October 2026

OCCASIONAL PAPER

Volume 6, Number 10

Deterrence Theory, Policy and Practice

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NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Deterrence Theory, Policy and Practice

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National Institute Press®

Published by
National Institute Press®
12150 Monument Dr., Suite 125
Fairfax, Virginia 22033

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

Cover design by Stephanie Koeshall.

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Preface

This issue of National Institute's *Occasional Paper* series, *Deterrence Theory, Policy and Practice*, presents a curated collection of *Information Series* articles by the author published over the past decade. The value of such a curated collection is that it provides, in a convenient single source, multiple articles on the designated subject. This *Occasional Paper* offers an opportunity for a new audience to read works on nuclear deterrence from months and years past that could be useful and of interest but, for all practical purposes, are otherwise lost in time given the pace of events and recent abundance of publications on the subject.

The overarching subject of this curated collection, as the title suggests, is deterrence. It includes articles that delve into questions of the general theory of nuclear deterrence, and the particular challenges of applying theory to practice given the dramatically worsening nuclear threat conditions that have emerged over the past decade. Those new threat conditions include: China's coming out as both hostile and a nuclear superpower; North Korea's continuing deployment of missiles and nuclear weapons; Russia's military expansionism and corresponding adoption of a nuclear doctrine that emphasizes coercive nuclear threats; and allies' increasing doubts about the credibility of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent—the credibility of which has been the single most important pillar for nuclear non-proliferation. These developments have created a dynamic nuclear threat context that is significantly different from that of the Cold War and have demanded the rethinking of U.S. deterrence strategies. The collection of articles included here reflects efforts to advance that rethinking.

One set of articles in this collection focuses on deterrence "tailoring," an innovation in U.S. deterrence formulation that began in the mid-1970s, but was not named until decades later. In short, tailoring is the

adaptation of U.S. deterrence strategies to our understanding of the potentially unique perceptions and calculations of the opponent in question. Absent tailoring, deterrence is based on untutored presumptions about how an opponent will perceive and be affected by U.S. deterrence strategies. Tailoring deterrence is not a "silver bullet" that can ensure the desired functioning of deterrence strategies, but it has the potential to reduce mistakes. The articles here present the rationale for, policy history of, and the limitations and advantages of tailoring deterrence.

Finally, another set of articles in this collection follows from the need to rethink deterrence and some recent initiatives to do so. For decades, U.S. deterrence policy has moved away from nuclear threats that emphasize targeting opponents' civilians and society, and toward much greater flexibility in U.S. threat options. This decades-long, bipartisan policy direction has been intended primarily to provide U.S. deterrence threats with credibility and effectiveness across a range of provocations, particularly including extending deterrence to protect allies. One initiative by several prominent academics to "rethink" deterrence recommends a retreat from the decades of U.S. policy evolution away from threats to opponents' civilians and society. Their self-declared goal is to identify an approach to deterrence in response to the recent buildup of Russian and Chinese nuclear capabilities that is less demanding of U.S. nuclear forces and thus friendlier to arms control efforts; their answer is a deterrence policy that re-emphasizes threatening opponents' civilians and society. This approach to U.S. deterrence threats is said to provide adequate deterrent effects with fewer forces. The articles included in this collection explain why the United States, for reasons of deterrence credibility—particularly but not exclusively for extended deterrence—and morality, departed from such an approach to nuclear deterrence decades ago, and why those reasons remain valid, and even

more persuasive, in the contemporary nuclear threat environment.

It is my hope that a new audience will find articles in this collection to be of value as we continue to address the question of how best to deter war in an international system that remains fundamentally anarchic and prone to conflict.

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THEORY AND POLICY

Deterrence is Not Rocket Science: It is More Difficult*

In a recent published article, two physicists offered remarks that illustrate a fundamental basis for the stark differences reflected in the public debate about deterrence.[1] A "fundamental issue" raised by the authors is, "Who is qualified to participate in the debate over US nuclear weapons policy?" Their expressed concern is that "discussion of these policies" is held "within silos," and that "one such silo is the US defense establishment," which, they suggest, is that side of the nuclear policy debate that does not "promote arms control or disarmament." The authors emphasize that all who engage in this discussion are "arm-chair generals" because no one has experience in nuclear warfare, and that "no political actors can know all the possible pathways of escalation from conventional to nuclear war." Their fundamental point in this regard appears to be that the "defense establishment" has no great advantage in this discussion because, "deterrence theory is not rocket science. Except for aspects of mathematical logic or game theory applied to deterrence, this 'theory' is essentially a collection of suspect assumptions and speculations on how one state would respond to the actions of an adversary. We can all partake in those speculations."[2]

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* Original publication: Keith B. Payne, "Deterrence is Not Rocket Science: It is More Difficult," *Information Series*, No. 527 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 2022).

[1] Stewart Prager and Alan Kaptanoglu, "Rebuttal: Current nuclear weapons policy not safe or sane," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, May 24, 2022, available at https://thebulletin.org/2022/05/rebuttal-current-nuclear-weapons-policy-not-safe-or-sane/.

[2] Ibid.

There are points of truth in these various observations. All the possible pathways to nuclear escalation surely are *not* known, thankfully. In some important aspects of this subject—we all *are* amateurs. And, deterrence theory *is* speculative. The prediction of foreign leadership decision making in unprecedented and stressful future circumstances is particularly speculative. This much has been recognized by some for generations. More than six decades ago, Herman Kahn emphasized the speculative character of deterrence theory and questioned the prevalent expectation that the reliable functioning of deterrence can be orchestrated: "In spite of our reliance on the idea that deterrence will work, we usually do not analyze carefully the basic concepts behind such a policy….This somewhat lackadaisical interest in bedrock concepts is probably related to a subconscious fear that our foundations cannot stand close examination."[3]

But the authors of the recent article appear to make these points to advance a broader conclusion that is both a *non sequitur* and mistaken, i.e., that there is not specialized knowledge and experience within the "defense establishment" regarding deterrence that enables some speculation about the functioning of deterrence to be more credible than other speculation. The interested commentator supposedly is as competent speculating about deterrence as those who spend their professional careers working on U.S. deterrence policy.

Speculation and Prediction

The basic principle of deterrence as applied to international relations in general is *not* complicated: a latent threat is posed with the expectation that an opponent may decide, via its calculation of cost, benefit, and risk, not to take an

[3] Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 556.

action for fear of that latent threat. "Redlines" are drawn in the hope that opponents will not cross them given this deterrent effect. This basic character of deterrence has endured for millennia as has its incomparable value for preventing war.

