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# Tailoring Deterrence: What and Why?

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# **Tailoring Deterrence: What and Why?**

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## Executive Summary

“Tailoring” deterrence requires developing an understanding of opponents’ unique characteristics, including their decision-making frameworks in the context of the engagement. The unique characteristics that inform decision making can follow from a wide variety of possible factors, including religion, ideology, culture, geopolitical goals, perceptions of risk, and expected costs and benefits. This study includes historical case studies demonstrating the variation in the factors that can drive opponents’ decision making in a range of ways, with differing consequent behavior patterns. For example, it identifies the way in which General George Washington’s religious belief system influenced his decision making during the American Revolutionary War. In stark contrast, it also traces the way in which Adolf Hitler’s dark and violent beliefs guided his decision making, driving his brutal regime.

This study also considers how the context of an engagement can shape decision making, and thus the value of tailoring deterrence for specific opponents. The historical example of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis highlights the reality that even opponents with similar ideological frameworks can ultimately come to different conclusions when following their unique decision-making frameworks. Although the Soviet and Cuban leaderships shared the goal of furthering socialist ideology, they had different opinions regarding whether it was reasonable to employ nuclear force against the United States. This distinction is vital for understanding that opponents with some similarities can have different decision-making frameworks and not be deterrable in the same manner.

After identifying factors to consider for tailoring deterrence, this study considers why tailoring is necessary. This is because human decision making is variable – there

are no universal rules that govern calculations of cost and benefit, or risk-taking. This conclusion is supported by applying financial “quant” Emmanuel Derman’s commentary on the modeling of financial decision-making behavior more broadly to deterrence. In sum, humans assign value to various factors based on their own opinions and subjective assessment of value rather than on a gold standard, objective cost-benefit analysis. Furthermore, a person’s evaluation is subject to change based on varying perceptions and suspected future outcomes. Imagined outcomes can affect decision making in the present. That is, leaders’ impressions of what may or may not happen in the future will inform their decision making. Such expectations can vary widely and decisions made based on them can, in turn, lead to a variety of behavior patterns.

An historical illustration of how the anticipated future can shape immediate decision making can be found in Japanese decision making during World War II. The choice to attack Pearl Harbor was a strategic calculation based at least in part on the belief that U.S. actions already in play would lead to Japan’s collapse with or without war, and that going to war involved great risk, but was the most honorable option. Although one can only speculate as to how events would have unfolded had the attack on Pearl Harbor never occurred, the Japanese leaders’ calculations were based on specific, dark expectations about the future, which shaped their decision making and behavioral choices, as described in principle by Derman. In short, decision making and resultant behavior is subject to influence by a variety of factors that can lead opponents to different responses to U.S. deterrence strategies, depending on their particular decision-making frameworks, perceptions and expectations.

Consideration in this study is then given to “assured destruction,” which was Secretary of Defense McNamara’s declared U.S. approach to defining an adequate strategic

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nuclear deterrent. “Assured destruction” can be defined as “the expectation that a punitive threat of societal destruction could serve as the basic measure of adequacy for reliable deterrence.” Societal assets could include opponents’ cities, population, industry, transportation systems, power grids, etc. These societal assets are typically highly vulnerable to attack. Accordingly, a limited number of weapons at a limited cost typically is considered adequate to establish an “assured destruction” deterrence threat. McNamara and prominent academics advanced this declared policy during the Cold War in many then-classified and unclassified U.S. policy documents.

The expectation that societal threats, or “assured destruction,” would essentially serve to deter all rational opponents is based on a presumption that all rational opponents will perceive and calculate in fundamentally similar ways, and thus can be deterred in a similar way. Noted deterrence scholar Thomas Schelling applied the construct of “rational man” from economics to deterrence theory in his renowned work, *The Strategy of Conflict*. As frequently applied, this method of anticipating opponents’ behavior often is referred to as “mirror imaging,” that is, expecting opponents’ rational calculations of behavior to mimic one’s own. Many academics and officials, explicitly or implicitly, similarly advanced this expectation that an essentially universal and familiar image of rationality would produce similar deterrence effects regardless of the differences of opposing leaderships’ decision-making frameworks. The late, renowned professor Kenneth Waltz is perhaps most explicit in this regard. The simplicity of this approach to U.S. deterrence policy is indeed attractive. It eases the calculation of deterrence requirements and requires little differentiation among opponents for reliable deterrence. It essentially reflects a “one-size-fits-all” approach to deterrence based on the assumption that rational opponents will calculate alike. However, this

perspective dismisses the reality that opponents can have vastly divergent decision-making frameworks and perceptions, including interpretations of what constitutes “rational,” with some willing even to risk the possibility of national destruction.

Since its early post-Cold War introduction, tailoring has become a well-established element of the U.S. approach to deterrence, on a bipartisan basis. The need for tailoring and the conclusion that it is best practice for nuclear deterrence is presented in various official documents spanning multiple administrations. The 2004 and 2006 *Joint Operating Concepts*, the 2009 Institute for National Strategic Studies report, the 2020 *Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States*, the 2018 and 2022 *Nuclear Posture Reviews*, and the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission’s report, all reflect the wide acceptance of tailoring. They demonstrate that deterrence tailoring has been adopted consistently and on a bipartisan basis, and is included in key military reports. Although the “assured destruction” approach was espoused by McNamara during the Cold War, and is promoted by some still, tailoring is a well-established requirement for U.S. deterrence strategies, as is the associated need for a spectrum of forces to support tailoring. No approach to deterrence is foolproof because opponents’ decision making will always include some elements of uncertainty. Nevertheless, tailoring, as opposed to presuming opponents’ generic rationality and behavior patterns, can reduce those uncertainties and provide a potentially more reliable approach to deterrence.

## Introduction

The need to adjust U.S. deterrence policy to the particular values and perceptions of the Soviet leadership was well-established during the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> However, the need for “tailoring” deterrence to a variety of opponents and potential opponents in the “Second Nuclear Age” was recognized soon *after* the Cold War. Doing so mandates adjusting U.S. deterrence strategies to a broad range of opponents via a close and ongoing understanding of their respective values, perceptions and calculations—their decision-making frameworks. This “tailoring” approach to deterrence policy was introduced very early in the post-Cold War period by Professor Keith Payne, including in a 1993 briefing at U.S. Strategic Command.<sup>2</sup> But the intellectual roots of the need to adapt deterrence strategies to opposing leaderships’ particular decision-making frameworks were well articulated as early as 1969 by noted deterrence scholar, Professor Alexander George.<sup>3</sup> Almost five decades later, a report published in 2014 by the National Academy of Sciences repeated the basic rationale

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, President’s Commission on Strategic Forces, *Report of the President’s Commission on Strategic Forces* (April 1983), <http://web.mit.edu/chemistry/deutch/policy/1983-ReportPresCommStrategic.pdf>. See also, Kyle Balzer, “‘Knowing Your Enemy’: James R. Schlesinger and the Rise of Tailored Deterrence,” *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2024), pp. 39-54.

<sup>2</sup> Keith B. Payne, “Deterring Emerging Nuclear Actors?,” Presentation at the Strategic Options Assessment Conference, sponsored by U.S. Strategic Command, Dougherty Conference Center, Offutt Air Force Base, July 7, 1993. Payne also discussed the need for “tailoring” deterrence and how to do so in, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), pp. 123-129, and *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), pp. 97-111.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander L. George, “The ‘Operational Code’: A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (June 1969), pp. 190-222.

for tailoring deterrence and emphasized the corresponding rejection of a simple rational-actor presumption as the basis for deterrence planning.<sup>4</sup>

As early as 1962, then-CIA Director John McCone presented a “real world” illustration of the deterrence need to understand “the imponderables of what the other fellow will or will not do.” He essentially attributed the “incorrect” U.S. reading of events leading up to the Cuban Missile Crisis as the result of U.S. Government analysts being, “...so convinced that the Soviets would not accept the inevitable confrontation resulting from placement of offensive missiles in Cuba, that they were inclined to dismiss such evidence as there was to the contrary.”<sup>5</sup> This appears to have been an early example of “mirror imaging” affecting U.S. Cold War analyses.

This study defines deterrence “tailoring” and identifies factors that should be considered under the tailoring framework. It also addresses why tailoring is necessary – as opposed to basing deterrence planning on generic “rational actor” expectations of opponents’ behavior. As an illustration of why tailoring is necessary, this study also includes several case studies discussing the ways in which leaders’ decision making can be influenced by a variety of factors, including their cultural, ideological, and religious priorities. The need to tailor U.S. deterrence strategies follows directly from this diversity in decision-making frameworks.

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<sup>4</sup> See National Research Council, *U.S. Air Force Deterrence Analytic Capabilities: An Assessment of Tools, Methods, and Approaches for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Security Environment* (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2014), pp. 35-39, 93-95.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in, CIA History Staff, *CIA Documents On The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962* (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, October 1992), pp. 373-374.

