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In the Eye of the Beholder: Deterrence Gaps, Real or Imagined?

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Introduction

Are deterrence gaps real or imagined? Does Russia's 10-to-1 numeric advantage in theater nuclear weapons over the United States threaten to weaken deterrence in Europe? What about in East Asia, where China maintains hundreds of theater-range dual-capable delivery systems and the United States stations none?

These ontological questions have a long-running history that trace back to debates over U.S. nuclear force posture during the Cold War.[1] Back then, American defense analysts debated whether unfavorable gaps in missile quantity,[2] size,[3] and range[4] weakened deterrence with the Soviet Union. Today, they debate everything from targeting gaps to theater gaps between the United States, on one side, and Russia and China, on the other. Indeed, one analyst recently went so far as to reject the existence of a deterrence gap in the aforementioned European and East Asian theaters.[5] And in some respects, critics of the whole idea have a point: To say there is a veritable gap in certain categories of weaponry may leave the impression that analysts know *precisely* what deters. It could imply that if the United States closes the theater gap in Europe and Asia, then problem solved. No gap? No threat of theater nuclear use.

This of course is not the case, however. Analysts can never know precisely what deters because deterrence cannot be readily quantified or reduced to matching the adversary weapon for weapon, capability for capability. Nor can analysts have a complete picture of what matters most: the political calculus of the deterrence target. In October 1973, for instance, an overmatched Egypt went to war with a superior Israeli military not to take the Sinai Peninsula

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by force but to convince Washington to break the deadlocked negotiations over that disputed territory. Launching a war—not winning a decisive battlefield victory—constituted the military means to Cairo's limited political ends.[6] In this sense, then, there was no conceivable gap favoring a nuclear-armed Israel that could have deterred a non-nuclear Egypt.

But while the concept of a deterrence gap may have its analytical limits, proposals to redress today's asymmetry in theater nuclear forces do not. To understand this seeming contradiction, it is important to recognize what critics past and present have ignored: that U.S. nuclear deterrence depends as much on adversary and allied perceptions of the nuclear balance as it does on American perceptions.[7] U.S. nuclear force posture, after all, is neither structured to deter the United States nor lend assurance to U.S. officials alone. Rather, it is structured to deter adversaries and lend assurance to allies by exhibiting those qualities that receive high ratings in their peculiar national assessments. As U.S. officials came to understand in the second half of the Cold War, a failure to structure nuclear forces accordingly could undermine the U.S. alliance system over the long run.

American defense analysts need not "scour" the strategic environment for "chinks in the armor of deterrence" to justify new nuclear programs.[8] They simply need to pay attention to what allies say and what adversaries do. Washington learned this lesson through great trial and tribulation during the Cold War, and it would behoove policymakers today to harness their forerunners' hard-earned experience.

It is thus worth examining the history of U.S. extended deterrence from the late 1950s to the present. Asymmetries in theater nuclear forces matter today for the same reason they did throughout the Cold War: They matter to those that the United States aims to deter and assure.

Back to the Cold War Past

Handwringing about nuclear gaps certainly has a long history in the United States, but it was not always as tortured as some suggest.[9] To be sure, prior to the revolution in overhead reconnaissance in the 1960s, there was a great deal of anxiety about nonexistent bomber and missile gaps in the 1950s.[10] Influential voices in Congress accused President Dwight Eisenhower of ceding the Soviets a vast advantage in intercontinental ballistic missiles. And the U.S. Air Force, in turn, harnessed these accusations to request some 2,300 ICBMs at a time when the Soviets lacked a reliable operational capability of their own.[11]

Then in the 1970s and 1980s, talk of a "window of vulnerability," in which the Soviets could disarm the U.S. ICBM fleet in a first strike and then blackmail Washington with follow-on threats, was certainly overblown. Team B, a panel of outside experts appointed by the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board in 1976, did in fact overrate the Soviet technical capability to conduct a disarming first strike while downplaying America's own offsetting capabilities. As the following sections demonstrate, however, it is important to note that, while Team B incorrectly assessed some Soviet technical *capabilities*, the outside panel of experts correctly assessed Soviet strategic *intentions*.[12] The accuracy of Soviet SS-18 and SS-19 ICBMs, for example, ultimately fell short of Team B's estimate, as did the inventory and range

of the Soviet Backfire bomber fleet.[13] As a joint net assessment conducted by the Central Intelligence Agency and Office of Net Assessment concluded in November 1983, "The strategic nuclear balance is probably adequate to deter a direct nuclear attack on the United States and a major attack on Europe." The Soviets, the joint assessment continued, likely perceive favorable asymmetries in the nuclear balance, but they "do not see their advantage as being as great as we would assess." Nevertheless, the CIA/ONA study still found good reason for concern: "The shift in the strategic balance over the last 15 to 20 years," it warned, "has made the Soviets more willing to try to coerce the Europeans and try to split them from the United States."[14]

