear retaliation from doing this in the Far East."[86] This widely held belief among Chinese leaders allowed the PRC to adopt its strategy of concentrating troops to overwhelm better-equipped though outnumbered U.S. units.

Similarly, the PRC's Central Military Commission recommended a strategy of "protracted war" that it believed would favor China in the long run given long

[86] Nie Rongzhen, as quoted in, Shu Guang Zhang, *Mao's Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War, 1950-1953* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995), p. 234.

logistics lines and domestic political pressure in the United States.[87] Chinese leaders recognized and adapted perceived U.S. vulnerabilities into their strategy, part of which included the U.S. fear of Soviet opportunistic aggression elsewhere in the world. Indeed, as noted earlier, these U.S. concerns had direct operational consequences in terms of withholding attacks in certain areas and limiting the number of troops committed to the Korean War. President Eisenhower, for example, was unwilling to risk "spreading the war" outside of the Korean Peninsula because it could involve the Soviet Union, and its newly acquired nuclear arsenal, directly.[88]

The lesson for policymakers today then is that adversary perceptions about the U.S. ability and willingness to potentially engage in multiple conflicts simultaneously will likely affect the military strategy the adversary adopts. That is, adversaries will likely adopt strategies aimed at perceived U.S. vulnerabilities—and if one of those perceived vulnerabilities is being susceptible to simultaneous conflict, then the risk of that kind of conflict may grow. And, when combined with the second lesson listed above on the inherent limitations of quickly adapting U.S. military forces, U.S. political leaders may be compelled to use inadequate forces to counter an adversary's military strategy that is tailored to exploit U.S. vulnerabilities. This dynamic will likely create pressure to either abandon certain political commitments or adopt a strategy of nuclear escalation, two inherently dangerous options against nuclear-armed revisionist adversaries.

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[87] Zhang, *Mao's Military Romanticism*, op. cit., pp. 76-77.

[88] Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: 1953-1956* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1963), pp. 179-180.

Conclusion

Overall then, the U.S. experience in the Korean War illustrates how the threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression compound the difficulties and costs that U.S. political and military leaders are likely to face in the emerging threat environment. The threat of simultaneous conflicts during the Korean War shaped U.S. political goals, military strategy, resourcing, alliances, and even the adversary's military strategy. Unlike the Cold War, however, the United States today faces not just one, but two nuclear peer adversaries in China and Russia—partners who describe themselves as in a "friendship without limits"—plus their regional partners, North Korea and Iran. Today, U.S. and allied officials should view the unique dangers and costs of opportunistic and coordinated aggression as orders of magnitude beyond those faced by U.S. and allied leaders during the Korean War. Only then can they begin to appreciate the scale and urgency needed to deter this growing network of threats.

Chapter 4. The Cuban Missile Crisis, Opportunistic Aggression, and Lessons for Today

Introduction

The popular image of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis is of President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev going "eyeball to eyeball" over the placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba, but this characterization leaves out just how important U.S. leaders considered Berlin to be during the crisis—making it a useful case study of the United States seeking to deter opportunistic aggression in one theater while engaged in a near conflict in another theater. Analyzing the Cuban Missile Crisis through the lens of deterring opportunistic aggression can yield some important lessons relevant to the current threat environment, characterized by two peer nuclear adversaries, each revisionist in nature and capable of simultaneous or sequential aggression in geographically separate theaters. The increasingly cooperative nature of the Sino-Russian partnership, and both of their growing relationships with North Korea and Iran, combine to form an unprecedented set of threats that the United States and its allies must face together. This case study is just one piece of a larger effort to understand the nature of opportunistic and coordinated aggression, how the United States has faced aspects of these threats before, and what can be learned from these past events to strengthen U.S. and allied security.

This chapter examines the role that the threat of opportunistic aggression played in the Cuban Missile Crisis. First, it examines whether U.S. political and military leaders believed opportunistic aggression was a realistic possibility and, if so, the extent to which they were prepared to deter it. Second, it considers the political and military actions U.S. leaders took to deter opportunistic aggression

both before and during the crisis. Third, it explores how U.S. political and military leaders judged the adequacy of their conventional and nuclear forces for various contingencies during the crisis. Fourth and finally, it examines how allies' views and interests affected U.S. actions to deter opportunistic aggression. The concluding section highlights and summarizes relevant lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis for U.S. policymakers to consider as they make plans and provide resources to deter and defeat opportunistic and potentially coordinated aggression in the future.

Threat Perceptions of Opportunistic Aggression

The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis was, in some ways, a continuation of the 1961 Berlin Crisis. From 1958-1961, culminating in the construction of the Berlin Wall, the Soviet Union placed ever greater pressure on the United States and its allies, Great Britain and France, to vacate Berlin completely. While West Berlin remained under allied control, it was essentially an island surrounded on all sides by East Germany, a member of the Warsaw Pact. Narrow road and air corridors linked West Berlin to West Germany but, if the Soviet Union and its allies sought to gain control of all of Berlin militarily, there was little NATO could do with its conventional forces in time to save the city. The attitude of U.S. leaders toward defending West Berlin therefore became something of a barometer that European allies could use to judge U.S. willingness and ability to come to their aid in a war against the Warsaw Pact.

Even though the United States and Soviet Union de-escalated the 1961 Berlin Crisis relatively peacefully, U.S. intelligence sources continued to indicate that the Soviets hoped to increase pressure on West Berlin—so when Soviet radars and missiles appeared in Cuba in October 1962, many U.S. leaders concluded that such actions were either meant to distract the United States from defending Berlin or

to gain leverage over the United States to settle the Berlin question in the Soviet Union's favor. Indeed, President Kennedy regularly received the U.S. intelligence community's assessments of Soviet intentions in Berlin in the months leading up to the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. On July 28th, for example, President Kennedy's "Intelligence Checklist" included the CIA Berlin Office's expectation that "the Soviets and their East German minions [will] try a variety of probes and cautious harassments in the coming weeks."[89] CIA Director John McCone also discussed with his colleague the possibility of action closer to the American homeland: "As an alternative, I can see that an offensive Soviet Cuban base will provide [the] Soviets with [sic] most important and effective trading position in connection with all other critical areas and hence they might take an unexpected risk in order to establish such a position."[90]

Once U.S. leaders understood the full scope of Soviet weaponry flowing into Cuba in October, their immediate reaction was to presume some sort of connection with Berlin. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, for example, noted his concern over the possibility of Soviet opportunistic aggression, potentially in Berlin, early on in the crisis:

> I think Berlin is very much involved in this [Khrushchev's motivation]. For the first time, I'm beginning really to wonder whether maybe Mr. Khrushchev is entirely rational about Berlin.

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[89] Central Intelligence Agency, *The President's Intelligence Checklist – 28 July 1962* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives, July 28, 1962), declassified 2011, p. 1, available at https://www.archives.gov/files/declassification/iscap/pdf/2011-056-doc11.pdf.

[90] Dir. John McCone to Dep. Dir. Marshall Carter (CIA), "McCone to Carter, Cable 20, September 20, 1962," chapter in Central Intelligence Agency, *The Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Documents* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 1994), p. 95.