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## Tailoring

Tailoring consists of adapting deterrence strategies to opponents' decision-making frameworks, and the context of the engagement. This means that the character of U.S. deterrence threats, including how and when they are communicated, must be based on an understanding of factors driving opponents' perceptions and decision making. Opponents' diverse decision-making frameworks will shape how they respond, in potentially unique ways, to U.S. deterrence strategies and redlines. Consequently, understanding these frameworks, to the extent practicable, and structuring U.S. deterrence strategies accordingly, can be critical to their reliability and effectiveness.<sup>6</sup> There are, of course, limits to how well opponents' decision-making frameworks can be understood for deterrence purposes;<sup>7</sup> some opponents' certainly will be more opaque than others. A complete understanding that enables a wholly reliable prediction of opponents' reactions to U.S. deterrence policies is beyond the art of the possible for reasons that are discussed below. That reality, however, does not undermine the basic proposition behind tailoring: that the more informed U.S. deterrence policies can be regarding opponents' decision-making frameworks, the more likely Washington will be able to anticipate their responses to U.S. efforts to deter and to plan those efforts accordingly.

Although tailoring has been a consistent element of U.S. nuclear deterrence policy since the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, it has not always been generally accepted. For example, Cold War-era thinking included the expectation that a threat of destroying cities and industry would serve broadly as a

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<sup>6</sup> Keith B. Payne, "Deterrence is not Rocket Science, it is More Difficult," National Institute for Public Policy, *Information Series*, No. 527 (July 6, 2022), p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> See Sean P. Larkin, "The Limits of Tailored Deterrence," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter, Issue 63 (2011), p. 48.

reliable, effective strategic deterrent against *all rational opponents*. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara publicly defined the U.S. strategic deterrence standard as holding at risk the destruction of 20 to 25 percent of the Soviet Union's population and 50 percent of its industrial base. McNamara labeled this an "assured destruction" deterrence capability.<sup>8</sup>

McNamara's "assured destruction" threat remained the main *declared* U.S. approach to strategic deterrence from the mid-1960s until the mid-1970s. For decades thereafter, prominent commentators, including former senior officials, fiercely criticized the gradual U.S. policy departures by Democratic and Republican administrations away from "assured destruction."<sup>9</sup> This approach to deterrence, contrary to tailoring, assumes that opponents' responses to U.S. "assured destruction"-oriented deterrence threats and redlines are generally predictable and effective because opponents' behavior will follow a generic "rational actor model" of decision making.

Historical studies, however, demonstrate that this approach to deterrence, i.e., assuming that opponents' responses to U.S. deterrence threats will be driven by a common rationality and are thus generally predictable, is prone to failure because leaderships often do not follow a generically predictable pattern of decision making and behavior.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, even today there are prominent

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<sup>8</sup> See, Alain C. Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, *How Much Is Enough?* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), p. 175.

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Herbert Scoville, "Flexible Madness?" *Foreign Policy*, Vol. 14 (Spring 1974), pp. 164-177; and, Seymour Melman, "Limits of Military Power," *The New York Times*, October 17, 1980.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Peter Karsten, et al., *Military Threats: A Systematic Historical Analysis of the Determinants of Success* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), *passim*. See also, Therese Delpech, *Nuclear Deterrence In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2012), p. 88, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2012/RAND\\_MG1103.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2012/RAND_MG1103.pdf).

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voices in the public square that appear to oppose the necessity of tailoring deterrence strategies in favor of a (partial) return to the Cold War's "assured destruction" approach to deterrence.<sup>11</sup>

## Understanding the Opponent

An opponent's decision-making framework can be informed by a multitude of factors, including religion; ideology; geopolitical goals; culture; psychology and cognitive function; domestic politics; government structure of authority and power; and the possession or lack of nuclear weapons.<sup>12</sup> This is not an exhaustive list of decision-making factors, but they have been shown to be important in past case studies. The late, eminent scholar Colin Gray, identified "strategic culture" as a potentially important contributor to national decision making and lauded Payne for his application of the concept to deterrence considerations.<sup>13</sup> Professor Kerry Kartchner similarly concludes that "ideational factors" ("character traits a given group assigns itself"), values, norms, and a "perceptual

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<sup>11</sup> Keir Lieber and Daryl Press, "US Strategy and Force Posture for an Era of Nuclear Tripolarity," *Issue Brief*, Atlantic Council, April 2023, pp. 3, 6. Former Defense Secretary William Perry suggested threatening 50 Russian cities with destruction as an adequacy standard. See, William J. Perry and Tom Z. Collina, *The Button* (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2020), p. 119. See also, Charles L. Glaser, James M. Acton, and Steve Fetter, "The U.S. Nuclear Arsenal Can Deter Both China and Russia: Why America Doesn't Need More Missiles," *Foreign Affairs Online*, Oct. 5, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/us-nuclear-arsenal-can-deter-both-china-and-russia#:~:text=Even%20if%20Russia%20and%20China,the%20United%20States'%20only%20adversary.>

<sup>12</sup> Keith B. Payne, "Understanding Deterrence," in, *Understanding Deterrence*, Keith B. Payne, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> See Colin S. Gray, *Out of the Wilderness: Prime Time for Strategic Culture* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2006), p. 12.

lens,” can contribute to opponents’ relevant decision making.<sup>14</sup> Decision-making frameworks may be informed by a wide range of factors, or highly influenced by one, or a few, overarching factors.

Religious beliefs, for example, can have a significant impact on a decision maker’s motivations and framework. For followers of Judaism and Christianity, the *Bible* may significantly inform their worldview, including the way in which they view goals, risk, costs and benefits, and conflict. The *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible) includes many different stories in which the victory of the ancient Israelite armies is attributed to their faith in God, not their military prowess. As noted by Israeli scholar, Dr. Shmuel Bar, in *Understanding Deterrence*, “the religious moral from ... stories in the Bible is clear: the true believer should not be deterred by a stronger enemy, as God will give him victory and hence in such situations, deterrence is not a viable option.”<sup>15</sup> This message is delivered time and time again in Biblical narratives.

One well-known example is that of David and Goliath, where the young David, future King of Israel, slays the yet unconquered warrior Goliath. As the inexperienced David faces the mighty Goliath, he states, “You come to me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied...the Lord saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the Lord’s, and he will give you into our hand.”<sup>16</sup> This account presents David’s belief that, despite

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<sup>14</sup> See Kerry M. Kartchner, “Introduction: Sociocultural Approaches to Understanding Nuclear Thresholds,” in, *Crossing Nuclear Thresholds*, Jeannie L. Johnson, et al., eds. (Cham, Switzerland.: Palgrave MacMillan. 2018), pp. 9-16.

<sup>15</sup> Shmuel Bar, “God, Nations, and Deterrence: The Impact of Religion on Deterrence,” in, Payne, *Understanding Deterrence*, op. cit., pp. 39-63, 49.

<sup>16</sup> 1 Samuel 17:1-52, *The Holy Bible* (English Standard Version).

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his opponent's many apparent physical advantages, his actions could rightly be driven by the expectation that he would defeat Goliath with divine intervention.

An opponent with such a decision-making framework may believe that, despite any apparent disadvantage, victory in war is guaranteed if it is the will of its deity. Almost seven decades ago, Henry Kissinger identified the potential significance this type of framework could have for deterrence: "In any conflict the side which is animated by faith in victory has a decided advantage over an opponent who wishes above all to preserve the status quo. It will be prepared to run greater risks because its purpose will be stronger."<sup>17</sup> If so, effective tailoring would need to consider that the opponent may not be deterred simply by the prospect of even a very lethal U.S. threat. Rather, the opponent may believe that, despite any apparent disadvantage, safety or even victory in war would be guaranteed by divine intervention.<sup>18</sup> In fact, the potential risk and cost of offending the deity with conciliation to the United States may be considered much greater than violating a U.S. redline—regardless of the U.S. deterrence threat.

This, of course, is a simplification of a decision-making framework for the purposes of illustration. Religious beliefs may be only one of multiple contributing factors driving decision making, but they appear to have contributed significantly to leadership decisions in the past. Two widely divergent examples follow.

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<sup>17</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper, 1957), p. 430.

<sup>18</sup> Israeli scholar, Professor Dmitry Adamsky, has noted that opponents may exploit an image of "faith and religiosity" to "motivate their people toward 'a decisive victory against all odds guided by divine intervention.'" See Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 241.

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### *General George Washington's Faith*

General George Washington often referred to the importance of his faith during the American Revolution.<sup>19</sup> His beliefs appear to have informed not only his perception of events as they unfolded, but were also foundational to his perspective that the American cause was favored by God.<sup>20</sup> At both high and low points during the war, Washington's correspondence included numerous examples of him discussing the hand of "Providence" in events.

In January 1776, for example, the American armies were facing low supplies and low morale.<sup>21</sup> In a letter to Joseph Reed, his secretary at the time, General Washington expressed the desire to be in the ranks, or even out of the war altogether, and "retir'd to the back country."<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, however, he concluded that, "If I shall be able to rise superior to these, and many other difficulties, which might be innumerable, I shall most religiously believe that the finger of Providence is in it, to blind the Eyes of our Enemys; for surely if we get well through this Month, it must be for want of their knowing the disadvantages we labour under."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> John C. Fitzpatrick, "George Washington and Religion," *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (April 1929), pp. 23-42.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> David McCullough, *1776* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2005), p. 79.