The principles of deterrence are simple and virtually anyone can become familiar with them and engage in speculation. Indeed, commentary by instant experts flourishes during times of international conflict and crisis. But the *application* of deterrence theory to actual deterrence strategies that can make the difference between war and peace is an extremely complex art demanding a broad range of specialized expertise to inform the speculation. Much of that expertise surely is not found *only* within the defense community responsible for deterrence policy, but it *does* have unique access to some of the information that is important, and it has the advantage of being able to assemble those with needed specialized expertise and a lifetime of invested work on the issue. On occasion, Democratic and Republican administrations have done just that.

Applying Deterrence: A Complex Analytical Challenge

Deterrence is a function of leadership decision making, which can be affected by many different factors. Consequently, the application of deterrence is an enormous and unavoidably difficult ongoing undertaking. Done properly, it requires understanding, to the extent feasible, the opponent to be deterred in the context of the engagement, including the opponent's foreign and domestic goals (how those goals are prioritized and the opponent's determination to achieve those goals), modes of decision making, willingness to accept risk, willingness to absorb and inflict hurt, cultural norms and values, perceptions of the deterrer, and even the health of key

leaders, among many other factors potentially pertinent to decision making. There are few, if any, universal constants in this regard; instead there is a wide variety of operating factors, some seen, others unseen, that can vary greatly across time, place and opponent, and may be decisive in determining if and how deterrence will function.

In short, rational leadership decision making can vary greatly because unique decision-making factors can drive leaders' perceptions and calculations of value, cost and risk in surprising, unpredictable directions. Consequently, the functioning of deterrence "is heavily context dependent."[4] As a prominent historian working with a prominent political scientist observed: "Not all actors in international politics calculate utility in making decisions in the same way. Differences in values, culture, attitudes toward risk-taking, and so on vary greatly. There is no substitute for knowledge of the adversary's mind-set and behavioral style, and this is often difficult to obtain or to apply correctly in assessing intentions or predicting responses."[5] Misunderstanding the opponent, however, "can result in the disintegration of even the best deterrence strategy."[6]

For the application of deterrence, generalizations are less helpful than an understanding of the opponent's worldview, priorities, calculations and definition of reasonable behavior. As Kurt Guthe has observed, "In matters related to deterrence, generalizations can be useful, but specifics are essential. The questions that must always be kept in mind are: Who is being deterred? From what action? By whom? For what reason? By what threats? And in what circumstances?"[7] Applying deterrence must be

[4] Gordon A. Craig, Alexander L. George, *Force and Statecraft: Diplomatic Problems of Our Time*, Third Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 192.

[5] Ibid., p. 188.

[6] Ibid., p. 189.

[7] See, Kurt Guthe, "Nuclear Weapons Acquisition and Deterrence," in *Understanding Deterrence*, Keith Payne, ed., (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 12.

based on expectations about the future decision making of foreign leaders. Doing so in an informed fashion is extremely demanding because, simply put, that future is not obvious.[8]

Who may contribute to the specialized expertise needed to help orchestrate the informed practice of deterrence? The list is very broad; it includes historians, psychologists, diplomats, anthropologists, economists, linguists, military experts, regional area experts, religious experts, physicians, and physicists, *inter alia*. Political science, which includes the study of international power relations, can be particularly helpful. But no single area of expertise or discipline is adequate.

For example, it is not a small point to note that while expertise in physics and other natural sciences led to the production nuclear weapons, it alone does not provide a basis for informed speculation about how deterrence is more or less likely to function in any real-world application. The atomic bomb helped end World War II, but it was the work of anthropologists focusing on Japan at the time that led the U.S. leadership to understand that respect for the position of the Emperor would be key to securing the surrender of Japanese armies. To use a sports analogy, knowing how to make a baseball conveys no special expertise for pitching a baseball or tailoring pitches to particular batters.

As noted, however, a broad interdisciplinary effort can help provide a measure of the informed understanding needed to best put deterrence into practice, i.e., *informed* speculation. This understanding can never be sufficient for fully confident prediction because the subject includes the inherent uncertainties of how a select leadership will make

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See also, Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New York: Praeger, 1965), p. 23.

[8] Colin S. Gray, "The 21st Century Security Environment and the Future of War," *Parameters* (Winter 2008-2009), p. 15.

decisions in extraordinary conditions. There is incomplete data, ambiguous data, and conflicting data. But it is possible, via broad interdisciplinary study over time, to reduce ignorance and thereby avoid some potential deterrence mistakes. Of particular importance in this regard is to understand an opponent's political goals, cultural norms, communication channels, and perceptions of power relations (regardless of how Washington may judge those relations). In short, a critical need is to understand the political, historical, and cultural background of any deterrence engagement. Doing so properly is a complex, interdisciplinary undertaking.

The defense establishment does not have a monopoly in the pursuit of that needed understanding, but it has some significant advantages and often makes a concerted effort to reach out beyond its "silo" for assistance.[9] As such, it has advantages over many others who "partake" in relatively uninformed speculation. The latter typically appear to have limited or no access to at least some of the important information needed and no recognition of its value.

The framework below is a simplified presentation of the process involved and the information sought.[10]

A Deterrence Framework

Step 1. Identify antagonists, issue, objectives, and actions.
- 1.1 Antagonists
- 1.2 Issue
- 1.3 Adversary's objectives
- 1.4 Actions to be deterred

[9] There are numerous efforts in this regard. See, for example, Admiral Charles Richard, *Commander's Vision & Intent*, U.S. Strategic Command, May 2020, p. 3, available at https://www.stratcom.mil/Portals/8/Documents/Commanders_Vision_and_Intent_May2020.pdf?ver=2020-05-19-145747-990.

[10] From, Keith B. Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001) pp. 112-114.

1.5 U.S. objectives

Step 2. Identify and describe those factors likely to affect the adversary's decision making in the context of this specific flashpoint and U.S. deterrent threats.

- 2.1 Degree of rationality and predictability as indicated by past behavior
- 2.2 Leadership characteristics
  - 2.2.1 Individuals with responsibilities for the issue at hand
  - 2.2.2 Leadership motivations
  - 2.2.3 Leadership determination
  - 2.2.4 Operational code (worldview and strategic style)
  - 2.2.5 Political-psychological profiles of key decision makers
  - 2.2.6 Adversary's understanding of and attention to the U.S.
    - 2.2.6.1 Previous interactions with the U.S.
    - 2.2.6.2 Attention to U.S. declaratory policy
    - 2.2.6.3 Likelihood the adversary will (mis)comprehend U.S. demands and threats
- 2.3 Value and cost/risk structure
  - 2.3.1 Location of the issue in the value hierarchy of the adversary's leadership
  - 2.3.2 Other relevant values of the adversary's leadership
  - 2.3.3 Cost/risk tolerance of the adversary's leadership with regard to this issue
- 2.4 Options
  - 2.4.1 Military options available to the adversary
  - 2.4.2 Adversary's freedom to conciliate or provoke

- 2.5 Adversary's belief about the costs the U.S. will incur if its deterrent threat is executed
  - 2.5.1 Costs from the adversary's retaliation
  - 2.5.2 Political costs at home and abroad
- 2.6 Communications
  - 2.6.1 Optimal method for communicating with the adversary
  - 2.6.2 Possibilities for misperception
- 2.7 Credibility of U.S. threats
  - 2.7.1 Past pledges or actions demonstrating U.S. commitments
  - 2.7.2 Other special circumstances

Step 3. Construct a strategic profile of the adversary with regard to the crisis in question.