> We've already talked about his obsession with it. And I think we have to keep our eye on that element. But they may be thinking that they can either bargain Berlin and Cuba against each other, or that they could provoke us into a kind of action in Cuba which would give them an umbrella for them to take action with respect to Berlin. In other words, like the Suez-Hungary combination. If they could provoke us into taking the first overt action, then the world would be confused and they would have what they consider to be justification for making a move somewhere else.[91]

Concurrent U.S. intelligence assessments agreed: "They [the Soviets] also probably believe that the missiles will reinforce the deterrent link between Cuba and Berlin which was implicit in the 11 September Soviet statement and in subsequent private conversations. Moscow clearly is seeking to portray Berlin as a hostage for Cuba."[92]

As the Cuban Missile Crisis progressed and the United States weighed seriously the option of a major attack on Soviet bases in Cuba, leaders in the White House became increasingly convinced that the Soviets would respond in some manner against Berlin. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, for example, stated, "How will the Soviets react? … How could Khrushchev afford to accept this action without some kind of rebuttal? He can't accept it without some rebuttal. It may not be a substantial rebuttal, but it's gonna have to be some. Where?... How does this affect our allies' support of us in relation to Berlin?...[Alexis Johnson, Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs,

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[91] Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 61.

[92] Central Intelligence Agency, "Probable Soviet MRBM Sites in Cuba, October 16, 1962," p. 2, chapter in, Central Intelligence Agency, *The Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Documents*, op. cit., p. 141.

suggests Soviet reaction could happen not only in Berlin, but Turkey] Sure. Iran… and Korea… Exactly. And we call it a worldwide alert."[93] President Kennedy agreed, stating simply, "I think it is more likely he [Khrushchev] would just grab Berlin."[94] Indeed, the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Gromyko told President Kennedy on October 18, in the early stages of the crisis, that the Soviets would "be compelled" to end the allied presence in Berlin if the Soviet Union and the United States could not come to an agreement.[95]

As the Cuban Missile Crisis neared its peak intensity, President Kennedy told others about an intelligence source in the United Nations "which indicated Soviet intention to grab Berlin."[96] Yet, around the same time, by October 24, 1962, CIA had not detected any unusual military movements among Soviet or bloc forces in reaction to the U.S. declaration of a naval quarantine around Cuba.[97] These discordant intelligence reports, however, did not detract from the U.S. leadership's overall assessment that the Soviet Union was both willing and able to seize opportunities for aggression and was particularly focused on resolving the Berlin question in its favor.

Secretary Rusk, as might be expected given his responsibilities at the State Department, neatly summarized the global scope of the threat of opportunistic aggression facing the United States at that time. As he considered U.S. response options to the Soviet placement of weapons in Cuba, Rusk was on the lookout for Soviet counter-actions in

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[93] May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, op. cit., pp. 115-116.

[94] Ibid., p. 138.

[95] Ibid., p. 168.

[96] John McCone, "Leadership meeting on October 22nd at 5:00 p.m., 24 October, 1962," p. 3, chapter in, Central Intelligence Agency, *The Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Documents*, op. cit., p. 277.

[97] Central Intelligence Agency, "The Crisis: USSR/Cuba, 24 October 1962," p. 1, chapter in, ibid., p. 296.

other parts of the world, including "an attack on Turkey" or "consequences in Berlin, Quemoy, Matsu, Korea, etc."[98] Indeed, Rusk was keenly aware that even strictly limited U.S. actions in specific geographic areas could have global repercussions given U.S. alliance commitments. As he stated early in the Cuban Missile Crisis, "The thing that I'm of course very conscious of is that there is no such thing, I think, as unilateral action by the United States. It's so intimately involved with 42 allies and confrontation in many places that any action that we take will greatly increase the risks of a direct action involving our other alliances and our other forces in other parts of the world."[99]

Given the global nature of U.S. commitments and the potential domino effect that U.S. action in one theater might have in another theater, how did U.S. political and military leaders act to deter or avoid provoking opportunistic aggression?

Political and Military Actions to Deter or Avoid Opportunistic Aggression

The Kennedy Administration felt compelled to act in response to Soviet actions in Cuba, even though some European allies might object and state that they had learned to live with being in range of regional Soviet nuclear missiles. Early on in the crisis President Kennedy acknowledged the "dilemma" posed by the U.S. outpost in Berlin and the Soviet capabilities in Cuba, stating that "action of a type contemplated would be opposed by the [NATO] alliance—on the other hand, lack of action will create disunity, lack of confidence and disintegration of our several alliances and friendly relations with countries who

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[98] "Memorandum of Meeting, Wednesday, October 17th, at 8:30 a.m., and again at 4:00 p.m., October 19, 1962," p. 4, chapter in, ibid., p. 172.

[99] May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, op. cit., p. 54.

have confidence in us."[100] Thus, for President Kennedy, even though military action, and even the quarantine, might prompt negative allied reaction, the risk of inaction was even greater as it might damage deterrence both in the current crisis and in the future. Secretary Rusk agreed, stating, "But we think that, when the full scope of this becomes known [in Europe], that [taking] no action would undermine our alliances all over the world very promptly… I think we also have to think of the effect on the Soviets if we were to do nothing. Now suppose that they were to consider this a major backdown, then this would free their hands for almost any kind of intervention that they might want to try in other parts of the world."[101] Having decided to take action in response to the Soviets, the Kennedy Administration debated how best to demonstrate resolve, strengthen security, and reduce risks.

The U.S. response involved a mixture of demonstrating resolve through military posture changes as well as diplomatic consultations with allies, political signaling via official announcements, and certain internal risk-reduction measures. Secretary McNamara recognized early during the crisis that U.S. military preparations served dual purposes as both deterrence signals and, should deterrence fail, an improved ability to accomplish U.S. objectives:

> It seems to me almost certain that any one of these forms of direct military action will lead to a Soviet military response of some type, some place in the world. It may well be worth the price. Perhaps we should say that. But I think we should recognize the possibility, and, moreover, we must recognize it in a variety of ways. We must recognize it by trying to deter it, which means we probably

[100] McCone, "Memorandum for File, 19 October 1962," p. 3, chapter in Central Intelligence Agency, *The Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Documents*, op. cit., p. 185.

[101] May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, op. cit., p. 127.

> should alert SAC, probably put on airborne alert, perhaps take other alert measures. These bring risks of their own associated with them. It means that we should recognize that by mobilization [sic]. Almost certainly, we should accompany the initial air strike with at least a partial mobilization. We should accompany an invasion following an air strike with a large-scale mobilization, a very large-scale mobilization, certainly exceeding the limits of the authority we have from Congress, requiring a declaration of a national emergency.[102]

McNamara went on to say that U.S. actions were signaling multiple audiences simultaneously, both allies and the adversary: "It's a political problem. It's a problem of holding the alliance together. It's a problem of properly conditioning Khrushchev for our future moves."[103]

Thus, President Kennedy and his advisors tailored his nationally-broadcast speech on October 22 to act as both an assurance to allies and a deterrence signal to the Soviets. President Kennedy stated, "That is why this latest Soviet threat—or any other threat which is made either independently or in response to our actions this week—must and will be met with determination. Any hostile move anywhere in the world against the safety and freedom of peoples to whom we are committed—including in particular the brave people of West Berlin—will be met by whatever action is needed."[104] These words were backed by deeds because only six hours before the speech President Kennedy ordered the dispersal and alert of U.S. strategic bombers.[105] Gen. Curtis LeMay, then Chief of Staff for the

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[102] May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, op. cit., p. 87.

