



## OPPORTUNISTIC AND COORDINATED AGGRESSION: THE NEW PACING THREATS?

*The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Opportunistic and Coordinated Aggression: The New Pacing Threats?” hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on April 28, 2025. The symposium was based on a recent NIPP Occasional Paper by Matthew Costlow on this subject that looks at the risks of opportunistic and coordinated aggression in the context of two historical case studies—that of the Korean conflict and the Cuban Missile Crisis—and analyzes these historical events for lessons learned that can be applied today.*

**David J. Trachtenberg (moderator)**

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

Today’s event highlights a recent National Institute *Occasional Paper* by my colleague Matt Costlow, which looks at the risks of opportunistic and coordinated aggression in the context of two historical case studies—that of the Korean conflict and the Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>1</sup>

The paper analyzes these historical events in order to ascertain what lessons are applicable for the United States in seeking to deter opportunistic and coordinated aggression from U.S. adversaries today. One key conclusion is that U.S. strategic nuclear forces must be able to demonstrate that there is no possible escalatory path adversaries can take that will lead to an acceptable outcome for them. In other words, the consequences to an aggressor must be seen as intolerable and not worth the risk of aggression. As the paper suggests, this necessitates both implementing and augmenting the current nuclear modernization program of record.

American non-strategic nuclear forces, deployed in regional theaters, also contribute to deterrence, extended deterrence, and assurance of allies. And the report proposes a number of recommendations in this area to fill the gaps that exist between U.S. non-strategic nuclear capabilities and those of U.S. adversaries most likely to contemplate opportunistic aggression—including adding SLCM-N to the mix.

Missile defenses—including expanded homeland defenses against multiple types of missiles, from ballistic to cruise to hypersonic—as well as regional defenses may also help dampen pressures and the impetus for adversary opportunistic aggression by protecting the U.S. homeland, complicating an adversary’s attack plans, reducing risk, and bolstering the credibility of U.S. security guarantees to allies.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew R. Costlow, *Deterring the New Pacing Threats: Opportunistic and Coordinated Aggression, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 2025), available at <https://nipp.org/papers/matthew-r-costlow-deterring-the-new-pacing-threats-opportunistic-and-coordinated-aggression/>.



In light of the recommendations in this report, I would note that the House and Senate Armed Services Committees have just released proposed legislation to add \$25 billion for implementation of the president's Golden Dome initiative and \$13 billion to accelerate the nuclear modernization program and improve the readiness of and infrastructure for U.S. nuclear forces.

Given that members of the so-called "axis of authoritarians" now appear to be cooperating and coordinating their military operations more extensively than ever before, the challenge of deterring opportunistic and coordinated aggression takes on even greater urgency. Three of the four axis powers have nuclear weapons and the fourth appears committed to acquiring them. This situation is unlike any prior historical era, which means the United States must think creatively about how to raise the barriers to opportunistic aggression. This is what the report argues must be the new pacing threat.

As ADM Richard notes in the Foreword to this report, "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."

This is the sobering backdrop for today's discussion. Now, without further ado, I would like to turn to our other panelists for their opening comments.

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### **Matthew Costlow**

***Matthew Costlow is a Senior Analyst at the National Institute for Public Policy.***

Thank you, Dave, and thank you to all the speakers in advance for their remarks. One of the main reasons I wrote this report that Dave mentioned is that I believe the threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression receive far less analysis and thoughtful commentary than they deserve—especially given their worldwide implications.<sup>2</sup> This webinar will, I am sure, be another great example of National Institute providing a forum where some of the great minds in the field can come together to share their thoughts on what ADM Charles Richard labelled a growing "deterrence crisis."

Given the time constraints, I will quickly lay out how I studied opportunistic aggression in this report and then explain some major lessons learned. If you read my report, you will see that I use the Korean War and the Cuban Missile Crisis as two case studies to examine how U.S. leaders dealt with the myriad of challenges that deterring opportunistic aggression brings—whether that is anticipating the different forms of opportunistic aggression, the political and military actions made to avoid opportunistic aggression, assessing the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

adequacy of conventional and nuclear forces, and navigating the often contradictory signals that allies send to the United States while under the threat of opportunistic aggression.

After looking at these case studies, it struck me that perhaps one of the best ways of explaining why opportunistic and coordinated aggression are so uniquely dangerous is to think about how dangers are multiplied. Allow me to illustrate. Imagine the United States becomes heavily involved in a China-Taiwan scenario. It quickly becomes apparent that this is not simply, or *only*, a “China problem”—this is a “conflict with a peer adversary *while deterring* another different peer adversary problem.” The difference is enormous.

When facing opportunistic aggression, the consequences of failure in one theater are multiplied and may directly impact whether deterrence will hold in the second theater. Each failure of military strategy, diplomacy, etc., only becomes magnified because there are multiple adversary audiences who are *already* revisionist.