<sup>22</sup> "George Washington to Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Reed, 14 January 1776," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-03-02-0062>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington, 1 January 1776-31 March 1776*, Revolutionary War Series, Vol. 3, Philander D. Chase, ed. (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1988), pp. 87-92.], <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=Correspondent%3A%22Reed%2C%20Joseph%22%20Correspondent%3A%22Washington%2C%20George%22&s=1111311111&r=25>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

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Washington maintained this faith in the sovereignty of “Providence” throughout the war. In March of 1776, the British Army held Boston. Washington made the daring calculation to take Dorchester Heights under cover of night and was met with success. Although the British were prepared to attack the following day, a storm blew in, preventing British advancement. In a letter describing these events to his brother John, General Washington concluded that this storm was a “remarkable Interposition of Providence,” and that it “is for some wise purpose I have not a doubt.”<sup>24</sup> Washington’s correspondence is filled with examples of his belief that “Providence” was in control of the outcome of the events, to the Americans’ benefit. For example, he made the following statement to Brig. Gen. Thomas Nelson following the Battle of Monmouth: “The hand of Providence has been so conspicuous in all this that he must be worse than an infidel that lacks faith, and more than wicked, that has not gratitude enough to acknowledge his obligations – but – it will be time enough for me to turn preacher, when my present appointment ceases; and therefore I shall add no more on the Doctrine of Providence....”<sup>25</sup>

Importantly, Washington believed that God favored the American cause. He was confident in divine intervention

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<sup>24</sup> “George Washington to John Augustine Washington, 31 March 1776,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-03-02-0429>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington, 1 January 1776–31 March 1776*, Revolutionary War Series, Vol. 3, Philander D. Chase, ed. (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1988), pp. 566–571.], <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-03-02-0429>.

<sup>25</sup> “George Washington to Brigadier General Thomas Nelson, Jr., 20 August 1778,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-16-02-0373>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series, 1 July–14 September 1778*, Vol. 16, David R. Hoth, ed. (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2006), pp. 340–342].

given his belief that the American cause was righteous and divinely favored.<sup>26</sup> Historian John C. Fitzpatrick summarizes this point in the following statement: “George Washington’s firm belief in the righteousness of human liberty, drew from him frank acknowledgement of God’s aid. Many times, his plans failed; but when they did, he merely assumed that Providence, for some inscrutable reason, had intervened.”<sup>27</sup> General Washington is a prime example of a leader whose beliefs appear to have significantly informed his viewpoint and decision making in wartime. His careful optimism and his willingness to make strategic gambles were likely informed by this confidence in the righteousness of the American cause and his belief that all events were ultimately controlled by a sovereign God. In discussing the “sporting chances” taken by Washington, Fitzpatrick noted that Washington “declined to grant anything to the heathen god of chance.”<sup>28</sup>

Had Washington’s opponents engaged in deterrence tailoring, they would have taken Washington’s belief system into account in their expectations of his decision making. Washington’s confident faith may have rendered him a difficult adversary to deter or predict in terms of his tenacious willingness to take chances and hope in divine favor. This factor in Washington’s decision making could have been manifest to his adversaries. As an Episcopalian, he would have shared many religious commonalities with his Church of England counterparts.<sup>29</sup> They could have recognized Washington’s pious faith and

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<sup>26</sup> See, Fitzpatrick, “George Washington and Religion,” op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Washington was a member of the Church of England prior to the American Revolution. The Episcopal Church was founded in 1785 after independence. See *History of the Episcopal Church*, History: Timeline, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/organizations-affiliations/history-episcopal-church/timeline-2/>.

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considered how it might shape his decision making, despite their fundamental opposition to the American cause. Understanding Washington's beliefs, however, may have been difficult for British leaders. They may have viewed the role of colonies akin to that of the tenancy system of the landed aristocracy which naturally governed and received rents from their estates; empires should thus naturally govern and receive profits from obedient colonies.<sup>30</sup>

### *Adolf Hitler's Brutal Beliefs*

Adolf Hitler's decision making provides a striking example of a leader whose particular beliefs led to a destructive path—one very different from that trod by General Washington. Hitler's beliefs were driven by a dangerous amalgam of factors—including a horrific disregard for human life corresponding to a lethal interpretation of the "laws of nature," and a strongly held belief that he alone was the appointed savior of Germany.

Although born into a Catholic family, Hitler did not adhere to Christianity and held the Christian churches in contempt—as is reflected in his ultimate plans to eliminate religious authorities and replace religious belief with National Socialist ideology. Hitler's harsh repression of Christian churches, Protestant and Catholic, is now well recorded: "The Churches, like all other institutions, were to be molded to the Nazi will...and they were constantly assailed with propaganda or police measures designed to cajole or enforce their submission...it is now possible to see in its entirety the extent of the Nazi persecution and the

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<sup>30</sup> Charles M. Andrews, "The American Revolution: An Interpretation" *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (January 1926), pp. 219-232, 226.

deliberate policies of repression under which the Churches suffered.”<sup>31</sup>

According to historian Richard Weikart, Hitler is best described as a “pantheist” who believed that nature, or the cosmos, is divine.<sup>32</sup> Weikart concludes that, “Hitler’s devotion to nature as a divine being had a grim corollary: the laws of nature became his infallible guide to morality. Whatever conformed to the laws of nature was morally good, and whatever contravened nature and its ways was evil.”<sup>33</sup> Hitler’s self-revealing text, *Mein Kampf*, reflects such a dark view.<sup>34</sup> For example, the law of nature included “...the rigid law of necessity and the right of victory of the best and strongest in this world. Those who want to live, let them fight, and those who do not want to fight in this world of eternal struggle do not deserve to live.”<sup>35</sup> Hitler’s infamous “Nero orders” of March 18 and 19, 1945, reflected his willingness to see the destruction of surviving Germans whom he deemed had failed him in Germany’s defeat.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Hitler’s first mass execution program in 1939, the so-called T-4 program, involved the murder of tens of thousands, and ultimately hundreds of thousands of Germans with mental and physical disabilities. Reflecting

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<sup>31</sup> J.S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches* (Vancouver, Canada: Regent College Publishing, 2001), p. XXX.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Weikart, *Hitler’s Religion: The Twisted Beliefs that Drove the Third Reich* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery History, 2016), p. xiii.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, Translated by Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971), pp. 131-132, 134, 151, 153, 288, 403-408.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 289.

<sup>36</sup> See the discussion in, Sebastian Haffner, *The Meaning of Hitler* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 158-160. See also, Whitney Harris, *Tyranny on Trial* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1999), pp. 472-473.

Hitler's ghastly view of the "law of nature," they were deemed "unworthy" of life.<sup>37</sup>

Such ideas were derived from a particularly brutal national interpretation of Social Darwinism, in which human advancement is believed to be based on the "laws of nature," including that the stronger will, and should be free to, eliminate the weaker. Social Darwinism gained popularity within Germany's intellectual community during the late 1800s.<sup>38</sup> The central concept of dreadful Nazi racial ideology was that natural selection had created a superior race and, thus, forced "euthanasia" (and subsequently mass murder) was justified as furthering its advancement.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to embracing this horrific belief system, Hitler placed high confidence in guidance from an "inner voice."<sup>40</sup> Hitler often used the German term "Vorsehung," suggesting a guiding divine will. In this regard, he referenced what historian Max Domarus, editor of a four-volume series of Hitler's speeches, described as a "peculiarly German God,"<sup>41</sup> whom Hitler believed "existed exclusively for the German people."<sup>42</sup> Hitler believed that he had been called by "die Vorsehung" to save the German people, or "Volk."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> See, James M. Glass, *Life Unworthy of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), pp. 61-62. See also, Haffner, *The Meaning of Hitler*, op. cit., pp. 132-133; and, Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitler in History* (London: University Press of New England, 1984), pp. 12, 50, 90.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Weikart, "Social Darwinism in Germany 1859-1895," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (July 1993), pp. 469-488.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Weikart, "The Role of Darwinism in Nazi Racial Thought," *German Studies Review*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (October 2013), pp. 551-552.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*, op. cit., p. 69. See also, Weikart, *Hitler's Religion*, op. cit., p. 64.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in, Weikart, *Hitler's Religion*, op. cit., p. 58.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in, *ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>43</sup> See, *ibid.*, pp. 57-60.

Hitler placed such a value on this “inner voice” that he apparently chose to trust it over outside advice. Indeed, Hitler scorned confidence in “sober considerations,”<sup>44</sup> believing that “...if the voice speaks, then I know the time has come to act.”<sup>45</sup> Hitler often described his decision making accordingly. For example,

- “The spirit of decision consists simply in not hesitating when an inner conviction commands you to act.”<sup>46</sup>
- “Neither threats nor warnings will prevent me from going my way. I follow the path assigned to me by [“die Vorsehung”] with the instinctive sureness of a sleepwalker.”<sup>47</sup>
- “Trust your instincts, your feelings, or whatever you like to call them. Never trust your knowledge.”<sup>48</sup>

With this framework for decision making, Hitler dispensed with any pretense of following advisors’ guidance; he did not hold cabinet meetings after 1937.<sup>49</sup> Once in power, Nazi policies were significantly influenced

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<sup>44</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Hitler’s Secret Book* (New York: Bramhall House, 1986), pp. 5-7.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in, Hermann Rauschnig, *Hitler Speaks* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1939), p. 181. See also, Weikart, *Hitler’s Religion*, op. cit., p. 61.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in, Rauschnig, *Hitler Speaks*, op. cit., p. 184.