- 3.1 Predictability of the adversary's behavior
- 3.2 Cost/risk tolerance
- 3.3 Influence of considerations beyond immediate issue
- 3.4 Will, determination, and freedom to conciliate or provoke
- 3.5 Cognizance of U.S. demands and threats
- 3.6 Credibility of U.S. deterrent threats
- 3.7 Susceptibility to U.S. deterrent threats

Step 4. Assess whether the challenger is likely to be susceptible to deterrence policies in this particular case, and, if so, the nature of those policies.

Step 5. Identify available U.S. deterrence policy options.

- 5.1 U.S. policy
- 5.2 Punitive or denial threats
- 5.3 Military actions
- 5.4 Related diplomatic steps
- 5.5 Means for communicating threats

5.6 Likely adversary reactions and implications for options
5.7 Indicators for determining option effectiveness
5.8 Opportunities for learning
5.9 Possible real-time modifications to improve option effectiveness
5.10 Domestic and allied constraints on U.S. actions
5.11 Expected results

Step 6. Identify the gap between the likely requirements for deterrence and available U.S. deterrence policy options. Describe different, new, or additional military capabilities and policies that may be needed or force reductions that could be undertaken.

6.1 Key military capabilities for supporting the deterrent options most suited to the challenger in this case
6.2 Related declaratory policy and diplomatic measures

Politics: "More Difficult Than Physics"

According to some knowledgeable observers, the requirement for deterrence policy to be so informed about the political background of a deterrence engagement is more difficult than rocket science. Who thinks understanding politics is more difficult than the study of energy and matter? In 1947, Albert Einstein was asked, "Why is it that when the mind of man has stretched so far as to discover the structure of the atom, we have been unable to devise the political means to keep the atom from destroying us?" Einstein reportedly replied, "That is simple, my friend. It is because politics is more difficult than physics."[11]

[11] This reported statement can be found in many sources. For example, see *TODAYINSCI*, available at

Emanuel Derman, a trained physicist turned financial "quant" explains, in part, why this is true. Deterrence—as in finance—must confront considerable uncertainties beyond even those encountered in the physical sciences. "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." And, "financial value…is therefore less inclined to yield to mathematics or science: there are no isolated social systems on which to carry out the repeated experiments the scientific method requires, and so it is hard to study the regularities that might reveal the putative laws that govern them."[12]

The application of deterrence theory is not a question of generally predictable interactions, known rules and other constants among opponents. If so, it would be relatively easy. Instead, it must follow from expectations about the decision making of multiple opponents with a variety of unique worldviews and diverse leaderships' calculations that can determine the functioning of deterrence.

Recognition of the great variation in opponents' worldviews and decision making, and the related need to understand them in their complexity for deterrence purposes, leads inevitably to the conclusion that speculation about deterrence that is more informed is likely to be much more useful than speculation that is not so informed. A 2014 study by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences emphasizes that taking account of such factors is critical in considerations of deterrence.[13] The authors of the recent article referenced above rightly observe that all may "partake" in speculation

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https://todayinsci.com/E/Einstein_Albert/EinsteinAlbert-PoliticsQuote500px.htm.

[12] Emanuel Derman, *Models Behaving Badly* (New York: Free Press, 2011), pp. 140, 190-191.

[13] National Research Council, *U.S. Air Force Deterrence Analytic Capabilities* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2014), pp. 35-39, 93-95.

about deterrence, but not all speculation is of equal value for deterrence policy. This should be unremarkable; the more informed speculation in most endeavors usually is the more valuable.

In short, if speculation about deterrence follows from serious efforts to understand specific opponents in pertinent contexts, i.e., informed speculation, it may be useful; speculation that follows from untutored generalizations about the opponent and context may, by luck, be useful, but is more likely to be misleading than enlightening.

This conclusion is at the heart of a bipartisan recognition in the deterrence policy community of the need to "tailor" the application of deterrence according to an informed understanding of opponent and context. Corresponding to this conclusion is recognition of the potential need for a diverse and flexible deterrence force posture that can provide the spectrum of U.S. threat options that may be necessary to deter diverse opponents in diverse circumstances. That is, recognition of the complexity of deterrence and the uncertainties involved leads almost inevitably to recognition of the need to hedge against a wide range of threats by having flexible U.S. deterrence capabilities and options.

This conclusion contrasts sharply with the policy recommendation, enduring in some quarters since the 1960s, that the U.S. deterrence posture can be well-served by a single type of deterrent threat, i.e., to destroy some number of an opponent's cities—as if it is self-evident that such a capability somehow equates to a universally-credible deterrent.[14] For example: "What nuclear weapons offer that

[14] "Just one boat [nuclear-armed submarine] can carry enough nuclear warheads to place two warheads on each of Russia's fifty largest cities," in, William Perry and Tom Collina, *The Button* (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2020), p. 119. "The possibility of even a few nuclear detonations in populated areas provides ample deterrence," in McGeorge Bundy, William Crowe, Jr., Sidney Drell, *Reducing Nuclear Danger* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1993), p. 95. See

is unique is the ability to put whole cities at risk and threaten populations in the tens or hundreds of millions. It is that which gives them their strategic value."[15] That deterrence standard may be met relatively easily and cheaply, but it is not a prudent general approach to deterrence given the diversity of opponents in the contemporary threat environment and the serious moral and legal problems associated with it.

Working to Understand Opponents: From "Assured Destruction" to "Tailoring"

The notion that deterrence could be based on a narrow and undifferentiated threat to cities and industry was reigning U.S. declared policy early in the Cold War; an "Assured Destruction" nuclear threat to population and industry supposedly would serve to deter "any industrialized nation."[16] This singular-declared approach to U.S. deterrence policy was the antithesis of the contemporary bipartisan conclusion that deterrence strategies should be informed by an understanding of the particular opponent and circumstances in a deterrence engagement. Indeed, it did not reflect any apparent attempt to connect deterrence strategy to the opponent's unique perspectives or to the need to differentiate among opponents in this regard. Instead, expectations about deterrence appear to have been predicated on the untutored assumption that opponents

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also, Bruce Blair, et al., "Smaller and Safer," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 5 (September-October 2010), p. 10; and, Jerome H. Kahan, *Security in the Nuclear Age* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1975), p. 330.

[15] Editorial, "The Nuclear Taboo: Thinking the Unthinkable," The *Economist* (U.K.), June 24, 2022, p. 23.