[103] Ibid., p. 133.

[104] Ibid., p. 280.

[105] *Strategic Air Command Operations in the Cuban Crisis of 1962, Vol. I* (Offutt AFB, NE: Strategic Air Command, 1963), Historical Study No. 90, Vol. 1, pp. 34-35, available at

U.S. Air Force, speaking publicly less than two months after the crisis, cited the bomber alert as a critical deterrence signal to the Soviets that helped deter opportunistic aggression: "Perhaps most important of all, our Strategic Air Command was able to move quickly to an alert that provided a strong and silent umbrella under which the quarantine could be carried out without expanding into war."[106] In short, Gen. LeMay believed that generating nuclear forces to a higher alert status allowed U.S. leaders to operate their conventional forces with more confidence that they could deter Soviet escalation in Cuba and elsewhere.

Adequacy of Conventional and Nuclear Forces

The Kennedy Administration pursued a "two and one half" war construct for its conventional war planning in which the Department of Defense prepared for major conflicts in Europe, East Asia, and a lesser conflict in a third region such as the Middle East.[107] The 1961 Berlin Crisis only accelerated the Kennedy Administration's calls to Congress to grow the defense budget to meet the larger set and severity of threats. Yet, even after a steady stream of investment, U.S. leaders were less than convinced they had the necessary resources. For example, when asked by Senator Barry Goldwater: "Don't we have ample conventional forces to handle any nation's conventional forces other than the U.S.S.R. and

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https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nsa/cuba_mis_cri/dobbs/SAC_history.pdf.

[106] Curtis LeMay, as quoted in, Mark S. Watson, "LeMay says Cuba Crisis Taught Five Key Lessons," *The Baltimore Sun*, December 6, 1962, p. 16.

[107] Maurice Matloff, *Oral History Interview with Mr. Roswell L. Gilpatric, Deputy Secretary of Defense, 1961-1964* (Washington, D.C.: OSD Historical Office, November 14, 1983), p. 16, available at https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/oral_history/OH_Trans_HarrimanAverell5-29-1975.pdf?ver=2014-05-28-130706-200.

Communist China?" CJCS nominee Gen. Maxwell Taylor responded, "We do potentially if we consider the Reserve forces... But there is also the question, Are you going to have more than one limited war at a time? All these factors have to be taken into account. It is never clear that we would have only one limited war at a given moment."[108]

Indeed, even with adequate conventional forces in Europe to meet U.S. war plan requirements, the plans accounted for the likelihood that the United States would be forced to employ nuclear weapons to defeat a Soviet conventional attack—such was the size of the Soviet conventional advantage. Gen. Taylor testified to this fact, stating, "To provide flexibility of choice when the time of decision comes, the defense of Western Europe requires a plentiful supply of nuclear weapons of many types, along with strong, modernized conventional forces. In my judgement, if an attack on Western Europe comes, we must use whatever weapons and forces are necessary to defeat it. To meet a massive attack today, because of the lack of adequate conventional forces in the West, it would be necessary to resort to atomic weapons early in the conflict."[109]

In fact, U.S. political and military leaders up to President Kennedy understood that a conventional battle for control over Berlin would almost certainly require U.S. nuclear first use. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, as the Executive Committee contemplated U.S. military options against the Soviet bases in Cuba, President Kennedy stated, "We have the prospect, if the Soviet Union, as a reprisal, should grab Berlin in the morning, which they could do within a couple of hours. Our war plan at that point has been to fire our

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[108] Maxwell D. Taylor, as quoted in, U.S. Senate, *Nominations of Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor and Gen. Earle G. Wheeler* (Washington, D.C.: Committee on Armed Services, August 9, 1962), p. 16.

[109] Ibid., p. 4.

nuclear weapons at them."[110] He clarified shortly afterwards that such a U.S. response was not meant to be a disarming first strike against the Soviet Union: "But, I think, if we're talking about nuclear war, the escalation ought to be at least with some degree of control."[111]

Towards that end, the Commander of Strategic Air Command, Gen. Thomas Power, recommended to the Joint Chiefs of Staff on October 16 that the United States alert its forces in three ways: "generate all command forces through declaration of Defense Condition 2 (DEFCON 2), initiate B-47 dispersal plans, and mount an airborne alert."[112] The Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered SAC to begin its bomber dispersal and alert almost immediately, but Secretary of Defense McNamara held off on ordering SAC to DEFCON 2, just below the level of general war, until October 23.[113] These general war preparations also included the U.S. Navy deploying its new Polaris submarines (SSBNs) to their battle stations while SSBNs in port entered a higher state of readiness.[114]

In advance of moving to DEFCON 2, SAC ordered all its units to focus on "covertly attaining the maximum state of readiness."[115] It is unclear if the emphasis on "covert" was meant to provide maximum advantage for a preemptive strike against the Soviet forces in Cuba should President Kennedy have ordered it or whether it was to increase

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[110] May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, op. cit., p. 264.

[111] Ibid., p. 273.

[112] *Strategic Air Command Operations in the Cuban Crisis of 1962, Vol. I*, op. cit., p. 30.

[113] May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, op. cit., p. 347.

[114] Curtis A. Utz, *Cordon of Steel: The U.S. Navy and the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, 1993), p. 22, available at https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-D221-PURL-gpo115515/pdf/GOVPUB-D221-PURL-gpo115515.pdf.

[115] *Strategic Air Command Operations in the Cuban Crisis of 1962, Vol. I*, op. cit., p. 55.

readiness without inadvertently escalating the situation overall. The historical record contains evidence for both justifications and, in Europe at least, U.S. military leaders saw the quiet increase in readiness as supporting both U.S. attack options and refraining from appearing overly aggressive.[116] This quiet change in posture in Europe may have helped incentivize the Soviet Union to also keep its forces from moving to a higher alert—the U.S. intelligence community had no significant indications of major Soviet posture changes against NATO or Asian allies even during the height of the crisis.[117]

While U.S. political and military leaders judged their conventional and nuclear forces were sufficient in general, the Cuban Missile Crisis exposed a number of shortfalls in critical areas. For instance, if the Secretary of Defense had ordered the military to move to DEFCON 3, a state of general war, that would have required the U.S. Navy to set up an antisubmarine "patrol barrier" between Greenland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom, the so-called "GIUK gap." There were not enough U.S. naval assets available, however, to conduct these antisubmarine warfare missions as most were heavily concentrated in the Caribbean—causing the Navy to rely on British and Canadian assistance in setting up antisubmarine operations farther south.[118] Additionally, the Joint Staff J-3 calculated that an invasion of Cuba, "would make adequate airlift to Europe or the Far East unavailable for eight days, severely restrict airlift within overseas commands unless Reserve C–119s were reactivated, require substantial requisitions of shipping for

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[116] May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, op. cit., p. 338; and, United States Air Force in Europe, *Chronology of the Cuban Crisis for the Period 6 October thru November 1962* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Air Force, December 21, 1962), pp. 8-9, available at https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20790-12.

