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Critical Strategic Deterrence Questions for Today – Lecture at the U.S. Air Force Academy’s 66th Annual Assembly

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Introduction

I have been asked to discuss key emerging strategic issues this morning. We confront multiple important strategic questions; and some are new. But my general opening point is that long-familiar, fundamental deterrence questions must now be readdressed in a threat context that has worsened dramatically. What is old is new again. Given the time available, I will limit my opening remarks to four of these issues. However, before I discuss these four issues, there is an important comment that supercedes everything else we consider about deterrence and strategic forces.

Preliminary Deterrence Questions

In 1832, Prussian General Carl Von Clausewitz said that, “Everything about war is very simple. But the simplest thing is difficult.” Exactly the same is true of deterrence. Deterrence seems simple because its basic principles can easily be understood. Consequently, deterrence discussions often move immediately to questions of force posture and employment doctrines.



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 657 | April 13, 2026

But deterrence ultimately is not simple, and questions of force posture are not first in importance. There are numerous prior questions that must be addressed. These include:

- Do you know whom you are deterring – not just the country’s name, but the specific leaders to be deterred? Do you know their motivations and goals, and what they care most about?
- Do you know what to hold at risk to best deter whomever it is that you hope to deter, and how to do so?
- On what basis do you think you know what to hold at risk?
- Do you know how to communicate with whomever you hope to deter?
- Does the opponent understand your redlines? How do you know?
- What deterrence threats will the opponent actually find believable, and under what conditions? How do you know?
- Does the target of your deterrent threats have the pragmatism (and decision space) to be deterred given your redlines? Or, does the opponent believe it must violate your redlines for many possible reasons despite your threat?

There are several additional such questions regarding deterrence that precede force posture discussions. The consideration of force posture requirements should follow, and be informed by, answers to these types of questions. Without at least some understanding of these issues, deterrence threats may still “work” as you hope, but they will do so as much by luck as by smart planning.

Unfortunately, given the many difficult questions about the opponent and context that must be addressed, deterrence always involves uncertainties, and projections about its functioning must be caveated. Unless you understand opponents and the context very well, the deterrent effect of a specific force posture characteristic cannot be predicted with confidence. Claims about whether a force posture element is “stabilizing” or “destabilizing” should be made with great humility.

Yet, in our debates about deterrence, confident claims about “stability” are ubiquitous. More often than not, these claims reflect hubris, not careful analyses, and must be taken with considerable skepticism. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard supposed experts claim without caveat and as a general truth, that missile defense or MIRVed missiles are “destabilizing.” In truth, such conclusions cannot be offered with any certainty, and should not even be suggested absent a detailed understanding of the opponents and the context – which rarely accompanies such claims.

Planning credible nuclear deterrence is as complex as I have just outlined. The problem with this reality is that deterrence is too important to rely on good fortune. As former Strategic Command Commander ADM Charles Richard has rightly said, everything we plan is based on the assumption that nuclear deterrence will work as we hope. If it fails, everything else is problematic. We must try our best to make it work without failure. That is why three generations of scholars have devoted their lives to the goal of making nuclear deterrence work



reliably. We cannot know with confidence that our efforts have made deterrence consistently work as we have intended, but at least we can say that nuclear deterrence has not failed catastrophically. As students of this subject, it will soon be your challenge and responsibility to do no worse, and perhaps even better than your predecessors.

With that necessary introduction, let me present what I believe to be four critical contemporary deterrence issues that must be reconsidered in light of the worsened threat context.

Four Familiar Deterrence Issues in a New Threat Context

1) *What Constitutes an Adequate Deterrence Threat Now?*

First, consider the definition of deterrence and the implications of that definition for U.S. force posture adequacy. This is an old debate in a new threat context. With two peer nuclear opponents, and an *increasing* number of targets to hold at risk for deterrence purposes, the question is: Do we expand nuclear forces beyond current plans to meet existing deterrence requirements (as called for by the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* and 2023 Strategic Posture Commission Report), or do we instead return to a past approach to deterrence that can be met with fewer forces?

This debate often is simplified as being between two different approaches to deterrence. One emphasizes holding at risk a limited number of opponents' societal centers; I call this easy deterrence. The other emphasizes holding at risk opponents' defended military and political targets, while *avoiding* intentionally targeting opponents' societal centers. I call this difficult deterrence.

The advantage of the first option, easy deterrence, is the reduced nuclear force requirements and the associated financial savings. The advantage of the second option, difficult deterrence, is that it may provide more credible deterrent effect, and a greater range of targeting options for tailoring and hedging deterrence. The history of U.S. policy regarding this issue is important.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, *declared* U.S. policy was oriented toward the easy approach to deterrence that focused on threatening Soviet population and industry. But, by the early-1970s, on a bipartisan basis, the United States started moving toward the more difficult approach to deterrence for multiple reasons, particularly to preserve the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence threats.

The question today is whether those reasons for moving toward difficult deterrence are more or less applicable in today's threat environment. I believe they are now more applicable, but this is a worthy question for your consideration.



2) *What Is the Value and Role of Missile Defense Now?*

My second question set also is well worn: What is the role of strategic missile defense? How much is enough and for what purposes?