<sup>47</sup> “Ich gehe den Weg, den mir die Vorsehung mit der Sicherheit eines Schlafwandlers gewiesen hat.” Adolf Hitler, Speech, Munich Exhibition Halls, March 14, 1936. Quoted in, Max Domarus, *Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945, The Chronicle of Dictatorship*, Vol. II, 1935-1938 (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publisher, 1992), p. 790. Quoted in Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*, op. cit., p. 70.

<sup>48</sup> Rauschnig, *Hitler Speaks*, op. cit., p. 184. Quoted in Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*, op. cit., p. 70.

<sup>49</sup> Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitler’s Weltanschauung* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1972), p. 82.

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by this amalgam of Hitler's deeply held, horrific beliefs.<sup>50</sup> For him, those beliefs ultimately justified mass murder, including Germans – in this regard he said, "Here too I am cold as ice."<sup>51</sup> He essentially isolated himself beyond the reach of advisors, answering only to his "inner voice." Establishing deterrence against an adversary with such a decision-making framework would be aided by understanding that such a framework was in place, or possibly concluding that any practicable approach to deterrence would be too uncertain to pursue.

## **The Context of the Engagement**

Another important factor for tailoring deterrence strategies is understanding opponents' decision-making frameworks in the specific context of the engagement. A key historical example of how the context can affect those frameworks is the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, in which America's opponents, Cuba and the Soviet Union, had contrary views regarding both the stakes involved and the risk of nuclear employment against the United States.

The Cuban Missile Crisis is famously regarded as the time when the United States and the Soviet Union came closest to nuclear conflict.<sup>52</sup>

In the lead-up to the crisis, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and Cuban leader Fidel Castro apparently agreed that the Soviets would place nuclear weapons in Cuba as a way of strengthening the Soviet strategic position and deterring the United States from attempts at an

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<sup>50</sup> See Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitler in History* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press and University Press of New England, 1984), passim.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in, *ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>52</sup> The Department of State, The Office of the Historian, "The Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962," undated, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/cuban-missile-crisis>.

invasion of Cuba.<sup>53</sup> Although Khrushchev and Castro had similar ideological goals, their viewpoints diverged in ways important to the context. During the crisis, Castro reportedly encouraged the Soviet Union to launch a nuclear strike against the United States.<sup>54</sup> A careful review of the available record reveals that “On October 27 [1962], one day before the public crisis would end, Castro cabled Khrushchev to urge a preemptive nuclear strike on U.S. targets.”<sup>55</sup>

Khrushchev later recalled that Castro was “hot-tempered,” and that “he failed to think through the obvious consequences of a proposal that placed the planet on the brink of destruction.”<sup>56</sup> Che Guevara, the political theoretician to Castro, indicated that the Cuban leadership was prepared to sacrifice Cuba, for the purpose of advancing socialism; he stated in hindsight that, “If the rockets had remained, we would have used them all and directed them against the heart of the United States, including New York, in our fight against aggression.”<sup>57</sup> Soviet military leader Col. Viktor Semykin recalled that Cubans were urging the Soviets to use nuclear weapons, assuring Moscow that Cuba was willing to sacrifice itself in the name of socialism.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*, op. cit., pp. 50-51.

<sup>55</sup> See “Cuban Missile Crisis’ Untold Story: Castro Almost Kept Nuclear Warheads On The Island,” *Huffingtonpost.com*, October 16, 2012, [http://huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/15/cuban-missile-crisis-into\\_n\\_1967544.html?v](http://huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/15/cuban-missile-crisis-into_n_1967544.html?v). See also, Juan O. Tamayo, “A Nuclear Secret in ‘62 Cuba Crisis,” *The Miami Herald*, May 3, 1998, <http://www.herald.com:80/americas/digdocs/015151.htm>.

<sup>56</sup> Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*, op. cit., p. 51, quoting James Blight, et al., *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), p. 29.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in, Enrique Krauze, “The Return of Che Guevara,” *The New Republic*, Vol. 218, No. 6 (February 9, 1998), p. 34.

<sup>58</sup> See Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*, op. cit., p. 51.

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However, the Soviet leadership had a different view of the stakes involved and a different perspective on the risks and consequences of launching a nuclear strike—seeing them as unacceptable. The Soviet Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan responded to Che Guevara by saying, “We see your readiness to die beautifully, but we believe that it isn’t worth dying beautifully.”<sup>59</sup> Despite similar ideological commitments and goals, Soviet and Cuban leaders displayed strikingly different perspectives on the stakes of the crisis, and on acceptable risks and costs. These differences appear to have shaped the course of events and the effects of U.S. deterrence threats. The Soviet Union was subject to deterrence, determining through its own decision-making framework that nuclear use was not worth the likely cost under the circumstances. Conversely, the Cuban leaders appear to have displayed a willingness to pursue reckless behaviors to further an ideological goal, regardless of the potential for self-destruction. This engagement ultimately was shaped by the fact that Moscow was deterrable by U.S. deterrence threats. In contrast, Cuban leaders appeared willing to sacrifice Cuba; fortunately, they did not control the nuclear weapons on Cuba.

Some elements of Cuban culture may have contributed to the Cuban leadership’s decision-making framework in this crisis. A.L. Bardach, an expert on Cuban culture, states that it, “...abhors surrender, rejects compromise and finds a measure of redemption in suicide.”<sup>60</sup> This apparent cultural view of martyrdom may have influenced the decisions of Cuban leaders and their willingness to sacrifice. This case suggests that deterrence tailoring must consider opponents’ decision-making frameworks within the specific context of the engagement. Despite their shared overall goals, the

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<sup>59</sup> Quoted in, Krauze, op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>60</sup> A. L. Bardach, “Cuba at the Crossroads,” *The Washington Post*, February 12, 2006, p. 7.

Soviet Union and Cuba had different perceptions of what constituted reasonable behavior during the Cuban Missile Crisis. While the Soviets saw it as an opportunity to bargain with the United States and would not launch nuclear weapons, the Cuban leadership apparently was willing to accept all costs rather than bargain. Had their positions been reversed, it is probable that the Cuban Missile Crisis would have ended in a nuclear catastrophe. Consequently, understanding opponents' potentially vastly different decision-making frameworks in context could be key to an informed U.S. deterrence strategy, particularly in a contingency in which the United States faces multiple nuclear-armed opponents—which appears increasingly likely.<sup>61</sup>

### **Why is Tailoring Necessary?**

Given the above illustrations of diverse decision-making frameworks, it is worth considering why tailoring is necessary: why is it important to know if an opponent has deeply-held religious, ideological or cultural beliefs that guide decision making? And, why is it important to consider how opposing leaderships perceive the particular context? Are the potential differences in decision-making frameworks and perceptions significant to opponents' responses to U.S. deterrence strategies and redlines? Or, is there an alternative approach to deterrence that is generally applicable to all opponents—making tailoring unnecessary?

The late, renowned political scientist Kenneth Waltz voiced the expectation that variations in decision-making frameworks would not likely affect the functioning of

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<sup>61</sup> See 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).

nuclear deterrence: "Who cares about the [differing] 'cognitive' abilities of leaders when nobody but an idiot can fail to comprehend [nuclear weapons'] destructive force." And, "In a nuclear world any state will be deterred by another state's [nuclear] second-strike forces. One need not become preoccupied with characteristics of the state that is to be deterred or scrutinize its leaders."<sup>62</sup> Similarly, in 1981, Waltz asserted that, "In a nuclear world to act in blatantly offensive ways is madness."<sup>63</sup> Looking back, he further conjectured that even if Adolf Hitler would not have been deterred personally by a nuclear threat, surely his generals would have been and would not have obeyed the commands of a "madman."<sup>64</sup> Waltz confidently concluded that "No country will goad a nuclear adversary that finds itself in sad straits."<sup>65</sup> Professor Waltz extended his confidence in the reliability of nuclear deterrence to its logical conclusion by advancing the controversial argument that Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons would be most likely to "restore stability to the Middle East."<sup>66</sup> He implicitly advanced the expectation that a nuclear threat against an opponent's society can underwrite deterrence in general because all rational leaders ultimately will have

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<sup>62</sup> Kenneth Waltz, "Nuclear Myths and Political Realities," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 84, No. 3 (September 1990), pp. 737-738, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1962764>. Quoted in, Keith B. Payne, *Shadows on the Wall: Deterrence and Disarmament* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2020), p. 67.