[117] Utz, *Cordon of Steel*, op. cit., p. 29.

[118] Ibid., pp. 29-30.

about thirty days, and delay full augmentation of the European and Pacific Commands until combat operations ended."[119] Air Defense Command was able to support all the required actions during the crisis, but only by withdrawing forces from other areas of the homeland. An official U.S. Air Force after action report on the crisis noted that if the crisis had involved a larger region than just the southeast United States, then "it would have been difficult to provide the additional reinforcements needed in the southeast."[120]

Strategic Air Command in particular encountered a number of logistical and planning obstacles during the Cuban Missile Crisis. For instance, bombers and their nuclear weapons placed on airborne alert could not be assigned to the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) during the Cuban Missile Crisis, requiring SAC to modify its SIOP plans, which resulted in changes to the target coverage and damage expectancy.[121] Another major issue involved the newly deployed land leg of the U.S. nuclear triad. SAC did not anticipate needing to speed up the certification and alert of its newly deployed ICBMs so quickly, and thus did not procure enough liquid oxygen for its ICBMs to stay on alert, as the Atlas D, E, F, and Titan ICBMs were all liquid fueled. SAC, therefore, had to initiate both covert and overt actions to procure enough liquid

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[119] Walter S. Poole, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, Volume VIII, 1961-1964* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2011), pp. 164-165, available at https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-D5-PURL-gpo57147/pdf/GOVPUB-D5-PURL-gpo57147.pdf.

[120] USAF Historical Division Liaison Office, *The Air Force Response to the Cuban Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: USAF, no date but likely 1963), p. 24, available at https://media.defense.gov/2019/Sep/23/2002185817/-1/-1/0/AF%20RESPONSE%20TO%20CUBAN%20CRISIS.PDF.

[121] *Strategic Air Command Operations in the Cuban Crisis of 1962, Vol. I*, op. cit., p. 45.

oxygen to last through the duration of the higher alert status.[122]

The prolonged nature of the crisis also highlighted necessary changes in how SAC postured its forces and communicated with them. As stated in the official SAC history of the Cuban Missile Crisis, "… SAC possessed no existing mobile communications facilities since the command was geared to fight a retaliatory war with little warning rather than anticipating a lengthy crisis allowing for dispersal with placement of mobile facilities. One of the essential elements the command moved to establish, therefore, was a mobile ground link with the airborne command post."[123] Finally, in a little reported incident, it appears that the United States also did not have enough personnel to maintain physical control of all the nuclear weapons once they left the storage area, leaving a U.S. Air Force commanding officer in Europe to effectively allow British control over some U.S. nuclear weapons during the heightened state of alert.[124]

In summary then, while U.S. conventional and nuclear forces were generally adequate to meet the mission requirements, there were a number of vulnerabilities and weaknesses that a more stressing circumstance may have exposed in short order. Relating this to today, U.S. policymakers should note that even though the United States had forewarning and postured itself against opportunistic aggression during the Cuban Missile Crisis, political constraints and the finite number of key capabilities such as airlift and naval patrols could have produced significantly greater risk in a more stressing

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[122] Ibid., pp. 62-64.

[123] Ibid., p. 82.

[124] Stephen Twigge, "Anglo-American Air Force Collaboration And the Cuban Missile Crisis: A British Perspective," chapter in, Roger G. Miller, ed., *Seeing Off the Bear: Anglo-American Air Power Cooperation During the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: United States Air Force, 1995), pp. 217-218.

scenario. Since the U.S. military is sized currently to only defeat one peer adversary in a major war, how much greater risk of deterrence failure, and ultimately, defeat, is the United States willing to accept in the face of two nuclear peer adversaries, China and Russia, and their willing partners, North Korea and Iran?

The Impact of Allied Perceptions on U.S. Leadership

Senior officials in the Kennedy Administration frequently voiced their concerns about alliance solidarity and security as they debated how to respond to Soviet movements into Cuba. Secretary of State Rusk and President Kennedy often suggested to the larger group that key allies should be notified about U.S. deliberations and options, such as Great Britain, France, and the Federal Republic of Germany, or West Germany.[125] Turkey and Italy also played prominent roles in U.S. deliberations as they were hosts of U.S. Thor intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs); this status as host nations meant they were simultaneously the potential targets of a Soviet response to U.S. moves against Cuba, while also being the potential subjects of a missile swap agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union—withdrawal for withdrawal.

One of the major divisions in President Kennedy's Executive Committee that developed early on was between those who believed large-scale decisive military action against the Soviets in Cuba would be the greatest assurance to allies, particularly in Europe, and those who believed that overly-aggressive action against Cuba could provoke a Soviet response against Berlin, or elsewhere in the world, leading to a dissolution of U.S. alliances.[126] President

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[125] For example, see, May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, op. cit., p. 56.
[126] Ibid., p. 172.

Kennedy at one point engaged in a long explanatory discussion with his advisers, laying out what he believed at the time were equally weighty concerns—all centered around alliance solidarity:

> If we attack Cuban missiles, or Cuba, in any way, it gives them [the Soviets] a clear line to take Berlin, as they were able to do in Hungary under the Anglo war in Egypt… We would be regarded as the trigger-happy Americans who lost Berlin. We would have no support among our allies. We would affect the West Germans' attitude toward us… On the other hand, we increase the chance greatly, as I think—there's bound to be a reprisal from the Soviet Union, there always is—[of] their just going in and taking Berlin by force. Which leaves me only one alternative, which is to fire nuclear weapons—which is a hell of an alternative—and begin a nuclear exchange, with all this happening… So I don't think we've got any satisfactory alternatives. Whether we balance off that, our problem is not merely Cuba but it is also Berlin. And when we recognize the importance of Berlin to Europe, and recognize the importance of our allies to us, that's what has made this thing be a dilemma for 3 days.[127]

Secretary Rusk noted that this dilemma was even more difficult since what mattered to allies was not just what the United States decided to do, but how it decided to do it: "The [U.S.] action also has to be thought about in connection with alliance solidarity, and there we're faced with conflicting elements. That's a situation where it is clear that the alliance is with us and willing to understand the problem. Then an unannounced, unconsulted, quick action on our part could well lead to a kind of allied disunity that

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[127] Ibid., pp. 175-176.

the Soviet attack will capitalize upon very strongly."[128] The U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson II, highlighted the nuclear element of the dilemma as it related to allies, noting flatly, "To start or risk starting a nuclear war is bound to be divisive at best."[129]

When President Kennedy made a decision to proceed with a quarantine of Cuba while increasing military readiness in preparation for a potential invasion, he thought it important to acknowledge to allies that the United States was aware it was taking a risk that could, if the Soviets responded aggressively, escalate the situation and directly involve allies in a military conflict. President Kennedy wrote to British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan on the potential for opportunistic aggression related to Cuba, "But this is so deep a breach in the conventions of the international stalemate that if unchallenged it would deeply shake confidence in the United States, especially in the light of my repeated warnings. It would persuade Khrushchev and others that our determination is low, that we are unable to meet our commitments, and it would invite further and still more dangerous moves."[130] Indeed, near the peak of the Cuban Missile Crisis President Kennedy admitted that because Berlin was such an important issue to the NATO alliance, he kept the quarantine confined to naval assets only, not airborne.[131]

By October 25, however, cracks in the alliance were beginning to show as Prime Minister Macmillan told President Kennedy, "I think that events have gone too far. While circumstances may arise in which such action [by the U.S. military] would be right and necessary, I think we are now all in a phase where you must try to obtain your

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[128] May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, op. cit., p. 128.