History thus bears out that the voices of undue alarm in the Cold War were checked by more cautious assessments. Eisenhower held at bay the Air Force's most extravagant demands, and his program for an ICBM buildup was comparatively measured.[15] And in the 1970s, defense secretaries on a bipartisan basis—like James Schlesinger and Harold Brown—downplayed claims that the United States lay vulnerable to a disarming first strike.[16] Though Schlesinger was certainly concerned that the Soviets would be able to hold a larger portion of the U.S. ICBM fleet at risk by the mid-1980s, he nevertheless prioritized the development of the highly accurate Peacekeeper ICBM that could strike *first* and thereby limit damage to the U.S. homeland. He also seeded money for an extended-range theater ballistic missile that could range the western Soviet military districts directly from NATO-Europe.[17] Brown, in turn, advanced Schlesinger's nuclear modernization program and handed it off for the Ronald Reagan Administration to run with in the 1980s.[18]

Although President Reagan depicted the 1970s as the "decade of neglect," in which the Pentagon had ceded the Soviets a position of strategic superiority,[19] it is more accurate to say that Schlesinger and Brown chose to focus not on hyperbolic fears but on modernizing U.S. nuclear forces for the long haul. Their quiet and painstaking work ironically laid the groundwork for Reagan to offset the Soviet SS-18 and SS-19 ICBMs and to neutralize the Soviet theater nuclear advantage by deploying extended-range theater missiles. And, as the following sections demonstrate, it was Schlesinger and Brown's highly accurate theater ballistic missile that ultimately thwarted the Soviet bid to split NATO-Europe from the United States.[20]

Perceptions of Theater Asymmetries in an Era of US Strategic Superiority

In growing the ICBM fleet for the 1960s and modernizing theater forces for the 1980s, neither Eisenhower nor Schlesinger nor Brown were contriving imaginary deterrence gaps into existence. They simply understood that the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella depended on non-American perceptions of the nuclear balance.

Consider the Federal Republic of Germany, one of America's most important Cold War allies. Following the Soviet launching of Sputnik in 1957, West German officials fretted about the wisdom of relying on the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Sputnik for them meant that the Soviets now had it within their grasp to hold the U.S. homeland hostage with ICBMs. This raised alarm

bells across Western Europe that the Kremlin might wield its emerging capability to isolate U.S. nuclear forces from NATO-Europe and make the continent safe for conventional war.[21]

Worse yet, Eisenhower officials began to sense a palpable anxiety among Europeans "that the US may gradually withdraw" from the continent or "enter bilateral negotiations with the USSR" at NATO's expense.[22] The prospect of American abandonment was especially unnerving for a frontline ally like West Germany, which lived next door to a massive concentration of Soviet conventional forces that outnumbered NATO's own. Even after it became clear that the Americans—not the Soviets—would enjoy strategic nuclear superiority well into the 1960s, West German officials continued to pay close attention to changes in the nuclear balance they perceived as damaging to U.S. extended deterrence.[23]

The West Germans were especially attentive to emerging asymmetries in the theater nuclear balance, where the Soviets enjoyed a clear numerical advantage in medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles (M/IRBMs). Through the 1960s, Bonn routinely expressed concern about America's ability to hold at risk Soviet theater missiles and, should deterrence fail, limit damage to West Germany by destroying them.[24] Yet West German priorities ultimately ran up against the John F. Kennedy Administration's determination to build out a conventional force that could stymie a Soviet armored assault without resort to nuclear weapons.[25] Kennedy officials urged Bonn to forget about developing theater missiles and "face up to immediate tasks" like growing conventional forces to meet the Soviet tank armies that dwarfed their own. In a meeting with NATO Secretary General Dirk Stikker in June 1961, Kennedy himself depicted the development of a modern theater missile force as a "fairly distant" problem.[26]

Bonn nevertheless remained attached to its perception of the Soviet threat. It continued to press for assurances that Washington assigned the "same priority" to deterring theater nuclear attacks on Europe as to strategic attacks on America.[27] As Defense Minister Franz Josef Strauss relayed to his American counterpart Robert McNamara in December 1961, West Germans "want to be assured of effective coverage of Soviet MRBMs in a way which formed a credible deterrent."[28] And through most of the 1960s, extending that assurance to Bonn demanded of Washington no major adjustment in theater capability; at that time, America's strategic superiority lent just enough residual coverage of Soviet MRBMs to impress the Germans.