<sup>63</sup> Kenneth Waltz, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May be Better," *Adelphi Papers*, No. 171 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981), p. 24, <https://theasrudiancenter.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/kenneth-waltz.pdf>.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>66</sup> Kenneth Waltz, "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (July-August 2012), pp. 2, 5.

similar perceptions of risk and limits to risk-taking in their decision-making frameworks: “In a nuclear world, any state—whether ruled by Stalin, a Mao Zedong, a Saddam Hussein, or a Kim Jong Il—will be deterred by the knowledge that aggressive actions may lead to its own destruction....”<sup>67</sup>

At its core, however, tailoring is considered necessary because human decision making underlying behavior is variable—there are no universal rules that govern calculations of cost and benefit, or risk-taking, or what may be considered reasonable behavior. There is no universal “rationality” that enables the general predictability of diverse leaderships’ calculations of value, priorities, costs and risks. This expectation and its implications are addressed indirectly in Emanuel Derman’s *Models Behaving Badly*.<sup>68</sup> Derman, a physicist turned financial “quant,” concludes that expectations of decision making based on the assumption of a common rationality perform poorly because rational individuals often make decisions very differently than is suggested by the notion of a universal rationality. While Derman is predominantly discussing models of financial decision making, his discussion applies more broadly, including to considerations of deterrence. Derman states that, “In physics you’re playing against God, and He doesn’t change his laws very often. In finance you’re playing against God’s creatures, agents *who value assets based on their ephemeral opinions*.”<sup>69</sup> “Ephemeral opinions” are not unique to financial decision making; they can shape

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<sup>67</sup> Kenneth Waltz, in Scott Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: Norton and Co., 2003), p. 117.

<sup>68</sup> See the discussion in Payne, “Deterrence is not Rocket Science, it is More Difficult,” *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>69</sup> Emanuel Derman, *Models Behaving Badly: Why Confusing Illusion with Reality Can Lead to Disaster, on Wall Street and in Life* (New York: Free Press, 2011), p. 140. (Emphasis added.)

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leaderships' calculations of risk and benefit regarding deterrence threats and redlines, and thus their responses. Extending the point, Derman concludes that, "Value is determined by people, and people change their mind."<sup>70</sup> This is an important consideration for tailoring deterrence strategies as well. Not only can leaders be expected to calculate and behave differently from one another based on their particular decision-making frameworks, but their calculations may shift over time.

Derman also contrasts the way in which physics can be modeled and that of social science. He states that, "It's not only the past that leaves its trace on humans. In physics, effects propagate only forward through time, and the future cannot affect the present. In the social sciences the *imagined future* can affect the present, and thereby the actual future too."<sup>71</sup> As applied to deterrence, this refers to the way opponents behave based on their *expectations* of future outcomes, which then affect contemporary decision making.

Indeed, deterrence theory presumes that opponents' expected outcomes will shape their cost and benefit calculations, decision making, and future behavior, i.e., opponents are expected to be deterred from an action when they expect the costs of that action will outweigh the possible benefits—meaning that how those outcomes are imagined will shape opponents' responses to U.S. deterrence strategies and redlines. Deterrence illustrates Derman's point that the "imagined future can affect the present, and thereby the actual future too." A Harvard Study Group concluded that this "crystal ball" effect is what enables deterrence.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 156. (Emphasis added.)

<sup>72</sup> Albert Carnesale, et al., *Living with Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), p. 44.

However, as Derman's analysis suggests, opponents may hold exceedingly varied "ephemeral opinions" regarding imagined costs, benefits and outcomes. Consequently, deterrence strategies that are informed by the best possible understanding of opponents' perceptions and decision-making frameworks, i.e., an opponent's opinions and particular "crystal ball," are likely to be more reliable than those that are not so informed.

An historical illustration of how the anticipated future can shape immediate decision making can be found in Japanese decision making during World War II.<sup>73</sup> The decision to attack Pearl Harbor was a strategic calculation based at least in part on the belief that U.S. actions already in play would lead to Japan's collapse with or without war, and that going to war was the most honorable option.<sup>74</sup> Historian Louis Morton wrote of Japanese leaders: "In their view, Japan had no alternative but to go to war while she had the power to do so. She might lose, but defeat was better than humiliation and submission. 'Japan entered the war,' wrote a prince of the Imperial family, 'with a tragic determination and in desperate self-abandonment.' If it lost, 'there will be nothing to regret because she is doomed to collapse even without war.'"<sup>75</sup>

One can only speculate as to whether the "doomed" future that Japanese leaders apparently anticipated would have actually occurred had they not attacked Pearl Harbor, or whether their decision making would have been different had they envisioned a different future. Regardless, the

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<sup>73</sup> For a broader discussion of this Japanese decision making see, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*, op. cit., pp. 1, 11, 43.

<sup>74</sup> See the discussions in Keith B. Payne, *The Great American Gamble* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2008), p. 267; Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*, op. cit., pp. 1, 11; and, Payne, *Deterrence In the Second Nuclear Age*, op. cit., pp. 55, 109-111.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in, Louis Morton, "Japan's Decision for War," in *Command Decisions*, Kent Greenfield, ed. (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1990), p. 122.

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Japanese leaders' calculations were based on specific expectations about the future, which shaped their decision making and behavioral choices, as described in principle by Derman.

Without an understanding of Japan's dark expectations regarding the future prior to Pearl Harbor, and the role that honor played in Japanese decision making, predicting probable Japanese responses to U.S. actions would be highly problematic. Indeed, U.S. expectations of Japanese decision making at the time were skewed by Washington's presumptions regarding what constituted rational behavior on the subject. In August 1941, Assistant Secretary of State Dean Acheson sought to reassure President Franklin Roosevelt that "no rational Japanese could believe an attack on us could result in anything but disaster for his country."<sup>76</sup> Clearly, Acheson did not understand Japanese reasoning.

The above conceptual discussion and historical cases point to the potential significance for decision making of how an opponent perceives the future, costs and benefits, and the potential for those perceptions to be driven by "ephemeral opinions." Given this, confidence in opponents' responses to U.S. deterrence strategies based on the presumption of a generic "rationality" driving opponents' behavior in predictable directions can easily lead to mistaken expectations regarding optimal U.S. deterrence threats and redlines; how national leaders interpret what is "rational" can determine expected outcomes.

In short, decision making and resultant behavior is subject to influence by a variety of factors that can lead opponents to different responses to U.S. deterrence strategies, depending on their particular decision-making frameworks, perceptions and expectations. Even an

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<sup>76</sup> Quoted in, Scott Sagan, "The Origins of the Pacific War," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Spring 1988), p. 906.

imperfect understanding of the decision-making frameworks that drive opponents' decision making can provide insight into the needed character of U.S. deterrence strategies.

### *"Assured Destruction"*

As noted above, prior to the incorporation of tailoring into U.S. deterrence policy, the United States had a *declared* approach to defining an adequate strategic nuclear deterrent known as "assured destruction." This policy was advanced during the Cold War by academics and in many then-classified and unclassified U.S. policy documents; it was specifically championed by U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara.<sup>77</sup> "Assured destruction" can be defined as "the expectation that a punitive threat of societal destruction could serve as the basic measure of adequacy for reliable deterrence" (of rational opponents).<sup>78</sup> Societal assets could include, *inter alia*, opponents' cities, population, industry, transportation systems, and power grids.<sup>79</sup>

During the Cold War, prominent academics and officials – referencing an "assured destruction" approach to deterrence – made confident predictions in this regard such as, "A force sufficient to kill the enemy's population and destroy his wealth is an adequate deterrent."<sup>80</sup> Additionally, "Deterrence comes from having enough

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<sup>77</sup> Draft Memorandum for the President, Secretary of Defense [Robert S. McNamara] to the President [Lyndon B. Johnson], Subj: Strategic Offensive and Defensive Forces, January 15, 1968, p. 5. (Originally classified; sanitized and declassified on January 5, 1983), p. 8. See the discussion in, Payne, *The Great American Gamble*, *op. cit.*, Chapter 4.

<sup>78</sup> Payne, *Shadows on the Wall*, *op.cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Ralph Lapp, *Kill and Overkill: The Strategy of Annihilation* (New York: Basic Books, 1962), p. 140.

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[nuclear capability] to destroy the other's cities; this capability is an absolute, not a relative, one."<sup>81</sup> Former National Security Advisor to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, McGeorge Bundy, confidently claimed that: "The stalemate that keeps nuclear peace between the superpowers...is not affected by the relative ruthlessness of the two societies or their different experiences of twentieth-century war. What each can do to the other, whoever goes first, is more than enough to stay the hand that does not belong to a madman";<sup>82</sup> and, "In light of the certain prospect of retaliation there has been literally no chance at all that any sane political authority, in either the United States or the Soviet Union, would consciously choose to start a nuclear war. This proposition is true for the past, the present and the foreseeable future."<sup>83</sup> In unison with other former senior officials, Bundy later specified that, "The possibility of even a few nuclear detonations in populated areas provides ample deterrence."<sup>84</sup> In 1973, former U.S. State Department official Louis Halle offered a similarly confident conclusion, stating that, "Our conclusion, in its narrowest terms, must be that the deliberate resort to war by a nuclear power against a power capable of effective retaliation is permanently ruled out...."<sup>85</sup>

The expectation that societal threats, or "assured destruction," would essentially serve to deter all rational opponents is based on a presumption that all rational

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<sup>81</sup> Robert Jervis, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 94, No. 4 (Winter 1979-1980), p. 618.

<sup>82</sup> McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), p. 592.

<sup>83</sup> McGeorge Bundy, "To Cap the Volcano," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (October 1969), p. 9.