[16] *Draft Memorandum for the President,* Secretary of Defense [Robert S. McNamara] 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. (Originally classified; sanitized and declassified on January 5, 1983). See also, Robert McNamara, *The Essence of Security: Reflections in Office* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 76.

adhere to familiar American values, perceptions and calculations (mirror-imaging). Broad generalizations about how deterrence *should* function essentially were based on the norms and reasoning of the U.S. leadership. The same unthinkable, deterring nightmare for U.S. leaders was presumed to be the unthinkable deterring nightmare for any "rational" leader.[17] Deterrence policy correspondingly could be approached as a mechanical question *uninformed* by the opponent's worldview and how that could affect its calculations:[18] how many survivable, deliverable U.S. weapons were needed to wreck destruction on opponents' cities and industry?[19]

Former National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy captured this presumption about the type of threat needed to deter all foreign leaders with his observation that: "In the real world of real political leaders—whether here or in the Soviet Union—a decision that would bring even one hydrogen bomb on one city of one's own country would be recognized in advance as a catastrophic blunder; ten bombs on ten cities would be a disaster beyond history; and a hundred bombs on a hundred cities are unthinkable."[20] From there, identifying an adequate deterrence force posture is an easy proposition and relatively easily met given the extreme vulnerability of undefended cities to nuclear weapons.

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[17] *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. 8. (Originally classified; sanitized and declassified on January 5, 1983).

[18] See, Alain Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, *How Much Is Enough? Shaping the Defense Program, 1961-1969* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 67, 174-196, 207-210. See also, *Draft Memorandum for the President,* Secretary of Defense [Robert S. McNamara] 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. 17. (Originally classified; sanitized and declassified on January 5, 1983).

[19] McNamara, *The Essence of Security: Reflections in Office,* op. cit., pp. 77-78.

[20] McGeorge Bundy, "To Cap the Volcano," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (October 1969), p. 10.

This remains the enduring basis for much continuing public deterrence commentary. It runs counter to the bipartisan theme of the U.S. defense policy establishment emerging since the mid-1970s, i.e., that considerations of how to deter and the requirements for deterrence should be informed by an understanding of opponents and the diverse factors driving their decision making. After considerable study of the Soviet leadership during the Cold War, for example, the United States concluded on a bipartisan basis that, "effective deterrence requires forces of sufficient size and flexibility" to threaten "a range of military and other targets," and that "the ability to provide *measured* retaliation is essential to credible deterrence."[21] This conclusion was not based on opposition to arms control, but from efforts to better understand how to deter Moscow. By the mid-1980s, the United States had openly rejected its earlier declarations that its strategic deterrent was based on threatening Soviet cities.[22]

Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger in the Nixon Administration and Secretary of Defense Harold Brown in the Carter Administration helped lead U.S. policy away from simplistic "counter-city" notions of deterrence by pointing to the need to pose a deterrence threat that actually spoke to the opponent and context in question, in this case, the Soviet leadership. Nevertheless, recognition of the need to understand opponents in all their possible diversity for U.S. deterrence purposes remains absent in much contemporary commentary on deterrence—which often continues to reduce deterrence to a simplistic jumble of assumptions and uninformed speculation based on mirror-imaging.

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[21] Harold Brown in, *The Department of Defense Statement on Strategic Military Balance: Military Assessment*, before the U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Hearings, 96th Congress, 1st Session, July 11, 1979, p. 3. (Emphasis added).

[22] Caspar Weinberger, "U.S. Defense Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (Spring 1986), p. 682.

The contrary conclusion, that the practice of deterrence involves enormous complexity and requires a diversity of deterrence options, is *not* a function of an opposition to arms control or the obscure work of "siloed" government analysts. Rather, it follows from recognition of: 1) the significance of the great diversity in opponents' perceptions and decision making for the functioning of deterrence; 2) the need for serious, ongoing, interdisciplinary efforts to understand opponents in context and to tailor U.S. deterrence strategies accordingly; and 3) the corresponding need for a diversity of deterrent options to hedge against the wide spectrum of decision making and behaviors among rational opponents and the inherent uncertainties of deterrence. This is not "worst case analysis"; it simply recognizes the realities of the contemporary threat environment.

Summary and Conclusion

In summary, *if* all opponents could be assumed to have similar world views and to calculate in predictable, familiar patterns—*if* there were a universally-accepted understanding of what constitutes reasonable decision making and behavior—deterrence policy would be a much easier endeavor. Opponents could be assumed to behave much more predictably. During the early years of the Cold War, for deterrence purposes, Washington's mirror-imaging facilitated a belief that Soviet calculations were easily known and predictable—indeed, the same was expected to be true for *any* rational leadership. This convenient mirror-imaging essentially assumes away the factors particular to diverse leaderships' decision making that likely affect their respective deterrence calculations. Such speculation about strategic deterrence is not informed by study of the unique character of opponent and context. Correspondingly, an "Assured Destruction" nuclear threat

to cities, an unthinkable prospect for U.S. leaders, became the declared U.S deterrence standard vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, and all other opponents were conveniently deemed lesser included cases. This approach greatly simplifies the practice of deterrence, although imprudently so, because it dismisses the need for deterrence policy that is informed by the complexities of reality that matter.

By the mid-1970s, this simplistic approach to deterrence began to fade in official policy formulations on a bipartisan basis. It was replaced by recognition that Soviet decision making was unique in important ways and did not mimic the reigning thinking in Washington, and that the view from Moscow needed to be taken into consideration in U.S. deterrence policy.

Since the mid-1970s, and on a bipartisan basis, the U.S. defense establishment has increasingly accepted as a basis for deterrence policy that opponents' decision making may be driven by a wide range of factors that vary greatly, and thus that deterrence must be "tailored." Doing so greatly complicates the application of deterrence—demanding serious, interdisciplinary analysis of opponents and political contexts. A dynamic international threat environment complicates the matter further—requiring *continuing* efforts to understand opponents and to adapt deterrence policy according to that understanding; there is no last word on the subject. Nevertheless, many contemporary commentators essentially continue to subscribe to the notion that the application of deterrence is an uncomplicated endeavor and to the corresponding simplistic, early-Cold War definition of what constitutes an adequate deterrent posture.

Deterrence theory is built on speculation in which all are free to partake. But it is a non sequitur and a mistake to conclude from those two points that all such speculation is of equal value for the application of deterrence. It is not. A broad range of specialized knowledge regarding specific

opponents and occasions must be brought to the table to inform speculation about deterrence policy, and the "defense establishment," writ large, is uniquely positioned to do so. Given the amount and types of information needed, it has some significant advantages in undertaking that analysis. Others can and should make every effort to be as informed as possible,[23] but they will do so without comparable access to information in at least some important areas. Those who engage in speculation that is uninformed by a serious multidisciplinary effort to understand the opponent and context are unlikely to be helpful, or worse. They will be even less aware of what they do not know and its potential importance. In short, all can indeed partake in discussions of deterrence, but not all such discussions are of comparable value for its "real-world" application.