Regrettably, it only gets worse from here. There are two more factors that make the threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression more likely, more deadly, or both. First, the United States simply is not postured conventionally to defeat a peer adversary and deter, much less defeat, a second adversary in a geographically distant second theater. If adversaries believe conventional force imbalances in their favor lower the risk of aggression, then deterrence may be more likely to fail. In other words, and to be blunt, weakness invites aggression. Second, China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran are increasingly connected politically, economically and militarily. They are discovering new economies of scale and divisions of labor that are mutually beneficial against their common adversaries: the United States and its allies.

All of these factors lead to what I believe are four dilemmas, or quandaries, that the threats of opportunistic and coordinated aggression impose on the United States.

First, the risk of conflict may grow as adversaries that otherwise would be willing to delay aggression see an opportunity where the risks and potential costs are acceptable—given U.S. and allied constraints, whether perceived military or political constraints. Second, without changes in conventional and potentially nuclear force postures, the United States may be forced to prioritize one set of allies over another in the case of opportunistic and coordinated aggression—ultimately causing damage to both. Third, without changes to the U.S. conventional force posture, the United States may need to rely more on its nuclear forces when deterring or defeating opportunistic and coordinated aggression. Finally, if political goals remain unchanged, the United States may need to rely on riskier, i.e., more escalatory, conventional and nuclear strategies during a conflict that hold out hope of a faster or more satisfactory resolution to an ongoing conflict—in the further hope of shifting forces to better deter a second conflict.

There are no “silver bullet” solutions to these dilemmas, but perhaps the first step in addressing them is ensuring that U.S. and allied policymakers have a realistic appreciation for the scope and scale of the threats—only then can they begin to tailor the appropriate solutions. With that I will end my remarks, and I look forward to the speakers’ presentations and the discussion afterwards.

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### **Christopher Ford**

***Christopher Ford is former Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Non-Proliferation and Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Weapons of Mass Destruction and Counterproliferation on the National Security Council staff.***

Thanks for inviting me. Matt Costlow has done great work in his most recent NIPP *Occasional Paper* in providing a valuable look at the problem of opportunistic or coordinated aggression and putting it in historical context. My fellow panelists have also made excellent points drawing out various aspects of the problem and how we can help mitigate or manage these dangers, especially in connection with building a stronger conventional force and working with our allies.

For my contribution to this discussion, I'd like to offer a few thoughts about the aspect of this broader challenge that relates to our own nuclear posture: what I call "the problem of numbers and types." As always, I can only offer my personal opinions, which won't necessarily correspond to those of anyone else. But let's give it a go.

### **The Need for a Larger Arsenal**

With respect to what we need to deter aggression and to limit damage in the event that deterrence were to fail, the potential for opportunistic or coordinated aggression between our adversaries clearly confronts us with huge challenges. In light of those challenges, is our arsenal big enough? If not, what do we need to have more of?

The Washington policy community has finally come around to understanding that we do have a numbers-and-types problem. The 2023 report of the Strategic Posture Commission took a huge stride in declaring—unanimously, on a bipartisan basis—that the current U.S. nuclear modernization Program of Record (POR) was "absolutely essential" but at the same time "not sufficient to meet the new threats posed by Russia and China." (We had hoped to say a bit more on such topics in the already-drafted report of a similarly bipartisan senior study group convened by the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP), but our consensus document remains in limbo as a result of USIP's recent DOGE-ification.)

So, while the problem of numbers and types has been raised, it remains to be squarely addressed. It is increasingly understood that we do need more, but there is no broad agreement yet on exactly how many and of what.

In his paper, Matt urges that we start uploading more warheads on our Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), purchase "at least four" additional Columbia-class ballistic missile submarines beyond the POR, and increase our planned buy of B-21 Raider bombers. He also suggests we speed up deployment of the nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N), develop a nuclear-armed variant of the U.S. Army's Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon, and develop "a mobile, land-based, short- to medium-range, ballistic or hypersonic system, with

a low-yield warhead that is deployable in theater.” There’s a lot to be said for taking those steps, but we’re still some ways from circling in on broad agreement on a new, “beyond-the-POR” agenda.

### **How Many Do We Need?**

Take, for instance, the question of how many weapons we need. We’ve felt reasonably comfortable for years vis-à-vis Russia with the U.S. arsenal at its current New START level of 1,550 operational strategic weapons. Even there, however—and assuming the Kremlin doesn’t start up-arming after that treaty expires next year, or even before—we face a growing problem due to the asymmetry in theater-level forces.

That asymmetry is destabilizing, with the Kremlin using its advantage in lower-yield and shorter-range systems for coercive diplomacy as it implements what I call an “offensive nuclear umbrella” strategy of invading its neighbors under what the Biden Administration called a “shield” of nuclear escalatory threats. This was a problem we recognized in the first Trump Administration, and which we at least tried to begin answering by deploying the W76-2 lower-yield weapon and by starting work on SLCM-N. But that problem is still worsening as Russia continues to develop its sub-strategic arsenal, and this has been exacerbated by the Biden Administration having dragged its feet on SLCM-N. Accordingly, even if we didn’t have a China problem at the same time—which, of course, we do—the United States would still need new nuclear systems that we presently do not have.