[129] Ibid., p. 118.

[130] Ibid., p. 282.

[131] Ibid., p. 373.

objectives by other means."[132] Meanwhile, French President Charles de Gaulle signaled his support for U.S. actions whatever their nature.[133] And, on the other side of the spectrum opposite Macmillan, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer of West Germany favored both bombing the Soviet bases in Cuba as well as a general invasion as he hoped that it would serve as a bargaining chip to eventually end the crisis.[134] Inter-alliance solidarity became even more stressed when McGeorge Bundy, President Kennedy's National Security Advisor, had to discourage Prime Minister Macmillan from making a separate diplomatic offer to the Kremlin to remove U.S. missiles from Great Britain to help solve the situation in Cuba.[135]

Senior officials in the Kennedy Administration were acutely aware of allied concerns and interests throughout the Cuban Missile Crisis and often adapted their policy pronouncements and military actions to strengthen alliance solidarity, or, at the very least, reduce the causes for friction. While their concerns focused most prominently on the potential for a Soviet response against Berlin, U.S. and allied policymakers today could plausibly face opportunistic or coordinated aggression at a number of flashpoints across Europe and Asia. All the problems of keeping alliance solidarity that the Kennedy Administration faced would

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[132] Ibid., p. 393.

[133] Lucius D. Battle, *Dean G. Acheson Oral History Interview – JFK #1, 4/27/1964* (Boston, MA: JFK Presidential Library, 1964), pp. 26-28, available at https://static.jfklibrary.org/16jy54bi4rncv563u763ql7a4ja4033f.pdf?odc=20231115182924-0500.

[134] "Memorandum of Conversation, Federal Republic of Germany Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and US Ambassador Walter Dowling, Rhöndorf, West Germany, 28 October 1962," chapter in, James G. Hershberg and Christian F. Ostermann, *The Global Cuban Missile Crisis at 50* (Washington, D.C.: The Wilson Center, Fall 2012), p. 634, available at https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/bulletin-no-1718-fall-2012.

[135] May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, op. cit., p. 629.

likely be magnified and broadened for U.S. officials today and in the future as China and Russia increasingly cooperate with each other and their regional partners, North Korea and Iran.

The United States is only now in the early stages of recognizing that deterring the threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression, and the parallel need for increased resources, are also equally challenging in the realm of allied assurance. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Kennedy Administration primarily focused on assuring allies in Europe; but today, the United States faces growing assurance requirements for both European *and* Asian allies. One of the most concerning aspects of this dynamic is the prospect of allies in one theater resenting the United States for what they perceive as unfairly prioritizing other allies over themselves. Indeed, it seems almost certain that China and Russia, or their regional partners, will exploit this U.S. dilemma and provoke crises that might expose fissures among U.S. alliances. China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, or some combination, moreover, may have a double incentive to act aggressively just below the level of open conflict against U.S. allies because if allies in one theater perceive the United States as lacking the capability or will to defend them, allies in other theaters will certainly take notice—potentially creating a domino effect of weakening U.S. alliances.

Summary Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis and Conclusion

There are three summary lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis that are especially relevant for U.S. policymakers today as they consider how to adapt U.S. policy and military forces to better counter the threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression: the significant value of flexible and diverse military capabilities for risk reduction; how

inadequate conventional capabilities can force leaders to consider potentially riskier strategies like nuclear first use; and, how the threat of opportunistic aggression may incentivize U.S. leaders during a conflict to adopt riskier strategies to end the conflict earlier on favorable political terms—an option allies in other theaters may pressure the United States to adopt.

1. *Flexible force generation capabilities provide valuable deterrence options for U.S. leaders that improve the ability to send tailored signals and reduce risks of misperceptions.*

Senior civilian and military officials took great care to tailor their deterrence messages, including deterring Soviet opportunistic aggression against Berlin, with a mix of signals of resolve and restraint. On October 22, for instance, the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered SAC to place one eighth of the available bombers on airborne alert, but to make it "quiet and gradual."[136] Strategic Air Command's ability in this instance to slowly raise alert levels achieved two goals simultaneously: improving military readiness and lowering the risk that the Soviet Union perceived U.S. actions as a precursor to a major attack. Additionally, President Kennedy was impressed that NATO Supreme Commander, Gen. Lauris Norstad, had carried out his orders to increase his forces' readiness levels as quietly as possible to avoid unnecessarily inflaming international tensions.[137]

This example indicates the value U.S. policymakers should attach to nuclear forces that can increase their

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[136] Strategic Air Command, *Chronology of SAC Participation in the Cuban Crisis* (Offutt AFB, NE: Strategic Air Command, December 21, 1962), p. 5, available via the Digital National Security Archive collection: Nuclear History I, 1955-1968.

[137] May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, op. cit., p. 338. See also, United States Air Force in Europe, *Chronology of the Cuban Crisis for the Period 6 October thru November 1962*, op. cit., pp. 8-10, available at https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20790-12.

readiness levels nonvisibly or at least with few outward indicators. Such characteristics provide additional options to senior leaders who may want to prepare for the possibility of an attack, but without appearing to the adversary as though a U.S. preemptive attack is imminent. Then-Commander of United States Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM), ADM Charles Richard, testified about the need for a "low yield, non-ballistic capability that does not require visible generation" not currently in the U.S. inventory, a list of characteristics he indicated would be fulfilled by pursuing the nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N).[138] Capabilities that do not require visible generation can also play a significant role in assuring allies during a crisis or conflict, especially when the United States may want to reduce the risk of adversary misperceptions that might result from a more visible force generation.

2. *Greater reliance on nuclear weapons in U.S. strategy, including the perceived need to employ them early in a conflict, may be the price to pay for insufficient conventional forces to deter and defeat opportunistic aggression.*

American civilian and military officials during the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis were quite open about the fact that the United States would likely employ nuclear weapons early in a conflict to defeat Soviet aggression in Europe due to a significant comparative disadvantage in conventional forces. As a nominee to be Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Maxwell Taylor testified, "To meet a massive attack today, because of the lack of adequate conventional forces in the West, it would be necessary to resort to atomic

[138] Charles Richard, as quoted in, "Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing: Nuclear Weapons Council," *STRATCOM.mil*, May 4, 2022, available at https://www.stratcom.mil/Media/Speeches/Article/3022885/senate-armed-services-committee-hearing-nuclear-weapons-council/.

weapons early in the conflict."[139] The Eisenhower Administration made a conscious decision to rely on nuclear weapons for this deterrence and warfighting task in Europe in large part because nuclear weapons were a cheaper alternative to conventional forces—a justification carried through to the Kennedy Administration.