Perceptions of Theater Asymmetries in an Era of Strategic Parity

Soon enough, however, a shift in the strategic nuclear balance gave new life to old fears. In the mid-1970s, Bonn's cautious faith in Washington eroded as the Soviets erased America's strategic superiority and upgraded their theater forces by deploying a more advanced IRBM. The Soviet SS-20 ballistic missile, introduced in 1976, placed every port, air base, and command-and-control center in NATO-Europe at risk for the first time. The following year no less than Helmut Schmidt, the West German Chancellor, warned in a public address that the deployment of the SS-20 and the end of U.S. superiority "magnifies the significance of disparities … in tactical and conventional weapons."[29] Schmidt thus raised in public what West

German officials had, up until that point, raised only in private with their American counterparts: the fear that Europe now fell outside the U.S. nuclear umbrella, leaving Bonn exposed to the coercive power of Soviet tank armies shielded by the SS-20.

The West Germans had good cause for concern. The Soviets, too, weighed carefully changes in the nuclear balance, and they ultimately saw an opportunity to translate the disparity in theater nuclear and conventional forces into political leverage and military advantage. As one Soviet official boasted years later, the SS-20 represented "a breakthrough, unlike anything the Americans had. We were immediately able to hold all of Europe hostage."[30] Soviet military planners even came to believe that the SS-20 provided a "roof" under which they could win a conventional war in Europe while deterring NATO's nuclear forces.[31] They initially planned for an armored blitz all the way to the English Channel "based on the fact that [Soviet conventional] forces greatly outnumbered the forces of NATO." And though their wartime ambitions were ultimately scaled back in the early 1980s, the Soviet general staff still exuded confidence in successfully waging a conventional war for more limited objectives. As one Soviet planner stated bluntly, "We thought it was realistic to achieve victory in Europe using our strategic advantages."[32]

As for the peacetime competition, the Soviets believed their asymmetric theater advantage "allowed political pressure to be brought to bear" on Western Europe.[33] And this pressure, they hoped, would gradually unravel transatlantic ties between the United States and NATO-Europe. Due to widespread public opposition in the West to deployments of theater-range missiles,[34] the Soviets did not anticipate an offsetting U.S. counter-deployment that would restore European trust in Washington.[35] Thus, while Team B certainly overrated some Soviet technical *capabilities*, it was far closer to the mark regarding the Soviet *intention* to lock in a decisive advantage by exploiting chinks in the armor of America's deterrence. And this explains why the CIA/ONA assessment warned, in 1983, that "[Soviet] policy is paying off; there has been an edging of many Europeans toward a position of neutrality, coincident with the buildup of Soviet strategic forces and of other Soviet forces focused directly against NATO."[36]

Thus, until Washington could muster the political will to restore NATO's cohesion with an offsetting theater deployment, the transatlantic alliance found itself mired in an existential crisis over America's credibility. The first attempt to reextend the U.S. nuclear umbrella over Western Europe backfired dramatically in 1978, when President Jimmy Carter rescinded his promise to deploy the Enhanced Radiation Weapon to West Germany. Thereafter, NATO fell into a tailspin that nearly tore the alliance apart,[37] and it leveled out only after Reagan closed the transatlantic gap with Schlesinger and Brown's theater-range missiles in the mid-1980s.[38]

Even then, however, the resolution of the Euromissile Crisis succeeded only in channeling the nuclear competition into new areas. After the Soviets agreed to remove the SS-20 from the field in 1987, NATO was left to grapple with the Soviets' shorter-range nuclear forces that outnumbered its own and remained uncontrolled. If not for the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, NATO surely would have found itself mired in another heated debate pitting those—like Great Britain—who favored rapid modernization of short-range nuclear forces against those—

like West Germany—who favored a more gradual process.[39] Even among allies, then, there was no one-size-fits-all approach to deterrence. Rather than a uniform perception of the nuclear balance, NATO was buffeted by clashing national perceptions, each shaped by distinctive geographies, political circumstances, and historical experience.

As the Cold War historian Hal Brands concludes, "The military balance mattered in reality precisely because it mattered in the minds of policymakers."[40] Deterrence was not a self-regulating system for the United States. The changing character of the nuclear balance—its slowly evolving asymmetries—called for periodic adjustments tailored to ally and adversary perceptions. And the sensitivity of allies to emerging asymmetries was arguably the greatest driver of those adjustments. As British defense minister Denis Healey famously observed in 1969, just as U.S. strategic superiority was coming to an end, "It takes only five percent credibility of American retaliation to deter the Russians, but ninety-five percent to reassure the Europeans."[41]

Today, U.S. officials would do well to remember Healey's theorem. The dilemmas of the Cold War past endure in our Cold War present. As the enduring counterweight to nuclear-backed coercion across the Eurasian rimland, Washington finds itself in another situation where asymmetries in the nuclear balance demand a periodic adjustment in force posture.