This does not, of course, mean that all studies conducted by the "defense establishment" will be done competently or will take advantage of its access to helpful information. Nor does it mean that all studies done outside that establishment must be incompetent. But those that do not bother to be so informed are more likely to mislead policy than those that seriously seek to be informed. Such is the nature of deterrence speculation.

[23] See for example, *Deterring China in the Taiwan Strait, Special Issue, Journal of Policy & Strategy*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2022, pp. vii-115, available at https://nipp.org/journals/volume-2-2022/.

Why Do US Nuclear Force Numbers Matter for Deterrence?*

The US debate about nuclear forces and policy often descends into arcane details. These details can be important, but it also is important to address a basic question: for deterrence, does the United States need more and different types of nuclear capabilities than the very limited number and types of nuclear weapons necessary to threaten to "destroy" an opponent's society? While it appears incongruous, a minimum US nuclear deterrent typically is defined as a second-strike (i.e., retaliatory) capability sufficient to threaten the destruction of an opponent's societal or urban/industrial assets, such as "a nation's modern economy, for example, electrical, oil, and energy nodes, transportation hubs."[1]

That adequacy standard for deterrence, i.e., the nuclear capabilities necessary to threaten the destruction of an opponent's societal assets, is "easy" to meet in quantitative and qualitative terms given the high vulnerability of unprotected, fixed societal targets (e.g., urban-industrial areas) to nuclear strikes.[2] Indeed, the number of US retaliatory, or "second-strike" weapons typically considered adequate to meet a minimalist standard for deterrence ranges from "several" weapons to hundreds of

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* Original publication: Keith B. Payne, "Why Do US Nuclear Force Numbers Matter for Deterrence?," *Information Series*, No. 404 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 9, 2026).

[1] See for example, Hans Kristensen, Robert Norris, Ivan Oelrich, *From Counterforce to Minimal Deterrence*, Federation of American Scientists and The Natural Resources Defense Council, Occasional Paper No. 7 (April 2009), pp. 31-32, see also pp. 2, 43, 44.

[2] Robert Jervis, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 94, No. 4 (Winter 1979-80), pp. 617-618. See also, Steven Pifer and Michael O'Hanlon, *The Opportunity: Next Steps in Reducing Nuclear Arms* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), pp. 20-21.

weapons.[3] Such numbers are modest compared to the approximately 2000 US nuclear weapons reportedly now deployed.[4]

US nuclear capabilities beyond those necessary for threatening opponents' societies and populations typically are criticized by minimalists as unnecessary and destabilizing. Indeed, these are the criticisms now leveled against the Obama administration's current, fledgling US nuclear modernization programs.[5]

The connection between the advocacy of minimal US nuclear capabilities and a deterrence policy of targeting opponents' societies has been explicit for decades. For example, in 1961, a prominent academic commentator observed, "Would the Soviets be deterred by the prospect of losing ten cities? Or fifty cities? No one knows, although one might intuitively guess that the threshold is closer to ten than to either two or fifty."[6]

More recently, two prominent commenters recommended a US "responsive force" of 400-500 nuclear warheads because this number of weapons would be adequate to target Russian sites, "affecting industrial recovery—the major nodes in the electric power grid and air, ground, and rail transportation systems, as well as major industrial sites."[7] In 2010, a minimum deterrence-oriented assessment by US Air Force personnel concluded

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[3] "Several" is the level identified as adequate in, James Wood Forsyth, Col. B. Change Saltzman, USAF, Gary Schaub, "Minimum Deterrence and its Critics," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 4 (Winter 2010), p. 7.

[4] Hans Kristensen and Robert Norris, "Nuclear Notebook: United States Nuclear Forces, 2016," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (2016), pp. 63-64.

[5] See for example, Center for Arms Control and Nonproliferation, *Is a New Nuclear Cruise Missile Necessary?*, February 2, 2016, available at http://armscontrolcenter.org/is-a-new-nuclear-cruise-missile-necessary/.

[6] Glenn Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 57.

[7] Sidney Drell and James Goodby, *What are Nuclear Weapons for? Recommendations for Restructuring U.S. Strategic Nuclear Forces* (Washington, D.C.: Arms Control Association, October 2007), p. 15.

that a US nuclear force of "311 weapons" would be more than adequate because, "There is not a state on the planet that could withstand that sort or punishment or a leader who would run that sort of risk."[8]

The critical question here is, "how much is enough?" for deterrence. As illustrated above, precise answers derived from the minimum deterrence approach range from several weapons to hundreds. However, every Republican and Democratic administration for five decades has rejected this minimalist standard for and approach to nuclear deterrence.[9] There are six basic reasons for rejecting the minimalist standard of adequacy for US nuclear capabilities that everyone who cares about this subject should understand.

First, as illustrated above, there are many claims regarding the number of nuclear weapons adequate for deterrence. The problem with all such claims is that no one knows with precision the minimal US nuclear capability necessary to deter attack, now or in the future. Omniscience would be required to predict how many and what types of weapons will deter across a spectrum of circumstances and opposing leaderships. And, if that number somehow could be known, it would likely change rapidly with shifting circumstances. That is, the US requirement for effective deterrence is not some known, set number of weapons or capability; it will change depending on the opponent, the time, and the context.[10]

Developments in circumstances that can shift deterrence requirements may be technical, political, operational, or even personal to a given leadership. For

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[8] James Wood Forsyth, Col. B. Change Saltzman, USAF, Gary Schaub, op. cit., p. 6.

[9] The Obama administration too has explicitly rejected "minimum deterrence". See, Department of Defense, *Report on Nuclear Employment of the United States Specified in Section 491 of 10 U.S.C.*, June 12, 2013, p. 4.

[10] See Keith B. Payne, *Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), chapters 1-4.

example, the possibility that a US nuclear system could experience an unexpected reliability problem that would disable or degrade many US weapons may best be mitigated by having a level of diversity and overlapping capabilities in the deterrent arsenal. This factor alone could lead US requirements beyond the typical minimal definitions of adequacy. We do not want to plan only for a minimal US deterrent because no one knows what that capability is, and because the goal of preventing nuclear war is so crucial that it is better to hedge with flexible, diverse and overlapping capabilities rather than risk the failure of deterrence due to a reliability problem, or otherwise having too few or the wrong types of nuclear forces needed to deter.