While U.S. leaders chose to rely more heavily on nuclear weapons in their defense strategy during the Cuban Missile Crisis, U.S. leaders today may be forced to rely more on nuclear weapons to make up for conventional inferiority in the face of opportunistic or coordinated aggression should they continue pursuing a "one major war" conventional force-sizing construct.[140] As both the congressionally mandated and bipartisan 2023 Strategic Posture Commission and the 2024 National Defense Strategy Commission noted, a "one major war" force-sizing construct is inadequate in the face of opportunistic and coordinated aggression.[141] The 2023 Strategic Posture Commission in particular noted that, "The threat of conflicts with China and Russia requires significantly increased U.S., allied, and partner investments in fielding and optimization of conventional forces; without these necessary enhancements to the conventional force, an increased reliance on the nuclear deterrent is likely."[142]

What might increased reliance on nuclear weapons look like in U.S. defense strategy? In some instances, it may mean employing nuclear weapons to defeat adversary conventional attacks or shift the military balance in the U.S.

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[139] Maxwell D. Taylor, as quoted in, U.S. Senate, *Nominations of Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor and Gen. Earle G. Wheeler*, op. cit., p. 4.

[140] For more on this topic, see, Trachtenberg, *The Demise of the "Two-War Strategy" and Its Impact on Extended Deterrence and Assurance*, op. cit.

[141] Creedon and Kyl, *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. 28; and, Harman and Edelman, *Commission on the National Defense Strategy*, op. cit., p. 37.

[142] Creedon and Kyl, *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. 28.

favor.[143] In other instances, increased reliance on nuclear weapons may be manifest in more frequent and more prominent deterrence signaling with nuclear forces, whether via changes in alert status, force movements, weapons uploading, or other measures. While U.S. leaders would almost certainly prefer to deter and defeat adversaries' conventional attacks with their own conventional forces, the global nature of U.S. alliances and the reluctance of post-Cold War U.S. leaders to adopt a "two major war" force-sizing construct for conventional forces necessarily forces the choice among three options: drastically reducing alliance commitments, right-sizing conventional forces to meet new threats, or increasing reliance on nuclear weapons.

3. *Internal and external factors may pressure U.S. leaders to adopt riskier warfighting strategies to end an ongoing conflict on favorable terms relatively early so that other adversaries contemplating opportunistic aggression are more likely to be deterred from attacking.*

Throughout the Cuban Missile Crisis, both domestic advisors and foreign leaders recommended President Kennedy adopt military courses of action against the Soviet bases in Cuba for two main benefits: first, larger military options are more likely to prove decisive in favor of U.S. national security interests, and second, a relatively quick and militarily decisive victory in one theater may improve the credibility of U.S. deterrence threats against opportunistic aggression in the eyes of adversaries in other theaters. Chief of Naval Operations ADM George Anderson and CJCS Maxwell Taylor agreed that taking overwhelming

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[143] For more on this topic as it relates to a Taiwan scenario, see, Greg Weaver, *The Role of Nuclear Weapons in a Taiwan Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: The Atlantic Council, November 2023), p. 12, available at https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Weaver-Role-of-Nuclear-Weapons-in-Taiwan-Crisis.pdf.

military action against the Soviets in Cuba would help deter the Soviets from taking Berlin in response.[144] Chancellor Adenauer of West Germany agreed, believing that U.S. actions against Cuba would greatly affect Soviet calculations concerning an attack on Berlin or NATO as a whole.

The Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David Shoup also noted that, if the United States did nothing against the Soviet bases in Cuba, then it would need an ever larger military force to defend against Soviet threats from Cuba—capabilities that could not be deployed to help allies in need abroad: "Then, in my mind, it all devolves upon the fact that they [the missiles] do matter. They can damage us increasingly every day. And each day that they increase, we have to have a more sizable force tied to this problem, and then they're not available in case something happens someplace else. And these guys either then have to take some action in Berlin, South Vietnam, Korea. You would be degrading. You'd have to degrade your capabilities against this ever-increasing force in Cuba."[145]

What should U.S. leaders learn from this insight? First, they should understand, as the Kennedy Administration did, that U.S. deterrence threats and actions in one theater will likely have a significant impact on other leaders' perceptions, both adversaries and allies. When facing opportunistic aggression, U.S. leaders are almost certain to field calls from officials internally and allies externally that recommend adopting potentially riskier military strategies that prioritize decisive and early defeat of the adversary—possibly involving U.S. nuclear first use—in the first conflict, in a bid to improve the credibility of U.S. deterrence threats against opportunistic aggression elsewhere in the world. While U.S. nuclear first use could in some

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[144] May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, op. cit., p. 179.

[145] May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, op. cit., p. 181.

circumstances lead to an adversary's nuclear response and an escalatory spiral, escalation is not necessarily a given;[146] in fact, U.S. nuclear first use may decisively alter the potential opportunistic aggressor's decision calculus concerning his perception of U.S. capability and will to resist aggression on behalf of its allies. Neither outcome is certain, of course, but the point is that U.S. leaders may find the strategic logic behind nuclear first use as more likely to achieve desired political outcomes than continuing a potentially doomed conventional conflict and risking the dissolution of the U.S. global network of alliances.

If U.S. and allied leaders view deterrence of opportunistic aggression as a vital national interest, then U.S. leaders should consider adapting their non-strategic nuclear force posture to provide additional regional nuclear options.[147] These forces are especially important both for deterrence purposes and potentially for warfighting purposes because they are generally lower in nuclear yield than strategic forces; they allow strategic forces to be held in reserve to deter further escalation; and, they can be employed selectively from within the theater of conflict, potentially providing an added incentive for the adversary to keep the conflict confined geographically.[148] Currently,

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[146] For additional analysis on the reasons why nuclear war might stay limited in some circumstances, see, Matthew R. Costlow, *Restraints at the Nuclear Brink: Factors in Keeping War Limited* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, July 2023), *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 3, No. 7, available at https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/OP-Vol.-3-No.-7.pdf.

[147] This recommendation is in line with the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission. See Creedon and Kyl, *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. 49.

[148] For elaboration on these points, see, Matthew R. Costlow, "Deterring and Responding to Escalation: What the US Needs and Why," chapter in, *Relearning Escalation Dynamics to Win the New Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: The Hudson Institute, September 2024), pp. 12-16, available at https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/Relearning+Escalation+Dynamics+to+Win+the+New+Cold+War.pdf.

the United States only counts its air-delivered B61-12 nuclear gravity bomb as a non-strategic weapon—a capability that is at a distinct disadvantage compared to Russia's nonstrategic nuclear arsenal and is not ideal for the ocean-dominated Indo-Pacific region.[149] While SLCM-N can make an important contribution to U.S. deterrence of opportunistic and coordinated aggression in this regard, a greater variety of non-strategic nuclear forces beyond the addition of SLCM-N may be necessary to improve the credibility of U.S. threats. That is, the United States and its allies may face such severe conventional and nuclear force imbalances in the geographically separate European and Indo-Pacific regions that adversaries believe it is unlikely the United States will uphold its alliance commitments in multiple theaters simultaneously. In that case, major additions to the U.S. non-strategic nuclear force may be required to overcome the perceived advantages adversaries may see in opportunistic or coordinated aggression against an overstretched United States.