Back to the Cold War Present

Many of the basic ingredients of the 1970s Euromissile Crisis are present today. A shift in the strategic nuclear balance has raised doubt among allies about the U.S. nuclear umbrella. An unfavorable asymmetry in the theater nuclear balance has intensified those doubts. And adversary coercive strategies are attempting to exploit those asymmetries to split the United States from vulnerable allies along the Eurasian rimland. To understand these very real dynamics and their implications for U.S. extended deterrence, one need only account for non-American perceptions of the eroding security environment.

Perceptions of a Shifting Strategic Balance

China's relentless buildup of strategic nuclear arms looks set to transform Beijing from a "lesser included" threat into a full-fledged nuclear peer of the United States. By 2035, Beijing will have matched the roughly 1,500 warheads that Moscow and Washington deploy across their respective strategic forces. Worse yet, several hundred of China's new warheads will arm hundreds of new ICBM silos that Beijing has laid down in its northern and northwestern desert. It is these blast-hardened silos that place upward pressure on US nuclear posture, as America's strategic force has long been structured to hold at risk the ICBMs of just one nuclear peer—not Russia's *and* China's simultaneously. A shift in the strategic balance is thus underway that calls into question America's ability to threaten adversary ICBMs and, if deterrence fails, limit damage to the U.S. homeland by destroying those missiles before launch.

Allies like Japan have taken note of this discernible shift in the strategic balance and are eager to see how Washington responds. Japanese officials frame the emerging security environment in terms of the "stability-instability paradox," in which China's strategic nuclear buildup has neutralized America's strategic forces and lowered the threshold for conventional aggression in East Asia.[42] Now that China's sprint to peer nuclear status is stretching America's targeting coverage to the limit, they fear Washington might fold up its nuclear umbrella and leave Japan at the mercy of China's growing conventional forces.[43]

That Beijing has reversed or cut into America's longstanding conventional dominance in East Asia only heightens Tokyo's fear of abandonment. As one Japanese defense expert warns, the erosion of the nuclear and conventional balance "may have changed the strategic game in the region."[44] Others in Tokyo are therefore watching closely to see whether Washington loads additional warheads onto its strategic nuclear forces—enhancing its ability to limit damage to the U.S. homeland and thereby increasing the prospect that America comes to Japan's defense in a conventional fight.[45]

But if allies believe the strategic game has changed, they fear it will ultimately be lost in the theater nuclear balance. At both ends of Eurasia, U.S. allies live in the shadow of Russian and Chinese theater nuclear forces that vastly outnumber America's. And like the Soviet SS-20 before them, some of these adversary forces can range the full depth of allied territory while sparing the U.S. homeland of catastrophic damage. Allies in Europe and Asia are thus concerned that a shifting strategic balance will leave them isolated and exposed to nuclear-backed coercion.

Perceptions of Theater Asymmetries at Both Ends of Eurasia

Since China's buildup threatens to neutralize "the US nuclear umbrella at the strategic level," Japanese officials have suggested Washington open up "a nuclear umbrella at the theater level" via a low-yield, nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N).[46] They perceive a "gap" in theater-range strike forces, as Beijing can field several hundred dual-capable missiles but Washington presently deploys none within the region.[47] They fear that Chinese IRBMs will hold farther-flung U.S. military bases hostage, even as Chinese MRBMs simultaneously bring coercive pressure to bear on Japan. With the erosion of the conventional balance and Tokyo's lack of strategic depth, Japanese officials are thus eager for Washington to fill the theater gap. And given that training manuals for China's missile forces have instructed that simply demonstrating their readiness can "create a great shock in the enemy psyche," offsetting American theater deployments like SLCM-N would help Tokyo withstand China's psychological pressure.[48]

These Japanese perceptions, moreover, track broadly with those in Europe, where countries bordering Russia are acutely aware of disparities in theater nuclear and local conventional forces. European anxiety about the theater imbalance is further aggravated by Russian doctrine, which stipulates that the coercive utility of nuclear weapons spans all phases of competition. Whether in peacetime or wartime, the Russian way of "strategic deterrence" aims

to both dissuade NATO from making certain moves *and* to compel a change in its behavior.[49] As a recent report of the European Nuclear Study Group points out, Russia has wielded its nuclear forces to sow divisions within NATO and coerce Ukraine into capitulating. And in a direct conventional fight with the transatlantic alliance, the study group warns that Moscow "could exploit its regional advantages, seize limited NATO territory, and shield its gains with threats of limited nuclear use."[50]