Consequently, every Republican and Democratic administration for five decades has concluded that US nuclear deterrence forces should be diverse, flexible and overlapping to help ensure that the US always possesses the capabilities necessary to deter attack across a wide spectrum of threats and circumstances.[11]

Second, to pose a retaliatory deterrent threat, US nuclear forces must be able to survive an opponent's "first-strike" attack on those US forces themselves. US forces vulnerable to a first strike would be useless as a retaliatory deterrent threat. Consequently, the US deterrent must be sufficiently large and diverse to survive a nuclear first strike by a determined foe under all conditions. This requirements has led to a 50-year consensus in favor of ensuring that the United States possesses a sufficient number of nuclear weapons to survive an attack and a diverse nuclear triad of carriers for those weapons, i.e., nuclear bombers, sea-based

[11] See for example, National Security Council, National Security Decision Memorandum 242, *Policy for Planning the Employment of Nuclear Weapons*, January 17, 1974 (declassified June 29, 2007); The White House, Presidential Directive NSC-59, *Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy*, July 25, 1980 (declassified July 24, 2012); and, Department of Defense, *Report on Nuclear Employment of the United States Specified in Section 491 of 10 U.S.C.*, op. cit.

missiles (SLBMs) and land-based missiles (ICBMs). The diversity of this overlapping triad of nuclear systems, with their different operations and locations, helps to ensure that under all conditions an opponent could not anticipate destroying the US retaliatory nuclear deterrent in a first strike. This is one of the rationales for and great values of the US nuclear triad that again takes US nuclear capabilities beyond the numbers typically associated with a minimal deterrent.

Third, as noted above, intentionally planning to destroy societal or urban-industrial centers establishes a minimal set of deterrence requirements for US nuclear capabilities, i.e., it makes for "easy" nuclear deterrence requirements. But, it also involves the intentional planning to kill innocents and non-combatants on a massive scale. Thus, it is widely considered immoral, a potential violation of international law, and inconsistent with the Just War tradition. Instead, the US should strive for deterrence capabilities that are not limited to, and do not depend on threatening opponents with societal destruction. The US nuclear deterrent must have the diverse US nuclear capabilities necessary to pose a threat to a variety of other types of targets and indeed to avoid to the extent possible an opponent's societal centers—thereby potentially reducing the destruction of an opponent's innocent non-combatants. This deterrence standard imposes US force requirements that are likely more diverse qualitatively and larger quantitatively than typically is deemed adequate to meet the "easy" minimal deterrence standard of threatening the destruction of an opponent's population and societal assets.

It should be noted here that this particular point stings advocates of minimal US nuclear capabilities. They clearly want to avoid being charged with advocacy of an approach to deterrence that so offends all humanitarian concepts. Consequently, they often claim in response that the types

and scale of US nuclear capabilities and the targeting plans underlying US deterrent threats essentially make no real difference in the prospective level of societal destruction in a nuclear war,[12] i.e., they claim that a minimal deterrent is no more guilty of violating humanitarian norms than any other approach to nuclear deterrence. There is, however, no doubt whatsoever that the types of nuclear weapons and the targeting plans followed can dramatically affect the levels of destruction and casualties—with the weapons and targeting plans advocated by minimalists unsurprisingly causing the greatest levels of societal destruction. Many careful studies over decades have reached this conclusion.[13] The United States should not help to ensure that any use of nuclear weapons leads to unmitigated levels of societal destruction by adopting an approach to deterrence that is

[12] See, Federation of American Scientists, Natural Resources Defense Council, and Union of Concerned Scientists, "Toward True Security," *Union of Concerned Scientists* (Cambridge, MA: February 2008), pp. 17-18, available at http://www.ucsusa.org/assets/documents/nwgs/toward-true-security.pdf.; See also, Daryl Kimball and Matthew McKinzie, "Nuclear Dangers: Myth, Reality, Response," *Defense News*, February 23, 2015, p. 21; and, Walter Pincus, "Nuclear Weapons Modernization: Not Fast Enough for Kyl," WashingtonPost.com, February 27, 2014, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/nuclear-weapons-modernization-not-fast-enough-for-kyl/2012/02/25/gIQANAJoeR_story.html.

[13] A study by the Natural Resources Defense Council showed that a small "countervalue" strike with up to 192 weapons would inflict 54-56 million casualties in an exchange with Russia, while a very large "counterforce" strike employing many times that number of weapons (approximately 1,300) would inflict 11-17 million casualties. See Matthew McKinzie, et al., *The U.S. Nuclear War Plan: A Time for a Change* (New York: National Resources Defense Council, June 2001), pp. x, 125. Other studies find far fewer casualty levels from "counterforce" targeting scenarios and much higher possible casualty levels from intentional "countervalue" targeting. The distinction here involves literally scores of millions of potential casualties. See for example, United States Senate, Subcommittee on Arms Control, International Law and Organization of the Committee on Foreign Relations, Hearing, *Briefing on Counterforce Attacks*, 93rd Congress, 2nd Session, September 11, 1974, pp. 12-22; Keir Lieber and Daryl Press, "The Nukes We Need: Preserving the American Deterrent," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 88, No. 6 (November/December 2009), p. 47; and, U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, *The Effects of Nuclear War* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, May, 1979), p. 10.

"easy" simply because societal targets are so vulnerable to nuclear weapons that few are needed to threaten them.

Fourth, and related to the above, for US deterrence strategies to function most reliably, the US deterrent must be able to threaten retaliation against those potentially different types of assets that opponents value most highly. In some cases, the minimalist deterrence threat to destroy an opponent's societal infrastructure as the basis of US deterrence strategy will *not* threaten what an opponent values most. There are many historical examples wherein leaderships have willingly and knowingly accepted a high risk of societal destruction in pursuit of a goal judged to be *more important* than avoiding that risk.[14] In short, threats against an opponent's society embraced by minimalists may deter in some cases; in other cases, the opposing leadership's goals and values may suggest that an alternative approach to deterrence is necessary and requires more and different types of US nuclear forces.

During the Cold War, for example, US deterrence policy reportedly was based in part on the expectation that Soviet leaders placed highest value *not* on urban-industrial centers, but on Soviet political and military assets, including the Soviet control structure itself and Soviet military/nuclear capabilities. As the Carter administration's Secretary of Defense, Harold Brown said in 1980, the US deterrent should be capable of posing a threat to "what the Soviets consider most important to them,"[15] which could include, Soviet conventional and

[14] See Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*, op. cit., and Keith B. Payne, *Deterrence and the Second Nuclear Age* (Lexington, KY, University Press of Kentucky, 1996), especially chapters 2-4.

[15] See, the testimony by Secretary of Defense Harold Brown in, U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Nuclear War Strategy*, Hearings, 96th Congress, 2nd Session (Top Secret hearing held on September 16, 1980; sanitized and printed on February 18, 1981), (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1981), p. 10. Se also, Harold Brown in, Committee On Armed Services, Hearing, *MX Missile Basing System And Related Issues*, 98th Congress, 1st Session (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1983), pp. 6-7.

nuclear military forces, the Soviet political and military control structure ("their power structure"), and military industry.[16] Thus, US forces had to be large enough in size and possess the diverse qualities necessary to threaten for deterrence purposes those assets valued most highly by the Soviet leadership. This was a standard for US deterrent forces well beyond the relatively small number of weapons typically deemed adequate to meet the minimal deterrence standard of threatening society. Why? Because Soviet political control and military assets were numerous and often protected.