<sup>84</sup> McGeorge Bundy, William Crowe, Jr., and Sidney Drell, *Reducing Nuclear Danger* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1993), p. 95.

<sup>85</sup> Louis Halle, "Does War Have a Future?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (October 1973), p. 23.

opponents will perceive and calculate in fundamentally similar ways, and thus can be deterred in a similar fashion. Because all rational decision making is expected to follow a predictable course, deterrence does not require adaptation to opponents' potentially unique decision-making frameworks.<sup>86</sup> Regardless of the potential differences in decision making, a highly lethal retaliatory threat to opponents' societal targets is expected to sustain the deterrence of all rational opponents.

Professor Stephen Cimbala summarizes the expectations underlying the Cold War's "assured destruction" approach to deterrence: "It depended upon a tightly reasoned world of interchangeable leaders and motives that could be fitted into matrices of cost-benefit analysis and nuclear exchange models. Leaders and states that refused to behave according to the models were dismissed as delinquent or logically flawed."<sup>87</sup> Professor William Martel described how widespread was this expectation regarding leadership decision making, noting "the fact that most of the literature on deterrence during the Cold War viewed deterrence as universally applicable based on a single conception of what could be defined as rational behavior. The universal application of deterrence strategy was tied directly to an implicit assumption that avoiding societal destruction represented the instrumental limit on rational action."<sup>88</sup>

That expectation runs contrary to the basic proposition underlying deterrence tailoring—that opponents' rationality does not equate to predictably similar decision

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<sup>86</sup> Payne, *Shadows on the Wall*, op. cit., p. 76.

<sup>87</sup> Stephen J. Cimbala, *Nuclear Weapons and Strategy* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 103.

<sup>88</sup> William C. Martel, "Deterrence and Alternative images of Nuclear Possession," in *The Absolute Weapon Revisited*, T.V. Paul, Richard J. Harknett, and James Wirtz, eds. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), p. 213.

making because they can have diverse decision-making frameworks that drive equally diverse behavioral patterns – and thus deterrence must be tailored. As a result, as discussed above, proponents of tailoring argue that U.S. deterrence strategies and associated capabilities must be informed by an understanding of opponents' decision-making frameworks. "Assured destruction" and tailoring begin with different expectations regarding the variability of rational opponents' decision making and conclude with opposite answers to the question of whether deterrence should be established on an understanding of opponents' diverse decision-making frameworks.

In Secretary McNamara's then-classified 1964 *Draft Presidential Memorandum*, he boldly stated that, to be effective, U.S. deterrence capabilities must include the ability to destroy, "25 percent of [Soviet] population (55 million people) and more than two thirds of [Soviet] industrial capacity."<sup>89</sup> As the 1960s progressed, McNamara continued to express confidence publicly in this type of deterrence metric and stated that the United States could rely on deterrence via its offensive capabilities for "assured destruction."<sup>90</sup> An arsenal able to threaten "assured destruction" was sufficient for deterrence.

Henry Rowen, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs from 1961 to 1964, and Assistant Director, U.S. Bureau of the Budget from 1965 to 1966, explained that the value of this "assured destruction" metric was not that it provided the basis for deterrence best

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<sup>89</sup> Payne, *Shadows on the Wall*, op. cit., p. 77, quoting *Draft Memorandum for the President, Secretary of Defense to the President [Lyndon B. Johnson]*. Subj: Recommended FY 1966-FY 1970 Programs for Strategic Offensive Forces, Continental Air and Missile Defense Forces, and Civil Defense, December 3, 1964, p. 4 (Sanitized and declassified on January 5, 1983).

<sup>90</sup> See for example, Edward J. Drea, *Secretaries of Defense Historical Series, Vol. VI: McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam, 1965-1969* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, USGPO, 2011), p. 347.

practice, but because it placed clear limits on nuclear spending:

The principal test of adequacy of the U.S. strategic force came to be the ability of our programmed force to produce civil damage, even against a greater than expected threat. The damage criterion settled on by McNamara for determining the size of the strategic force was the destruction of 20-25 percent of the Soviet population and 50 percent of its industrial capacity....The primary purpose of the Assured Destruction capabilities doctrine was to provide a metric for deciding how much force was enough: it provided a basis for denying service and Congressional claims for more money for strategic forces.<sup>91</sup>

The societal assets McNamara described as the basis for deterrence are highly vulnerable to nuclear attack.<sup>92</sup> Accordingly, a limited number of weapons at a limited cost typically is considered adequate to establish an “assured destruction” deterrence threat. During the Cold War, Henry Kissinger criticized “assured destruction” as immoral because it focuses on an intentional threat to civilians; he also criticized proponents of this approach to deterrence for seemingly seeking not the most effective deterrence policy, but only to minimize costs: “They believe

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<sup>91</sup> Henry S. Rowen, “Formulating Strategic Doctrine,” Commission on the Organization of the Government for the Conduct of Foreign Policy, Volume 4, Appendix K, *Adequacy of Current Organization: Defense and Arms Control* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, June 1975), p. 227. See also, Alain Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, *How Much Is Enough? Shaping the Defense Program, 1961-1969* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 23-24, 170-171, 179, 194-195.

<sup>92</sup> See Payne, *Shadows on the Wall*, op. cit., p. 76, referencing comments from Steven Pifer and Michael E. O’Hanlon, *The Opportunity: Next Steps in Reducing Nuclear Arms* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), pp. 20-21.

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in assured destruction because it guarantees the smallest expenditure. To have the only option that of killing 80 million people is the height of immorality.”<sup>93</sup>

Despite Republican and Democratic administrations moving U.S. deterrence policy steadily away from an “assured destruction” basis for deterrence since the mid-1970s, academics and some officials have continued to espouse this “easy deterrence” concept. For example, in 2010, the late noted national security commentator Bruce Blair offered a confident forecast of deterrence success from the threat of societal destruction: “Deterrence today would remain stable even if retaliation against only ten cities were assured.”<sup>94</sup> Professor Steve Fetter continued to assert that, “No sane adversary would believe that any political or military advantage would be worth a significant risk of the destruction of his own society....”<sup>95</sup> In 2013, Thomas M. Nichols, professor emeritus of national security affairs at the U.S. Naval War College and current staff writer at *The Atlantic*, went so far as to state that, “The number of nuclear weapons required to deter policymakers in ‘the real world’ has long been far fewer than several thousand or even several hundred. It may be closer to the simplest number of all: one.”<sup>96</sup> Other estimates range from ten, to one hundred,

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<sup>93</sup> Henry Kissinger in, National Archives, Nixon Presidential Material, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-108, Minutes of Meetings, Verification Panel Minutes, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Vol. XXXV, National Security Policy, 1973-1976* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 2014), p. 105.

<sup>94</sup> Bruce Blair, et al., “Smaller and Safer,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 5 (September-October 2010), p. 10. Quotation found in Payne, *Shadows on the Wall*, op. cit., p. 76.

<sup>95</sup> Steve Fetter, “Nuclear Strategy and Targeting Doctrine,” in Harold A Feiveson, ed., *The Nuclear Turning Point* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), p. 57.

<sup>96</sup> Payne, *Shadows on the Wall*, op. cit., p. 79, quoting Thomas M. Nichols, *No Use: Nuclear Weapons and U.S. National Security* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), p. 85.

to a few hundred warheads.<sup>97</sup> More recently, in 2020, former Defense Secretary William Perry suggested that threatening fifty Russian cities with destruction is an adequate deterrence standard.<sup>98</sup> All such estimates appear to assume opponents adhere to a predictable, common decision-making framework and are, correspondingly, deterred by the same basic type of threat, i.e., to cities.

The simplicity of this approach to U.S. deterrence policy is indeed attractive. It seems easy to calculate and requires little differentiation among opponents to deter reliably. It essentially reflects a “one-size-fits-all” approach to deterrence based on the assumption that rational opponents will calculate alike. While “assured destruction” was originally designed with the Soviet Union as the designated opponent, its advocates during and after the Cold War have contended that it applies against all rational opponents.

These definitive Cold War and more recent assertions regarding deterrence functioning similarly and predictably dismiss the reality that opponents can have vastly divergent decision-making frameworks and perceptions, with some willing even to risk the possibility of national destruction. It ignores the reality of Cuban decision making during the 1962 crisis, Hitler’s “Nero orders” in March 1945, and General Korechika Anami’s thinking in August 1945, as discussed above. Again, Professor Martel made this point in 1997, stating that, “The universal view of deterrence can be challenged, therefore, by recognizing the possibility that

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<sup>97</sup> As discussed in Payne, *Shadows on the Wall*, op. cit., p. 80; Union of Concerned Scientists, *The Obama Administration’s New Nuclear Policy: An Assessment of the “Nuclear Posture Review”* (Washington, D.C.: Union of Concerned Scientists, April 8, 2010), [http://www.ucsusa.org/nuclear\\_weapons\\_and\\_global\\_security/nuclear\\_weapons/policy\\_issues/Obama-administration-npr.html](http://www.ucsusa.org/nuclear_weapons_and_global_security/nuclear_weapons/policy_issues/Obama-administration-npr.html); and, Steve Fetter, “Nuclear Strategy and Targeting Doctrine,” in Harold A. Feiveson, ed., *The Nuclear Turning Point* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), p. 57.