Conclusion

The Cuban Missile Crisis yields some relevant lessons for U.S. leaders as they seek ways to adapt the military to better deter and defeat the threats of opportunistic or coordinated aggression. The Kennedy Administration benefitted in many ways from the Berlin Crisis a year before the Cuban Missile Crisis because it fundamentally shaped senior leaders' perspectives on the need to both respond to the Soviet Union forcefully in Cuba while keeping U.S. and allied interests secure in another major theater, Berlin. These realistic threat perceptions aided the Kennedy Administration in navigating the balancing act of

[149] On Russia's advantages in non-strategic nuclear weapons, see, U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, 2018, op. cit., p. 9.

demanding the Soviet withdrawal of missile from Cuba while maintaining alliance solidarity by not being overly aggressive during the crisis. While U.S. nuclear and conventional forces were generally sufficient for their intended missions, the extended nature of the crisis exposed some operational weaknesses that U.S. leaders would do well to note as they face not one, but two, peer nuclear adversaries. Additionally, allied perceptions and interests greatly affected U.S. decision-making during the crisis, highlighting further the importance of regular and sustained inter-alliance dialogue.

Three summary lessons from the crisis stand out as relevant for U.S. policymakers today: flexible military forces contribute to better tailored deterrence threats and the reduced risk of adversary misperceptions; inadequate conventional forces may incentivize U.S. leaders to increase their reliance on nuclear weapons; and, U.S. political and military leaders will likely field recommendations, including from allies, to adopt riskier military strategies, potentially including nuclear first use, to conclude an ongoing conflict quickly and thus improve the credibility of its deterrence threats against adversary opportunistic aggression elsewhere in the world.

Even granting that history is unlikely to repeat itself exactly, U.S. officials can still learn important and relevant lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis that can inform and improve their efforts in fielding the forces necessary to deter and defeat opportunistic and coordinated aggression.

Chapter 5. Summary Recommendations and Conclusion

Postponing a fight until after one has been outmaneuvered is practiced only by democracies.[150]

~ Nicholas John Spykman, 1942

Summary Recommendations

Given the growing threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression and the lessons taught by the Korean War and Cuban Missile Crisis described earlier, there are a number of summary recommendations that broadly outline the capabilities U.S. policymakers should consider to strengthen deterrence, assurance, and the ability to achieve objectives should deterrence fail.

Strategic Nuclear Forces

U.S. strategic forces serve as the final backstop to escalation, the ultimate threat to any adversary or set of adversaries that there are no scenarios in which the benefits will outweigh the costs of engaging in a general nuclear war. Deterring and defeating opportunistic and coordinated aggression begins with the U.S. ability to conduct major counterforce campaigns against any adversary in any scenario, even under the worst circumstances in which the United States is caught by surprise in a first strike. Or, as a prominent bipartisan senior-level working group stated, "…the United States must always be capable of inflicting intolerable costs on a peer nuclear adversary—even after a preemptive strike on its forces and a follow-on large-scale

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[150] Nicholas John Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), p. 161.

exchange. The temptation for others to exploit that vulnerability could be disastrous."[151] Strategic forces provide the "strong and silent umbrella" that Gen. LeMay said was crucial in allowing the United States to deploy its conventional forces knowing that there was a deterrent to adversary escalation.[152]

While there are a host of factors that U.S. strategic nuclear force planners must account for, the significant growth in Chinese nuclear forces and the growing partnership between China and Russia should be primary drivers for U.S. strategic force posture changes. U.S. policymakers should consider, in this regard, uploading additional nuclear warheads on U.S. intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), loading submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) in tubes that were converted under the New START Treaty, and procuring at least four additional Columbia-class submarines beyond the program of record. Strategic bombers will likely be in high demand during a conflict involving the threat of opportunistic aggression given their conventional and nuclear roles and ability to serve as visible deterrence signaling tools. Policymakers should therefore consider procuring additional B-21 bombers beyond the program of record. Moreover, as the U.S. experience during the extended alert in the Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrated, U.S. strategic forces should be able to operate on alert for an extended period of time—a particularly difficult task for strategic forces that have not yet been modernized under the current program of record. To aid in practicing for this scenario and to improve survivability, the United States should deploy a portion of the B-21 bomber force on alert.

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[151] Roberts, et al., *China's Emergence as a Second Nuclear Peer*, op. cit., p. 40.

[152] Curtis LeMay, as quoted in, Watson, "LeMay says Cuba Crisis Taught Five Key Lessons," op. cit.

Regional Nuclear Forces

Since the U.S. ability to project power from its homeland may be degraded to some degree by adversary attacks during a conflict, and facing the threat of opportunistic aggression, forward-deployed regional U.S. nuclear forces will be critical capabilities for deterrence, assurance, and achieving objectives should deterrence fail. The United States can raise the alert level or make force posture adjustments in a second theater as a deterrence threat against a potential opportunistic aggressor, a role that U.S. conventional forces may be less able to fill if they are needed elsewhere or have difficulties and delays deploying from the U.S. homeland. SLCM-N will be valuable in this regard because it can be a survivable and persistent presence. Additionally, given the USEUCOM experience during the Cuban Missile Crisis and the U.S. leadership's desire to raise military readiness without provoking Soviet reaction, SLCM-N represents the ideal nonvisible generating capability to reduce the risk of adversary misperception.

That said, there is also great value in a nuclear-armed, land-based, mobile, long-range system—a capability not currently in the U.S. program of record. A nuclear-armed variant of the U.S. Army's Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon, or Dark Eagle, could potentially provide these characteristics. It would be especially valuable as a capability that can be deployed in theater before a crisis or conflict erupts as a deterrent, as well as surged to the theater during a crisis or conflict to signal U.S. resolve, assure allies, replace capabilities that were destroyed in the initial attack, and, if needed, employed to limit damage or weaken adversary advantages.[153] Additionally, if the United States

[153] On the allied desire for U.S. damage-limitation capabilities, see, Masashi Murano, *The 2023 Strategic Posture Commission Report From a Japanese Perspective* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy,

is likely to rely more on its nuclear forces in the face of opportunistic or coordinated aggression, then the President, based on historical precedent, will likely value multiple theater-based capabilities that offer a range of effects, deployment options, signaling capabilities, and other characteristics that can be tailored to best match the political objectives. This may indicate the value of a mobile, land-based, short- to medium-range, ballistic or hypersonic system, with a low-yield warhead that is deployable in theater. A President may value multiple options under the broad category of regional nuclear weapons (battlefield up to intermediate-range) to keep a conflict confined geographically and avoid homeland-to-homeland exchanges—a clear implication derived from the cases of the Korean War and Cuban Missile Crisis.