In today's international threat context, there is no reason to assume that current and future opponents, potentially including Russia and China, will not similarly place greatest value on numerous assets that are realistically vulnerable *only* to US nuclear threats,[17] and impose higher standards of adequacy on US deterrence capabilities than a minimal deterrent. The size and diversity of the US nuclear arsenal for deterrence must be paced accordingly.

Fifth, the minimum deterrence approach to sizing US nuclear forces provides little, if any provision for the failure of deterrence, i.e., in most plausible contingencies, it would provide a President the most miserable options possible were the United States or allies to suffer a nuclear attack. In the event of a nuclear attack, a President certainly would want the scope and size of any US response to help discourage any further nuclear escalation by the opponent. Yet, retaliating against, say, many Russian or Chinese

[16] See, the testimony by Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and the "Administration's Responses to Questions Submitted Before the Hearing," in ibid., pp. 10, 16, 25, 29-30. See also, *Remarks Prepared for Delivery by the Honorable Harold Brown, Secretary of Defense, at the Convocation Ceremonies for the 97th Naval War College Class, Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island*, August 20, 1980; and, the discussion in, Walter Slocombe, "The Countervailing Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Spring 1981), pp. 18-27.

[17] For reasons explained in, Keith B. Payne and James Schlesinger, et al., *Minimum Deterrence: Examining the Evidence* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 2013), pp. 22-25.

societal targets, per minimum deterrence notions, would be likely to undo whatever targeting restraint Moscow or Beijing might have practiced in the initial attack, and do little or nothing the protect the United States from further attack. Then-Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara emphasized precisely this point in 1962: "In the event of war, the use of such a force against the cities of a major nuclear power would be tantamount to suicide."[18] There is almost no conceivable circumstance in which US retaliation against numerous societal targets in the event of an initial Russian or Chinese attack could help to restore deterrence and limit the carnage. The President, instead, would want flexible and diverse US nuclear retaliatory options to have available a response best suited to the crisis and to limiting further escalation and levels of destruction.

The hope that escalation can be limited in the event of war may be a faint hope, but the United States should not by the narrowness of its capabilities and rigidity of its planning be limited to a response that would likely ensure that nuclear escalation proceeds unabated. Again, the US deterrence goal should be, and has been, to have flexible and diverse response options, not the very narrow types of responses imposed by a minimum deterrence approach to sizing US forces. This point is not a rejection of deterrence or a call for a US "nuclear war-fighting" policy; it is a call for diverse US capabilities that make available to the President a variety of options best suited for reestablishing deterrence and limiting nuclear escalation in the event deterrent fails. Once again, this goal can require a US arsenal beyond the number and types of weapons deemed adequate for minimum deterrence.

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[18] Remarks by Secretary McNamara, NATO Ministerial Meeting, 5 May 1962, Restricted Session (Top Secret; declassified in part, August 17, 1979) pp. 11-12, quoted in, Kurt Guthe, *Ten Continuities in U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy, Strategy, Plans, and Forces* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, 2008), p. 50.

Sixth and finally, the United States has formal extended deterrence responsibilities to provide a "nuclear umbrella" for over 30 allies. Many of these allies consider the US nuclear umbrella essential to their security (particularly those in close proximity to Russia and China). However, a minimalist US nuclear deterrent capability limited to threatening an opponent's society may be judged *incredible* as an extended deterrent (i.e., not believed by the opponent) because of the well-recognized US desire to limit civilian destruction in its military operations and also, again, because of the likelihood that a US nuclear response against an opponent's society could lead that opponent simply to launch strikes in return against US urban-industrial centers. In this case, a US extended deterrent threat focusing on an opponent's society essentially would be a US threat to commit national suicide on behalf of an ally. Opponents may understandably doubt that any US President would ever choose to proceed along such a course. Indeed, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger long-ago publicly explained to allies that they should never expect the United States to follow such a course.[19] An opponent's doubts along these lines would render that US minimal nuclear deterrent threat incredible for extended deterrence purposes. Even if the United States clearly possesses a minimal deterrent capability, it will be of little deterrent value if opponents deem it incredible.

Consequently, for decades, US policy has been to have a diversity of flexible and limited nuclear response options, including Dual Capable Aircraft (DCA) deployed in NATO countries and intended to be more credible for extended deterrence purposes than a minimal deterrent. DOD officials in the Obama administration fully recognize this need for "diverse nuclear options," and the corresponding continuing need for the US triad and DCA. Why? Because,

[19] Henry Kissinger, "The Future of NATO," in, *NATO, The Next Thirty Years*, Kenneth Myers, ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), p. 8.

"sustaining a diverse set of U.S. nuclear capabilities is essential for the role they play in regional deterrence."[20]

For all of the reasons noted above, US officials have long recognized a minimalist US nuclear arsenal as inadequate to support US deterrence requirements. Minimal US nuclear force numbers may sound appealing, but in general, the smaller and less diverse is the US force, the less survivable it is, the less flexible it is, the more narrow are the available US deterrent threat options, and the less credible it is likely to be in some potentially critical contingencies.

It must be acknowledged that there is considerable speculation regarding "how much is enough?" in both the minimum-deterrence approach to US nuclear forces sizing and the decades-long US approach that instead seeks flexible, diverse, and overlapping capabilities. But, while both approaches involve speculation, the now-traditional US approach to deterrence is by far the more prudent in an area that begs for prudence.

Why so? Because deterrence is an art that includes numerous moving parts with some inherent and irreducible uncertainties. "How much is enough" for deterrence is not fully predictable because we have an inherently limited capacity to predict reliably and precisely how prospective foreign leaders will think and act in crises. Given the great variety of international threats and the equally great variation in the perceptions, values and decision-making modes of foreign leaderships, no one knows with any level of confidence that a small, minimum deterrence-oriented US arsenal will deter on any given occasion, much less universally for all plausible occasions now and in the future.

Given this reality, the most imprudent approach to deterrence is to have an "easy" small and narrow set of US

[20] Robert Scher, Statement of Robert Scher, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans, and Capabilities Before the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, February 9, 2016, p. 4.

deterrence threat options based on the presumptions that opponents will be deterred by nuclear threats to their societies and that the United States can make such threats credibly. The effective functioning of deterrence is too important to depend on the assumption that the US will face only opponents who are susceptible to minimum deterrent threats. The US goal must be for deterrence to work in all cases, which again suggests the value of diverse, flexible and overlapping capabilities that are adaptable for deterrence purposes across a wide variety of potential circumstances.