To grasp the degree to which the specter of nuclear-backed aggression weighs on NATO-Europe, consider recent decisions taken by some of its most vulnerable members. Poland has purchased F-35A strike aircraft that can be certified to carry U.S.-controlled nuclear weapons, and Warsaw has lobbied Washington for years to extend that certification to its pilots. Lithuania has reportedly joined Poland in discussions on nuclear-capable assets deploying to the Baltic.[51] And Finland, for its part, has undergone a remarkable transformation from a non-NATO partner with a longstanding nuclear weapons ban to a full-fledged NATO member ready to accept U.S. nuclear weapons in a crisis. Indeed, following Russia's nuclear saber rattling in Ukraine, President Alexander Stubb explained his country's decision to join NATO simply: "I would start from the premise that we in Finland must have a real nuclear deterrent."[52]

To be sure, the disdain that some in the Donald Trump Administration harbor for America's allies—particularly those in Europe—has negatively impacted transatlantic and transpacific relations. But concerns among allies about asymmetries in the theater nuclear balance ultimately predate the Trump Administration. Indeed, they are longstanding in some cases. Tokyo first expressed its anxiety in 2010 when the Barack Obama Administration retired the sea-launched Tomahawk Land Attack Missile-Nuclear. And in the intervening years, Japan's anxiety has only grown, spread to South Korea, and—since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine—enveloped frontline countries in NATO-Europe.

Thus, if the Trump Administration aspires to shore up America's extended deterrence, it will have to adjust U.S. nuclear force posture to account for the peculiar perceptions of ally and adversary alike. But adjustments of what kind, exactly?

Conclusion: Toward a Modern Theater Nuclear Deterrent

It has been said that deterrence lies in the eye of the beholder.[53] The same can be said of deterrence gaps. As the history of U.S. extended deterrence underscores, allies and adversaries will abide by their own distinctive perceptions of the nuclear balance. And since it is these countries that Washington aims to deter and assure, their perceptions invariably bear on the size and composition of U.S. nuclear force posture.

At both ends of Eurasia, allies are increasingly concerned about the U.S. nuclear umbrella. China and Russia, meanwhile, are determined to brandish their asymmetric theater nuclear capabilities in ways that stoke allied concerns and undermine America's credibility. Fortunately for the United States, however, the foundation already exists to build out a modern

theater nuclear force and strengthen the cohesion of the Free World. To shore up its extended nuclear deterrence, all that Washington needs to do is lean into its global alliance system.

Washington should explore ways to bring frontline allies in Europe and Asia into a nuclear-sharing arrangement, in which the United States maintains custody of its nuclear weapons in peacetime but transfers them to ally delivery systems in crisis or wartime. Such an arrangement already exists in NATO, so the main task for Washington in Europe would be certifying Polish and Finnish F-35A strike aircraft for the nuclear mission and, in the interests of expediency, having them operate from existing air bases with B61 gravity bombs.

Washington could establish a similar program on a bilateral basis with Japan and South Korea, whose strike aircraft would operate from Guam or, in the latter case, the Korean peninsula. Whether in NATO-Europe or East Asia, however, Washington and its allies should explore a co-development consortium for a dual-capable air-launched cruise missile and a ground-launched hypersonic weapon, as standoff missiles would pose a more credible threat to adversary air defenses than gravity bombs.

All of these moves would help offset unfavorable asymmetries in the nuclear balance. None of them will be possible, however, unless non-American perceptions are taken into account. Deterrence gaps exist today because they exist in the minds of those being deterred and assured. As history bears out, the Trump Administration—like its Cold War forerunners—would be wise to mind those gaps and close them.

[1] For a seminal example, see Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1984).

[2] Lawrence C. McQuade, "But Where Did the Missile Gap Go?" May 31, 1963, enclosure to Paul H. Nitze to McGeorge Bundy, May 30, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, *US Nuclear History: Nuclear Arms and Politics, 1955-1968*.

[3] Paul H. Nitze, "Assuring Strategic Stability in an Era of Détente," *Foreign Affairs* 54, no. 2 (January 1976), pp. 207-232; and Paul Warnke, "Apes on a Treadmill," *Foreign Policy*, no. 18 (Spring 1975), pp. 12-29.

[4] For the debate over theater-range nuclear missiles in the early 1980s, see "Acceptance of a Stable Balance: An Interview with Paul Warnke," *The Fletcher Forum* (Summer 1983), pp. 241-242; and McGeorge Bundy's and Michael Howard's comments in John Newhouse, "Arms Control and Orthodoxy," *The New Yorker*, June 7, 1982, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1982/06/07/arms-and-orthodoxy.