Criticism now of the new Golden Dome missile defense program typically repeats the three arguments from the 1960s: Strategic missile defense cannot work; is too expensive; and, is destabilizing. Those policy arguments were decisive during Cold War decades, until the George W. Bush administration decided in 2002 to deploy missile defense systems. The invaluable results of that decision have now been on full display on multiple occasions in the Middle East.

In fact, whether missile defense can work, and its value, almost certainly depend on the threat context, the prospects for deterrence success, and what it means “to work.” And, the relationship between missile defense and stability is that missile defense is likely to be stabilizing in key contexts, and destabilizing in others; more definitive assertions simply are little more than guesses absent an understanding of the opponents and contexts. The missile defense question for us today is whether its potential value and stabilizing effects outweigh its potential costs given contemporary threat contexts and opponents. I believe that strategic missile defense can now contribute significantly to deterrence working and to U.S. societal resilience if deterrence fails, but this is, once again, a very familiar question asked in a new context.

Another related issue regarding missile defense is how much of the defensive goal should be assigned to “left-of-launch” strikes rather than to active defenses. We are seeing this issue play out in the Middle East now, as we did during the 12-Day War. How we answer that question now will shape requirements for strike forces and missile defense.

3) *Why Nuclear Proliferation Now?*

My third question concerns nuclear proliferation—even if the subject seems out of fashion. This, again, is an old issue in a new threat context. For example, Japan, South Korea, Poland, and even Germany, now openly discuss the question of having nuclear capabilities independently of Washington. This is shocking to many in Washington, but the reasons are fairly clear. These countries see unprecedented, even existential threats; for more than a decade they have been increasingly skeptical of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent. In short, they rightly feel severely threatened, and are not fully assured, so they appear to be considering new options—potentially including nuclear.

While some neo-isolationists now suggest that selected nuclear proliferation would be a good thing for the United States, I believe a nuclear proliferation cascade, set in motion by allied decisions to proliferate, could be extremely dangerous.

A key difference now from the past is that it is clear that proliferation is motivated, at least in part, by fears that U.S. theater nuclear capabilities for extended deterrence are too few and limited. In the past, the general line in Washington was that if only the United States would



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 657 | April 13, 2026

take the lead in reducing its nuclear forces and their role in strategy, then other countries would do the same and move away from nuclear weapons. The continuing reduction of U.S. nuclear capabilities was thought to be a key to non-proliferation success. The frequent quip was that, “a drunk cannot advocate for abstinence.” So, it was thought, the United States must move toward nuclear abstinence to promote non-proliferation.

Yet it is now clear that opponents did not follow the U.S. lead, and allies are increasingly willing to consider independent nuclear capabilities not because of U.S. nuclear weapons, but because they fear the inadequacy of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent. Numerous allied officials have said that if they lose confidence in the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent, they will need their own option. Germany, for example, signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty with essentially this caveat.

In short, it is not the existence of U.S. nuclear forces that now drives allied interest in proliferation, but their doubts about the credibility and capacity of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent. What that means for U.S. non-proliferation policy and force requirements is a critical question. But we now know that U.S. withdrawal from nuclear weapons and deterrence is a route to proliferation, not non-proliferation.

4) Requirements for Extended Deterrence Now?

My related fourth and final question again is not new, but asked in a new threat context. This question concerns the requirements for extended nuclear deterrence and the assurance of allies in a much more severe threat context.

Discussions of deterrence and assurance often neglect that the twin goals of deterring opponents and assuring allies involve two separate audiences that must be addressed differently and simultaneously. The specific requirements for assurance may be relatively easily understood given key allies’ obvious willingness to voice their fears and concerns.

But, the requirements for deterring Russia, China and North Korea must be shaped by answers to those difficult questions I presented at the outset of my remarks. Consequently, deterrence requirements are inherently more speculative given the simple fact that opponents do not broadcast what would deter them, and often instead seek to deny Washington that knowledge. Deterrence requirements are discerned much more by inference and involve inherent uncertainties.

The challenge now is to identify, and not conflate, the various different U.S. moves needed to assure allies and deter opponents simultaneously. Our deterrence efforts may not assure, and our assurance efforts may not deter. We need to understand the differences and what they mean for U.S. efforts to pursue these twin goals in this new threat context.

There are numerous additional strategic issues confronting us. But, the four issues I have briefly reviewed this morning involve fundamental questions that must be addressed anew in today’s severe threat context.



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 657 | April 13, 2026

Conclusion

My closing thought is one I inflict on my doctoral students. That is, to understand and comment on contemporary strategic issues in an informed manner, you must take the time needed to read and understand past key policy and strategy documents. While few appear to do this, you can study what U.S. strategic thinking and policy truly have been and not rely on journalistic interpretations, which typically are incomplete at best, and often worse than just incomplete. You can learn how and, equally important, why U.S. strategic thinking and policy have evolved as they have.

To do so, most of the documents needed are easily available to you, including Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's annual Draft Presidential Memorandum (DPMs), National Security Study Memoranda-169, National Security Decision Memoranda-242, NUWEP-74, Presidential Directive-59, the Scowcroft Commission Report, and a series of *Nuclear Posture Reviews*. Students of today stand on the shoulders of those who did this past work – do not neglect what they have given you.

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