When you add in the challenge presented by China’s sprint toward what is likely to be at least nuclear parity in a decade, of course, the problem gets much worse. (And don’t forget the additional complicating factors of nuclear-armed North Korea and potentially soon also Iran, though I won’t address them here.) The number of targets we would need to be able to hold at risk in a few years’ time will presumably be significantly greater than the number we did when New START was ratified 15 years ago.

To be sure, it doesn’t necessarily follow that if 1,550 warheads are needed to deter one near-peer adversary then you need 3,100 to deter two of them, though conceivably it might. The question of numbers is actually a very challenging one, involving as it does questions not just about force size and the targeteering science of holding at risk specific types of assets or facilities, but also about what targets we want to hold at risk in the first place.

### **Deterrence vs. Damage Limitation**

So, what does each adversary care about enough that threatening that thing would help deter aggression? And what would we need to be able to strike if deterrence failed, and we thus needed to minimize that adversary’s capacity to hit and hurt us in the fight?

Perhaps significantly, those two questions may well yield divergent answers, for the potential target set threats which would best deter the bad guy from starting a war in the first place might actually be a somewhat different set than you would want to destroy for purposes of damage limitation once fighting had begun.

What the adversary most prizes is an essentially empirical question—one that in principle should be decided on the basis of deep study of his thinking and circumstances, so that your deterrent signaling can be “tailored” to the minds one wishes to influence. If it turns out that he cares most about protecting his nuclear weapons, then I suppose a pure “nuclear-on-nuclear” counterforce approach would suffice for both deterrence and for damage limitation.

But if the thing he most cared about protecting isn’t his nuclear arsenal, the targeting requirements for deterrence and for damage limitation would tend to diverge. If they do—and if you still want to be capable of meeting both objectives—you might need to be able to cover both sets of targets. If you didn’t maintain the ability to cover more than what you’d need to target for pure damage limitation, after all, you would be less effective in deterring your adversary, since actually executing your deterrent threat would bring you below the number of weapons you want for damage limitation. This would make your deterrent threat less credible, and presumably thus also make aggression more likely. Accordingly, unless you were quite confident that the requirements of deterrence and damage limitation are exactly the same, you’d have reason to bump up your numbers to be able to handle both target sets—additively rather than alternatively.

In the short-term, our response to such numerical challenges can presumably only come through uploading, as both Matt and I have advocated. That wouldn’t really get us too much vis-à-vis Russia, of course, because the Russians could easily upload too (though just adding warheads to already-deployed delivery systems doesn’t necessarily drive up the number of aim-points you’d need to cover). At the least, however, uploading would at least delay the point at which China reaches parity, buying us a little more time in which to pursue better longer-term answers.

### **New Types of Weapons?**

Beyond the stop-gap of uploading, such longer-term answers would surely involve complex trade-offs between capability, cost, and timing. In this respect, I suspect we still have a lot of intellectual spadework to do—not just on numbers but also with respect to questions about the potential long-term need for new types of nuclear weapons or delivery systems.

What new capability, for instance, would give us the most deterrent and potential warfighting value most inexpensively and rapidly? Do we need to shift more to cruder “Willys MB Jeep” or “VW Bug”-type nuclear devices that can be produced more quickly and cheaply in response to future needs than our current “Ferrari”-type designs?

To best deter our adversaries, should we develop new devices that can better do things that “normal” nuclear weapons have difficulty doing—such as destroying hardened and deeply-buried targets (HDBTs), or producing neutron-bomb-style area effects that would be handy against invading Russian battalion tactical groups (BTGs) on land, or Chinese amphibious flotillas at sea?

For maximum flexibility in responding rapidly and cost-effectively to the problem of theater overmatch and the need for quick and relatively unobvious force generation in a

crisis, do we need some kind of smaller nuclear device that can be swapped in and out on a modular basis with the non-nuclear warhead packages in a range of existing or planned conventional precision systems?

There's clearly a lot of complex trade space here. In light of that complexity, however, have our leaders ever really even been given a soup-to-nuts "menu" of potential future options—including potential "out of the box"-type possibilities—in the first place? If not, shouldn't they be? U.S. leaders have not had the chance to set a genuinely new course in nuclear force posture for several decades, and once set in place, programs of record develop enormous path-dependencies that make even modest alterations slow and costly. We are at a threshold moment, and our leaders deserve to be able to consider a broad range of possible choices—and rapidly.

That's why I'm so glad this webinar is calling attention to the possibility of opportunistic or coordinated aggression, for that threat greatly expands the range of nuclear tasks that our force posture might at some point need to handle at the same time, thus highlighting the need for such a serious rethink.

It's past time to limit ourselves simply to implementing the POR from 2010. We need to move out rapidly in figuring out what the next POR needs to be and setting it promptly in motion.