<sup>98</sup> Perry and Collina, *The Button*, op. cit., p. 119.

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there may be societal conceptions of rational behavior that instrumentally include the potential for societal destruction in the pursuit of societal goals...the logic of deterrence does not compel anything, including the behavior of societies that do not adhere to the rational-actor image of nuclear possession."<sup>99</sup>

Confidence in the functioning of a specific type of deterrent against all opponents, apart from "madmen," is based on the presumption of opponents' fundamentally similar decision-making frameworks and, correspondingly, the effectiveness of a similar type of deterrence threat. Rational leaders are expected to come to the same basic conclusion: with "assured destruction," the possibility of suffering a retaliatory nuclear attack on societal assets is considered suitable to deter all rational leaderships. Thus, per this presumption, deterrence based on societal threats is universally effective against rational opponents. As noted, this presumption stems from the concept of a near-universal applicability of a "rational actor model" of decision making, which, as applied, assumes that opponents' decision making will follow the predictable pattern and method of decision making that is "rational"—according to a particular interpretation of what constitutes rational calculations.<sup>100</sup> That is, the prospect of intentionally provoking a nuclear attack on one's cities is so analogous to self-annihilation that it would be ludicrous/irrational for any adversary to consciously take such a risk. In short, because no rational person would do so, there can be confidence in the predictability of this approach to deterrence functioning against all but "madmen."

This rational actor model is adapted from the "economic man," or *homo economicus*, model in which decisions are

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<sup>99</sup> Martel, *op. cit.*, pp. 213, 231.

<sup>100</sup> Payne, "Understanding Deterrence," *op. cit.*, p. 3.

based on maximizing one's self-interest,<sup>101</sup> with the presumption of "ideal decision-makers with complete rationality, perfect access to information, and consistent, self-interested goals."<sup>102</sup> Thomas Schelling applied this construct from economics to deterrence theory in his renowned work, *The Strategy of Conflict*. At the outset, he explained that his theory of strategy was based on, "the assumption of rational behavior - not just of intelligent behavior, but of behavior motivated by a conscious calculation of advantages, a calculation that in turn is based on an explicit and internally consistent value system."<sup>103</sup> It is notable that Schelling himself caveated this assumption with the statement that, "whether the resulting theory provides good or poor insight into actual behavior is ... a matter for subsequent judgement."<sup>104</sup> Even in positing a theory based on this presumption of informed rationality and a particular "value system," Schelling recognized that this model, or expectation of behavior, is not necessarily reflective of the reality of decision making. Nevertheless, in his discussion of deterrence outcomes, he clearly presumed a type of common rational thought, and that familiar rational thinking would produce common, predictable behaviors: "You can sit in your armchair and try to predict how people will behave by asking how you would behave

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<sup>101</sup> Michele Bee and Maxime Desmarais-Tremblay. "The Birth of Homo Economicus: The Methodological Debate on the Economic Agent from J.S. Mill to V. Pareto," *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2023), pp. 1-26, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1053837221000535>.

<sup>102</sup> James Chen, "What is Homo Economicus? Definition, Meaning, and Origins." *Investopedia.com*, Updated July 31, 2021, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/h/homoeconomicus.asp>.

<sup>103</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 4.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

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if you had your wits about you. You get, free of charge, a lot of vicarious empirical behavior."<sup>105</sup>

This method of anticipating opponents' behavior suggested by Schelling often is referred to as "mirror imaging," that is, expecting opponents' calculations of behavior to mimic one's own. Many academics and officials, explicitly or implicitly, similarly advanced this expectation that an essentially universal and familiar image of rationality would produce similar deterrence effects regardless of the differences of opposing leaderships' decision-making frameworks.

In sum, the assumption of a generic "rational man" and value system when anticipating opponents' behavior does not demand tailoring because, by assumption, opponents will follow a predictably similar pattern that U.S. observers deem "rational" according to familiar standards.<sup>106</sup> This assumption of common, predictable decision making, based on a particular interpretation of rationality, was an implicit driver of the belief, frequently expressed by U.S. officials and academics during the Cold War, that an "assured destruction" deterrence policy would deter all rational opponents. However, as suggested by Derman and evidenced by numerous historical cases discussed above, apparently rational opponents can engage in a wide range of behaviors in response to U.S. deterrence policies, some of which will confound U.S. expectations, particularly if those expectations are not informed by an effort to understand opponents' decision-making frameworks.

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<sup>105</sup> Quoted in, Kathleen Archibald, et al., *Strategic Interaction and Conflict: Original Papers and Discussion* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of International Relations, University of California, 1966), p. 150; see Payne, *The Great American Gamble*, op. cit., p. 78.

<sup>106</sup> Payne, "Understanding Deterrence," op. cit., p. 3.

## Accepting and Applying Tailoring to U.S. Deterrence Policy

As noted at the outset of this discussion, since its early post-Cold War introduction, “tailoring” has become a well-established element of the U.S. approach to deterrence, on a bipartisan basis; the practical need for tailoring and the conclusion that it is best practice for nuclear deterrence strategy is reflected in various government documents, spanning multiple administrations. For example, the Department of Defense’s 2004 *Strategic Deterrence Joint Operating Concept* (JOC) elaborated on the information needed to support tailoring deterrence.<sup>107</sup>

Subsequently, the 2006 *Deterrence Operations Joint Operating Concept* (DO JOC) produced during George W. Bush’s administration, states that “DOD must develop strategies, plans and operations that are tailored to the perceptions, values, and interests of specific adversaries.”<sup>108</sup> This 2006 JOC recognizes the need for understanding the opponent on multiple fronts and developing deterrence strategies accordingly. It further states that, “effective deterrence results from tailoring and orchestrating available ways and means against a specific adversary’s decision-makers to achieve specific ends in a specific strategic context.”<sup>109</sup> It also discusses the requirements for tailored deterrence. They are dynamic, and it is necessary to

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<sup>107</sup> See, Director, Policy, Resources and Requirements, United States Strategic Command, Offutt Air Force Base, Department of Defense, *Strategic Deterrence Joint Operating Concept*, February 2004, Appendix B. This references Payne’s earlier work in, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age*, op. cit., pp. 126-127.

<sup>108</sup> Department of Defense, *Deterrence Operations: Joint Operating Concept* (DO JOC), Version 2.0 (August 2006), p. 3, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joc\\_deterrence.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joc_deterrence.pdf).

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

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consider the various layers of decision making that may be in play in an opponent's government structure, and the importance of managing uncertainty as best as is possible given some enduring uncertainties in opponent decision making.<sup>110</sup> To this end, the 2006 JOC acknowledges that a balance must be struck between "oversimplifying an adversary's decision calculus and presuming a greater understanding of an adversary's calculus than is realistically achievable."<sup>111</sup> Clearly, uncertainties can follow from the fact that the details of opponents' decision making may not be fully known, and may be purposefully concealed by opponents.

The 2006 JOC includes a generalized five-step method for implementing tailoring that follows the "how to" steps outlined years earlier by Payne in *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*.<sup>112</sup> The steps are as follows: (Step 1) Specify the deterrence objective(s) and strategic context; (Step 2) Assess the decision calculus of adversary decision makers; (Step 3) Identify desired deterrence effects on an adversary's decision calculus; (Step 4) Develop and assess tailored courses of action (COAs) designed to achieve desired deterrence effects; and, (Step 5) Execute deterrence COAs and monitor and assess adversary responses.<sup>113</sup> These steps are likely meant as a general approach to be adapted to specific strategies for particular opponents. This approach shows a clear departure from the "assured destruction" deterrence thinking of the Cold War.

A 2009 report by the National Defense University's Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) reported the need for tailored deterrence. Tailoring is necessary because, "Differences in values, culture, attitudes toward risk-taking, and so on vary greatly. There is no substitute

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*, op. cit., pp. 103-114.

<sup>113</sup> DO JOC, op. cit., pp. 46-48.

for knowledge of the adversary's mindset and behavioral style...." Deterrence requires, "nuanced, tailored strategies appropriate to the specific circumstances."<sup>114</sup>

The Trump Administration's 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) provides a statement describing the need for and purpose of tailoring. The definition states that: "Tailored deterrence strategies are to communicate the costs of aggression to potential adversaries, taking into consideration how they uniquely calculate costs and risks."<sup>115</sup> This indicates that the 2018 NPR affirms that the study of how an adversary calculates costs and risks is a necessary element of deterrence best practice.

The 2018 NPR also suggests that tailoring requires a flexible force posture, with a variety of different nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities. It proposed adding to the then-current nuclear program with two "supplements," specifically focusing on creating non-strategic, low-yield options for deterrence purposes.<sup>116</sup> The 2018 NPR also discusses the merits of the nuclear triad and the tailored deterrence effect that it can provide, stating that, "the triad's synergy and overlapping attributes help ensure the enduring survivability of our deterrence capabilities against attack and our capacity to hold at risk a range of adversary targets throughout a crisis or conflict."<sup>117</sup> The 2018 NPR posits that maintaining a diverse arsenal of weapons, including nuclear and non-nuclear options, bolsters the U.S. ability to respond in a variety of ways to different

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<sup>114</sup> See Robert B. Killebrew, "An International Net Assessment for the Second Nuclear Age," in *America's Security Role in a Changing World* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2009), p. 168.