Missile Defense

Improved and expanded U.S. homeland missile defense would be critical in supporting a number of roles in deterring and defeating opportunistic and coordinated aggression. For example, adversaries are potentially more likely to perceive U.S. nuclear employment threats as credible if the United States has the ability to degrade or defeat an adversary's missile attack. That is, an adversary may be less willing to threaten strikes on the U.S. homeland if he believes his attacks would fail in some significant way *and* potentially elicit an unacceptably costly U.S. nuclear response—the worst of both worlds. The U.S. ability to defeat coercive attacks via missile defense is also likely to aid in assuring allies that the United States will be a reliable security partner despite the myriad of threats it faces. Additionally, a robust homeland missile defense system that protects key power projection sites will not only aid

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January 6, 2025), *Information Series*, No. 610, especially pp. 2-3, available at https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/IS-610.pdf.

deterrence but also allow a more effective U.S. response should deterrence fail, by limiting damage.

Another important, though less discussed, role for homeland missile defense is its potential effect on an adversary's willingness to escalate a regional conflict to a conflict involving homeland-to-homeland strikes. If the United States relies more on its regional nuclear forces to deter and defeat opportunistic or coordinated aggression, then it should expect an increased risk of an adversary escalating a regional nuclear exchange to conducting strikes on the U.S. homeland. This strategy is, of course, inherently risky for adversary leaders who will likely be seeking assurances from their military planners that such strikes will both achieve their intended effect and not invite an unacceptable U.S. response. Expanded and improved U.S. homeland missile defenses may be critical in affecting the adversary's decision calculus concerning the likelihood of the initial attack's success—making it seem too risky given the potential cost and ultimately discouraging a regional conflict from expanding geographically, thus reducing the risk of escalation.

Regional missile defenses are also likely to play a key role in deterring or defeating opportunistic or coordinated aggression. If an adversary seeks a relatively rapid *fait accompli* against a U.S. ally, then U.S. regional missile defenses can potentially provide enough protection of critical assets to allow the ally and forward-deployed U.S. forces to mount a successful defense—providing additional time for reinforcements to arrive from the U.S. homeland. While the missile defense interceptor inventory will be limited, those systems can potentially provide enough defense of key assets that an adversary likely will be discouraged from attacking in the first place given all the other risks. As in the case of homeland missile defenses, regional missile defenses act as deterrents in and of themselves, and enablers of conventional and nuclear

deterrence threats. Or, as the scholar Benson Adams stated, "If the attacker thinks he has a way to neutralize the deterrent, the deterrent no longer deters."[154]

The priority short-term investments U.S. officials should consider include expanding cruise missile defense of the U.S. homeland, accelerating the Glide Phase Interceptor program to defeat hypersonic targets, and investing in terminal phase defenses for critical infrastructure against ballistic missile attacks. Over the longer term, the United States should develop, rigorously test, and deploy a distributed space-based ballistic missile defense system, including the necessary sensor and communication layers. Even the early phases of this effort, when coverage is not complete or optimal, can contribute significantly to deterrence by complicating adversary planning and potentially reducing the perceived utility of coercive threats. Moreover, a layered homeland missile defense system would provide another risk reduction capability during a crisis or conflict, a mission that U.S. political and military officials valued highly during the Korean War and Cuban Missile Crisis, by being able to neutralize accidental or unauthorized adversary missile launches. Finally, the United States and its allies should jointly invest in an increased industrial capacity to develop, test, and deploy regional missile defenses to better cope with the dynamic threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression.

Conventional Forces

Both the Korean War and the Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrate the value of sufficient U.S. conventional forces and the risks that insufficient conventional forces incur. Regrettably, conventional forces are also the costliest capabilities—perhaps the primary reason why the United

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[154] Benson D. Adams, "In Defense of the Homeland," *Proceedings*, Vol. 109/6/964 (June 1983), p. 50.

States has avoided adopting a "two major wars" force planning construct. If, as seems likely currently, the United States continues to maintain something less than a "two major wars" construct, then U.S. policymakers should consider force posture changes to best position U.S. conventional forces to deter and defeat opportunistic and coordinated aggression. The main force planning principle in this regard is focusing U.S. efforts on those capabilities that are its comparative advantage. Stated differently, the United States should focus on deploying conventional forces that provide capabilities that regional allies do not have or perhaps do not have in the required quantities. The United States, for instance, has unparalleled long-range strike forces, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), and airlift—whereas regional allies can provide infantry and land transport capabilities that best complement U.S. forces at scale and quickly.

Conclusion

While the United States and its allies have faced threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression in the past, today's emerging political and military entente among China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran is uniquely dangerous. The United States now faces an unprecedented set of threats: two peer nuclear adversaries in China and Russia; their regional partners, North Korea and Iran, a nuclear-armed state and a nuclear threshold state, respectively; and, the increasing likelihood that their shared revisionist interests could lead to sequential or simultaneous attacks on the United States and its allies in geographically distant theaters. The United States and allies have heedlessly added to these threats by being late to recognize their severity and adapt their policies and military postures to match the expanding deterrence requirements. Absent a major shift in U.S. and allied

policies and military postures, China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, or some combination, might sense a window of opportunity to advance their bellicose agendas.

The Korean War and the Cuban Missile Crisis are still relevant examples that U.S. and allied leaders should learn from as they consider how best to adapt their militaries to meet the new pacing threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression. While this task will no doubt be a generational undertaking, U.S. and allied efforts must match the scope and scale of the threats or risk deterrence failure, perhaps in multiple theaters simultaneously. The United States should apply the lessons learned from history to size and posture its strategic nuclear forces, regional nuclear forces, homeland and regional missile defenses, and conventional forces to counter the unique dangers that opportunistic and coordinated aggression pose. Deterring these new pacing threats requires U.S. and allied leaders to replace their complacency with urgency, and exchange their inaction for action.

About the Author

Matthew R. Costlow is a Senior Analyst at the National Institute for Public Policy. His areas of expertise are in nuclear deterrence, missile defense policy, arms control, and Russia's and China's nuclear doctrine. His work has been published by *Comparative Strategy*, *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, and the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. He has also published numerous opinion pieces in the Institute's *Information Series* as well as the *Wall Street Journal*, *War on the Rocks*, *Defense News*, and *Defense One*.

While working for the National Institute, Mr. Costlow graduated in 2012 from Missouri State University with an M.S. in Defense and Strategic Studies. His thesis, "Gunboat Diplomacy in the South China Sea" was chosen for publication at the U.S. Air Force Institute for National Security Studies. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Political Science at George Mason University.

From 2012-2019, Mr. Costlow worked as an Analyst at National Institute, specializing in many of the same areas he currently writes on. In 2018, he assisted former Senator Jon Kyl in drafting nuclear and missile defense policy recommendations on the bipartisan National Defense Strategy Commission. Before 2012, he researched cybersecurity, emergency management, and foreign airpower acquisition at the Congressional Research Service. Prior to that, he worked at SAIC on federal and state emergency management best practices.

From 2019-2021, Mr. Costlow served as a Special Assistant in the office of Nuclear and Missile Defense policy, Department of Defense. He received the Office of the Secretary of Defense Award for Exceptional Public Service. Mr. Costlow also serves as a Special Advisor to the USSTRATCOM Strategic Advisory Group.

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