[5] Jay Tilden, "Contriving Imaginary Gaps in Nuclear Deterrence," *War on the Rocks*, May 29, 2026, https://warontherocks.com/contriving-imaginary-gaps-in-nuclear-deterrence/.

[6] Richard B. Parker, ed., *The October War: A Retrospective* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2001).

[7] For a notable example from the Cold War, see McGeorge Bundy et al., "Nuclear Weapons and the Atlantic Alliance," *Foreign Affairs* 60, no. 4 (Spring 1982), pp. 753-768.

[8] Tilden, "Contriving Imaginary Gaps in Nuclear Deterrence," op. cit.

[9] See, for example, Tilden, "Contriving Imaginary Gaps in Nuclear Deterrence," op. cit.

[10] The definitive study of U.S. assessments of the bomber and missile gaps remains Lawrence Freedman, *US Intelligence and the Soviet Strategic Threat* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

[11] Draft Memorandum from Secretary of Defense McNamara to President Kennedy, "Recommended Long Range Nuclear Delivery Forces," September 23, 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, vol. VIII, *National Security Policy*, ed. David W. Mabon (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1996), p. 140.

[12] While the CIA maintained through the early 1970s that the Soviets aimed for nuclear parity with the United States, Team B correctly recognized that the Soviets were instead pursuing war-winning forces and their own peculiar conception of strategic superiority. Compare, for example, the conclusions of the Team B "strategic objectives" report and the testimonial evidence provided by senior Soviet officials in the "Hines Report": Central Intelligence Agency, *Intelligence Community Experiment in Competitive Analysis, Soviet Strategic Objectives: An Alternative View, Report of Team "B,"* December 1976, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book, op. cit., doc. 10; and John G. Hines et al., *Soviet Strategic Intentions, 1965-1985,* vol. 1, *An Analytical Comparison of US-Soviet Assessments During the Cold War* (McLean, VA: BDM Federal, Inc., September 22, 1995).

[13] See, for example, how the CIA downgraded the accuracy of the SS-19 in 1985 after it had moved toward Team B's estimate in the late 1970s, in Bill Keller, "US Study Finds a Soviet ICBM Is Less of a Threat to Missile Silos," *New York Times*, July 19, 1985, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP90-00965R000403310030-1.pdf; and Michael R. Gordon, "CIA Downgrades Estimate of SS-19…Saying Missile Too Inaccurate for a First Strike," *National Journal*, July 20, 1985, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP90-00965R000302430034-6.pdf. For post-Cold War assessments of how Team B overrated Soviet technical capabilities but accurately assessed Soviet strategic intentions, see Steven Rosen's and Raymond Garthoff's remarks in *Watching the Bear: Essays on CIA's Analysis of the Soviet Union*, eds. Gerald K. Haines and Robert E. Leggett (Langley, VA: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2003), pp. 159-163, 186; and David Holloway, *Nuclear Weapons: An International History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2026), pp. 498-500.

[14] Department of Defense and Central Intelligence Agency, "US and Soviet Strategic Forces," Joint Net Assessment, November 14, 1983, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book: The 1983 War Scare: "The Lost Paroxysm of the Cold War, Part III, eds. Nate Jones and Lauren Harper, May 22, 2013, doc. 1.

[15] Peter J. Roman, *Eisenhower and the Missile Gap* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 195-200.

[16] In April 1974, Schlesinger told Henry Kissinger, "I have never bought the Minuteman vulnerability argument. That is the NSC staff – Wayne Smith." See Memorandum of Conversation, April 23, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, National Security Adviser Memcons, Box 3. In 1984, Schlesinger stated that "it is important to avoid exaggeration on the vulnerability issue." See David Ignatius, "Intelligence Data Suggest That Reagan Overstated Pace of Soviet Military Buildup," *Wall Street Journal,* October 31, 1984. And in 1987, Schlesinger offered this criticism of the Reagan administration: "An invulnerable or a basing mode of low vulnerability is always desirable. It was not essential. It seemed to me in the 1980s, during the arguments over the MX, that the emphasis was placed upon the wrong issue and notably by the Administration. The Administration put all of its emphasis in the 1980 campaign on achieving silo invulnerability, or closing the window of vulnerability, as the catchword was during the campaign. The purpose of the MX was not to achieve invulnerability in basing. That was desirable, but the purpose was to provide for the Soviet Union an indication that the United States, if it initiated, if it initiated... could go after the Soviet forces." See James Schlesinger interview, December 16, 1987, *War and Peace in the Nuclear Age*, WGBH Open Vault, available online at https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip-15-sq8qb9vd44.