<sup>115</sup> Department of Defense, 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review*, Executive Summary, "Deterrence of Nuclear and Non-nuclear Attack," p. VIII, <https://fas.org/wp-content/uploads/media/2018-Nuclear-Posture-Review-Version-2.pdf>.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XII.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. X.

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opponents as necessary to best deter based on opponents' particular decision-making calculations. Furthermore, this flexibility is meant to strengthen the credibility of the U.S. capability and apparent willingness to follow through on its deterrence threat strategies.<sup>118</sup>

The 2018 NPR also identifies specific strategies for deterring contemporary threats, with sections briefly discussing tailored deterrence strategies for Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran.<sup>119</sup> These sections provide a short summary of some of the characteristics of these adversaries, with proposed methods for tailoring deterrence to them.<sup>120</sup> This reflects acceptance of the potential need for various deterrence approaches, all of which are tailored to an understanding of the specific adversary.

The Defense Department's subsequent 2020 *Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States* repeats these points, specifying the need for tailoring deterrence and its implications for U.S. force requirements: "...tailored deterrence strategies – unique to each potential adversary – are now necessary to reduce the chance of misperception while clearly and credibly communicating U.S. intentions and capabilities.... Consequently, the United States will apply a tailored approach to effectively deter across a spectrum of adversaries....To meet the requirements, the United States will field nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities that provide U.S. leadership a range of tailored response options to deter escalation and accomplish U.S. objectives if deterrence fails."<sup>121</sup>

Although the 2018 NPR and 2020 *Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy* were produced under a Republican

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., pp. 30-33.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Department of Defense, *Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States*, Specified in Section 491(a) of Title 10 U.S.C., November 30, 2020, p. 4.

administration, there is bipartisan support for tailoring. The 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, completed during the Joseph Biden Administration, also specifically identified tailoring as a vital component of the U.S. approach to deterrence: “We will deter through safe, secure, and effective nuclear forces that enable country-specific strategies and plans... tailored to specific threat scenarios.”<sup>122</sup> Despite some differences in priorities and terminology, tailoring clearly is recognized as needed for deterrence strategy by both major U.S. political parties.

The 2022 NPR presents tailoring in conjunction with the term *integrated deterrence*, which is defined as “working seamlessly across warfighting domains, theaters, the spectrum of conflict, all instruments of U.S. national power, and our network of Alliances and partnerships.”<sup>123</sup> It states that when “tailored to specific circumstances,” this approach would “reduc[e] competitors’ perceptions of the net benefits of aggression relative to restraint.”<sup>124</sup> The 2022 NPR also includes a section entitled “tailored deterrence approaches,” stating that, “coordinating and applying deterrence logics to maximum effect requires tailoring for specific problems, competitors, and settings.” It further couples integrated deterrence with tailoring by noting that one of the key goals of integrated deterrence is to “develop tailored options that will shape adversary perceptions of benefits and costs.”<sup>125</sup> The 2022 NPR remains committed to modernizing the U.S. nuclear program,<sup>126</sup> with continued reliance on the nuclear triad for effective deterrence.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR), 2022, p. 9, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.pdf>.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

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Although “tailoring” is introduced in conjunction with “integrated deterrence,” a term which was not used in the 2018 NPR, its meaning is not changed.

The 2023 report of the bipartisan Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States identifies tailoring as one of the foundational tenets of U.S. nuclear deterrence strategy,<sup>128</sup> and says that tailoring must consider specific characteristics such as opponents’ goals, values, capabilities and vulnerabilities.<sup>129</sup> The Commission’s report describes tailoring as accounting for “the unique aspects of each potential adversary’s decision calculus,”<sup>130</sup> and further states that, “at its most fundamental level, tailored deterrence holds at risk what each adversary values most.”<sup>131</sup> Repeating Payne’s early post-Cold War discussions of tailoring, this statement indicates that tailoring requires an assessment of what each adversary values most, rather than a blanket assumption that all share similar perceptions, values, and reasoning, or that threatening societal assets can be a generally effective approach to deterrence vis-à-vis all rational opponents.

These documents, the 2004 and 2006 JOCs, the 2009 INSS study, the 2020 *Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States*, the 2018 and 2022 NPRs, and the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission’s report, all reflect the wide acceptance of tailoring. They demonstrate that tailoring has been adopted by different administrations on a bipartisan basis and is included in key military and congressional reports. Although the “assured destruction”

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<sup>128</sup> Madelyn R. Creedon, Jon L. Kyl, et al., *The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, October 2023, <https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/a/am/americas-strategic-posture/strategic-posture-commission-report.ashx>.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

approach was espoused by McNamara during the Cold War, and is promoted by some still, tailoring is a well-established requirement for U.S. deterrence strategies, as is the associated need for flexible capabilities to support tailoring.

A tailored deterrence approach calls for the ability to employ a variety of deterrent threats flexibly. The variability of opponents' perceptions and decision-making frameworks mandates the U.S. ability to deter in a variety of ways to provide the greatest opportunity for effective deterrence. This flexibility pairs well with tailoring because it is intended to help provide Washington with a range of means to deter a spectrum of opponents given the potential variability in their decision making, value systems, perceptions, and calculations of risk, cost and benefit. Recognizing that not all opponents will respond to deterrence threats in the same way and from a similar decision-making framework, leads logically to the demand for the flexible means necessary to deter in a variety of ways to provide the greatest opportunity for deterrence to "work." Specifically, a tailored approach to deterrence provides the fundamental rationale for a diverse arsenal, with both nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities, as a means for deterring multiple opponents simultaneously, including the flexibility of the nuclear triad and regional nuclear capabilities.

For example, the 2018 NPR says, "the triad's synergy and overlapping attributes help ensure the enduring survivability of our deterrence capabilities against attack and our capacity to hold at risk a range of adversary targets throughout a crisis or conflict."<sup>132</sup> Earlier, in 2015, Gen. C. Robert Kehler (Ret.), former Commander at U.S. Strategic Command, presented congressional testimony that explicitly made the connection between tailoring deterrence

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<sup>132</sup> *Nuclear Posture Review*, 2018, op. cit., p. X.

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and force posture requirements, i.e., that tailoring demands a range of supporting capabilities: “In my view, dealing with today’s varied threats from actors with widely different capabilities and motivations requires the flexible application of a range of capabilities within strategies and plans that are tailored to specific adversaries and scenarios.”<sup>133</sup>

## Conclusion

Tailoring deterrence requires developing an understanding of opponents’ unique characteristics, including their decision-making frameworks in the context of the engagement. The unique characteristics that inform decision making can follow from a wide variety of possible factors, including religion, ideology, culture, geopolitical goals, perceptions of risk, and expected costs and benefits. Historical case studies demonstrate the variation in the factors that can drive opponents’ decision making in a range of ways, with differing consequent behavior patterns. For example, during World War II, Japan was driven to risk destruction and initiated an attack on Pearl Harbor based, in part, on the belief that the possibility of defeat was preferable to the humiliation of passive submission to the United States. Similarly, during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, Cuban leaders apparently pushed Moscow to attack the United States to advance socialism, despite the acknowledged, strong possibility of Cuba’s destruction, and, in August 1945, even after the two U.S. atomic attacks on Japan, Japanese War Minister Korechika Anami sought to continue the war as a matter of honor despite the recognized risk of Japan’s destruction.

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<sup>133</sup> See, *Statement of C. Robert Kehler, United States Air Force (Retired), Before the House Armed Services Subcommittee On Strategic Forces, December 8, 2015, p. 3.*

Tailoring has become an accepted principle of U.S. deterrence policy. It is an alternative to deterrence based on a generic “rational actor model” of decision making which assumes that all rational opponents ultimately will calculate similarly and can be deterred similarly. The “assured destruction” approach to U.S. deterrence policy, advocated publicly by McNamara and other leaders during the 1960s and 1970s, reflected this particular rational actor assumption regarding the Soviet leadership and more broadly. Although some academic commentators still assert that “assured destruction” is a useful approach to deterrence, it has long been rejected in numerous U.S. policy documents, on a bipartisan basis, in favor of tailoring. These reports consistently refer to the need for tailoring and for maintaining deterrence force capabilities that are sufficiently flexible to provide the spectrum of deterrent threats that may be needed given opponents’ unique characteristics and decision-making frameworks.

No approach to deterrence is foolproof because opponents’ decision making will always include some elements of uncertainty. Nevertheless, tailoring, as opposed to presuming opponents’ generic rationality and behavior patterns, can reduce those uncertainties and provide a potentially more reliable approach to deterrence.

## *About the Author*

Sarah Faris graduated with a JD from Michigan State University College of Law, where she was a senior associate editor on the *International Law Review* and interned with the U.S. Army JAG Corps at Fort Carson. She subsequently passed the Michigan Bar exam and is now a member of the Michigan and Washington, D.C. Bars. She most recently served as an Attorney-Advisor at the Department of Veterans Affairs, and currently is a graduate student at Missouri State University, School of Defense and Strategic Studies.



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