[17] In the spring of 1975, Schlesinger informed the Army that it would be allocated exploratory funds, in Fiscal Year 1976, to extend the range of the follow-on system to the Pershing Ia short-range ballistic missile. The final decision to extend the range of what became the medium-range Pershing II, however, ultimately came under Brown in 1977. See Michael David Yaffe, "The Origins of the Tactical Nuclear Weapons Modernization Program, 1969-1979," Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1991, pp. 553-556.

[18] For more on Schlesinger's competitive nuclear modernization program, see Kyle Balzer, "'Knowing Your Enemy': James R. Schlesinger and the Rise of Tailored Deterrence," *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2024), pp. 39-53.

[19] Remarks by President Reagan, April 6, 1984, *FRUS 1981-1988*, vol. I, *Foundations of Foreign Policy*, ed. Kristin L. Ahlberg (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2022), pp. 804.

[20] Luke Griffith, *Unraveling the Gray Area Problem: The United States and the INF Treaty* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).

[21] For a concise overview of European perceptions of the Cold War nuclear balance, see Beatrice Heuser, *NATO, Britain, France, and the FRG: Nuclear Strategies and Forces for Europe, 1949-2000* (London, UK: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1998), pp. 1-25.

[22] Memorandum From the Deputy Directory of Intelligence and Research to the Secretary of State, November 14, 1957, *FRUS 1955-1957*, vol. XXIV, *Soviet Union, Eastern Mediterranean*, eds. Ronald D. Landa, Aaron D. Miller, and Charles S. Sampson (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1989), p. 184.

[23] See, for example, Andreas Lutsch, "West Germany and NATO's Nuclear Force Posture in the Early 1960s (Part 1)," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 24, no. 4 (Fall 2022): 4-58; and Lutsch, "Counterforce and Peaceful Change: US Nuclear Commitments to Europe and the 'German Question,'" in *Counterforce in Contemporary US Nuclear Strategy*, ed. Brad Roberts (Livermore, CA: Center for Global Security Research, 2025), pp. 189-218.

[24] At the 27th meeting of the NATO Military Committee in December 1961, the West German representative submitted a paper that disapproved of the U.S. decision not to develop a modern theater missile force to cover Soviet M/IRBMs. Memorandum from Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to President Kennedy," December 20, 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, vol. XIII, *Western Europe and Canada*, eds. Charles S. Sampson and James E. Miller (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1994), pp. 473-474.

[25] Ingo Trauschweizer, *The Cold War US Army: Building Deterrence for Limited War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008), pp. 114-161.

[26] Record of Meeting Between President Kennedy and the Secretary General of NATO (Stikker), June 16, 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963,* vol. XIII, *Western Europe and Canada*, op. cit., pp. 443-444.

[27] Quoted in Lutsch, "Counterforce and Peaceful Change," op. cit., 206.

[28] Memorandum of Conversation: Debriefing by Paul H. Nitze on Recent European Trip," December 20, 1961, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 139: *"The Master of the Game": Paul Nitze and US Cold War Strategy from Truman to Reagan*, ed. William Burr and Robert Wampler, October 27, 2004, doc. 4.

[29] Helmut Schmidt, "The 1977 Alastair Buchan Memorial Lecture," *Survival* 20, no. 1 (1978): pp. 3–4.

[30] Andrian A. Danilevich interview, September 21, 1992, in John G. Hines, Ellis M. Mishulovich, and John F. Shull, eds. *Soviet Intentions 1965-1985,* Vol. 2, *Soviet Post-Cold War Testimonial Evidence* (McLean, VA: BDM Federal, Inc., September 22, 1995), p. 33.

[31] Gelii Viktorovich Batenin interview, August 6, 1993, *Soviet Intentions 1965-1985*, Vol. 2, op. cit., pp. 8.

[32] Danilevich interview, *Soviet Intentions 1965-1985*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 32.

[33] Danilevich interview, *Soviet Intentions 1965-1985*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 33.

[34] Griffith, *Unraveling the Gray Area Problem*, op. cit., pp. 99-101; and Colbourn, *The Euromissile Crisis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022), pp. 115-132.

[35] Danilevich interview, *Soviet Intentions 1965-1985*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 33.

[36] Department of Defense and Central Intelligence Agency, "US and Soviet Strategic Forces," op. cit.

[37] Colbourn, *The Euromissile Crisis*, op. cit.

[38] Griffith, *Unraveling the Gray Area Problem*, op. cit.

[39] Colbourn, *The Euromissile Crisis*, op. cit., pp. 240-247.

[40] Hal Brands, *The Twilight Struggle* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), p. 74.

[41] Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life* (New York, NY: WW Norton and Company, 1989), p. 243.

[42] See, for example, Satoru Mori, "Japan's Views on Extended Deterrence," in *Extended Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific*, ed. Zack Cooper (Seattle, Washington: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2026), pp. 28-30; Sugio Takahashi, "Strategic Stability and the Impact of China's Modernizing Strategic Strike Forces," in *China's Strategic Arsenal: Worldview, Doctrine, and Systems*, eds. James M. Smith and Paul J. Bolt (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2021), pp. 63-88. See also, Wakana Mukai, "China's Nuclear Modernization and Its Implications for Japan," in *Meeting China's Nuclear and WMD Buildup: Regional Threat Perceptions and Responses* (Washington, D.C.: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2024), p. 56.

[43] A recent report underscores that Japan's greatest fear when it comes to extended deterrence is that of American abandonment. See Zack Cooper, "Introduction: Preventing Erosion of Extended Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific," in *Extended Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific*, op. cit., pp. 7-8.

[44] Takahashi, "Strategic Stability and the Impact of China's Modernizing Strategic Strike Forces," op. cit., p. 64.

[45] As one Japanese expert has written, "China would potentially achieve near-parity with the United States if the latter's nuclear employment policy related to deployed warheads does not change to meet the nuclear challenger problem.'" See Mori, "Japan's Views on Extended Deterrence," op. cit., pp. 31-32. Sugio Takahashi has suggested that the United States should develop damage-limitation capabilities through enhanced homeland missile defenses. See "Strategic Stability and the Impact of China's Modernizing Strategic Strike Forces," op. cit., p. 88.

[46] For the Japanese conception of distinct strategic and theater umbrellas, see Mori, "Japan's Views on Extended Deterrence," op. cit., p. 33. For Japanese interest in SLCM-N, see Mori, "Japan's Views on Extended Deterrence," op. cit., pp. 30, 36; Takahashi, "Strategic Stability and the Impact of China's Modernizing Strategic Strike Forces," op. cit., pp. 83, 86; and Masashi Murano, "The 2023 Strategic Posture Commission from a Japanese Perspective," *Information Series*, No. 610 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 6, 2025), p. 4.

[47] Sugio Takahashi and Masashi Murano have used the term "gap" explicitly to describe the asymmetry in theater strike forces. See Takahashi, "Strategic Stability and the Impact of China's Modernizing Strategic Strike Forces," op. cit., p. 82; and Murano, "The 2023 Strategic Posture Commission from a Japanese Perspective," op. cit., p. 5. For Japanese perceptions of the theater nuclear asymmetry, see Mori, "Japan's Views on Extended Deterrence," op. cit., p. 30; and Mukai, "China's Nuclear Modernization and Its Implications for Japan," pp. 51-52.

[48] Excerpted from Jin Yu, ed., *The Science of Second Artillery Operations*, trans. Gregory Kulacki (People's Liberation Army Press, 2004), https://www.ucs.org/sites/default/files/attach/2014/09/Kulacki-Translation%20of%20Coercion%20section%209-22-14.pdf.

[49] Dima Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024), pp. 21-39.

[50] A Report of the European Nuclear Study Group, *Mind the Deterrence Gap: Assessing Europe's Nuclear Options*, February 2026, p. 26, https://securityconference.org/assets/02_Dokumente/01_Publikationen/2026/ENSG/Mind_the_Deterrence_Gap%E2%80%93Report_of_the_ENSG.pdf.

[51] "US in talks to expand nuclear capable deployments," *Financial Times*, June 1, 2026, https://www.ft.com/content/1a32ad0f-c8b3-4b91-a931-5dc053c6c214?syn-25a6b1a6=1; "Poland and Lithuania Confirm Exploring A Bigger Role in Nuclear Deterrence," *Associated Press*, June 3, 2026, https://apnews.com/article/nato-us-poland-lithuania-baltics-nuclear-deterrence-d1faf58b2de90569c9b38dc3c26cab8d.

[52] Anne Kauranen, "NATO's Nuclear Deterrent Must Be Real for Finland, Says New President," Reuters, March 1, 2024, https://www.yahoo.com/news/finland-inaugurates-alexander-stubb-president-103310657.html.

[53] In 1974, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger observed, "Deterrence, it is said, lies in the eye of the beholder. It works by acting on the psychology, the attitudes, and the perceptions of difficulties recognized by a potential attacker." Remarks by the Honorable James R. Schlessinger at Rollout Ceremony for B-1 Bomber, October 26, 1974.

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