In addition, US planning must recognize the possibility that deterrence will fail. Yet, as noted above, minimum deterrence makes no useful provision for the failure of deterrence. Indeed, it likely maximizes the prospects for uncontrolled societal destruction if deterrence fails. The functioning of deterrence is not foolproof and thus making no provision for its failure is grossly imprudent.

In summary, while all approaches to determining "how much is enough" for deterrence involve speculation about how opponents will think and act, for the United States, the possession of flexible, diverse and overlapping capabilities is the most prudent approach. This is particularly so in the contemporary threat environment characterized by an expansionist, revanchist and hostile Russia that is adding to its nuclear arsenal and making explicit nuclear first-use threats,[21] and also by an increasingly aggressive, expansionist China that also is adding to its nuclear capabilities.[22]

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[21] See Keith B. Payne, John S. Foster, et al., *Russian Strategy: Expansion, Crisis and Conflict* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2016).

22 U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Committee, 2015 Report to Congress (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, November 2015), available at http://origin.www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/annual_reports/2015%20Annual%20Report%20to%20Congress.PDF. See also, Bill Gertz, "China Adds Warheads to Older DF-5s," *The Washington Times*, February 10, 2006, available at

Advocates of a minimal US nuclear deterrent continue to call for revising US nuclear deterrence policies and targeting plans per the minimum deterrence adequacy standard to facilitate lower US nuclear force requirements.[23] They actually argue against diverse and flexible US forces,[24] typically because those attributes suggest the requirement for retaining larger US force numbers than they prefer. But, given the stark reality of increasing nuclear threats to the United States and allies, US deterrence policies should not be determined by how well they meet "easy" standards and provide a rationale for eliminating US nuclear capabilities; US deterrence policies serve purposes other than rationalizing the elimination of US nuclear forces. The adequacy of US nuclear forces and policies should be determined primarily by the requirements for deterring enemies and assuring US allies in the most prudent manner possible. Consequently, the reasons described here for rejecting a minimalist US nuclear deterrent force continue to be sound.

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http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/feb/10/inside-the-ring-china-adds-warhead-to-older-df-5s/.

[23] See, for example, Hans Kristensen and Robert Norris, "Reviewing Nuclear Guidance," Arms Control Association, November 2, 2011, available at http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2011_11/Reviewing_Nuclear_Guidance_Putting_Obama_Words_Into_Action; and, Adam Mount, "The Fiscal Threat to Nuclear Strategy," *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 15, 2015, available at http://thebulletin.org/fiscal-threat-nuclear-strategy8080.

[24] Hans Kristensen and Robert Norris, "Reviewing Nuclear Guidance," op. cit.; Tom Nichols, "Time to Change America's Atomic Arsenal," *The Diplomat*, March 14, 2013, available at http://thediplomat.com/2013/03/time-to-change-americas-atomic-arsenal/; and, George Perkovich, Individual Statement, "A Sustaining U.S. Nuclear Posture," CSIS Nuclear Consensus Working Group (Barry Blechman, Linton Brooks, Robert DeGrasse, Frank G. Klotz, Franklin Miller, Clark Murdock, George Perkovich, Steven Pifer), "Forging a Consensus for a Sustainable U.S. Nuclear Posture," April 2013, pp. 46-47, available at http://csis.org/files/publication/130422_Spies_ForgingConsensus_Web.pdf.

New Threat Realities and Deterrence Requirements*

The SW-21 conference sponsors have asked multiple worthy and overarching questions. But given the time available, we must narrow the aperture for our respective remarks. In doing so, I would like to discuss two of these overarching questions briefly:

- **First:** What are the changes in the security environment posed by regional powers?
- **Second**, and, correspondingly: What do these changes suggest regarding the possibility of new requirements?

Most of my remarks along these lines today focus on Russia and deterrence policy considerations because that has been the focus of my work for decades. But there are important parallels with regard to US-Chinese relations that we can discuss as well.

Previous speakers have focused on the first question regarding changes in the security environment. So I will offer a brief, up-front conclusion in this regard: the world has become a much more dangerous place since the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) and Western security policies and practices need to adjust to this new reality.

Until recently, that conclusion would have been deemed far-fetched. Indeed, a basic presumption underlying past NPRs was of an increasingly benign world order in which nuclear weapons would play a declining role in terms of both the threat they pose and their security value. The post-Cold War world supposedly was moving beyond such methods and concerns. Nuclear deterrence was deemed decreasingly relevant to US relations with Russia and

* Original publication: Keith B. Payne, "New Threat Realities and Deterrence Requirements?," *Information Series*, No. 415 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 30, 2017).

China, and irrelevant to the most serious threat, nuclear terrorism.

Indeed, for most of the previous twenty-five years, US policy increasingly has been captured by three related refrains regarding the post-Cold War era: 1) nuclear terrorism was the remaining greatest threat; 2) nonproliferation was the highest priority and key to countering this greatest threat; and, 3) in turn, US nuclear reductions and limitations were the key to nonproliferation.

The policy direction that followed these three refrains regarding US nuclear weapons was that their salience and numbers should be lowered, both for their lack of value and to advance our *highest nuclear policy priority*, nonproliferation.

The postulates underlying these lines were and are questionable at best, but taken together they led inevitably to the conclusion that nuclear deterrence was an outdated subject and strategy, and US nuclear forces were of greatly-declining value and interest.

It's difficult to overstate the certainty that attended this policy direction. It was reflected in a highly-regarded 1991 *Foreign Affairs* article written by three senior former officials and authors, including the late Robert McNamara. To wit, hostility with Russia was described as, "hardly more likely to be revived than the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries between Catholics and Protestants in Europe."[1] Over two decades later, the Global Zero Commission study similarly said, "The risk of nuclear confrontation between the United States and either Russia or China belongs to the past, not the future."[2]

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[1] Carl Kaysen, Robert S. McNamara, and George W. Rathjens, "Nuclear Weapons After the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (Fall 1991), p. 96. Over two decades later, the authors of a prominent report by the Nuclear Zero Commission made essentially the same claim, that is, the prospect of conflict with Russia or China had become a thing of the past.

[2] James Cartwright, Chair, Global Zero U.S. Nuclear Policy Commission, *Modernizing U.S. Nuclear Strategy,Force Structure and Posture* (Washington, D.C.:

Unfortunately, that new world was short-lived, as some doughty realists said would be the case. We are now playing catch-up as nuclear deterrence once again is identified as priority number one by senior US civilian and military leaders. As a 2016 DoD report states: "The nuclear deterrent is the DoD's highest priority mission."[3]

What happened? The supposed new world order and its corresponding nuclear policy line so embraced by the West were mugged by reality, particularly including Russia's and China's blatant drives to overturn existing orders and their expanding nuclear capabilities. These drives appear ultimately to have persuaded key folks in the Obama Administration that the new world order is not emerging; that nonproliferation is not the highest priority goal; and that robust US nuclear capabilities and threats remain critical for the deterrence of enemies and the assurance of allies.

As former Secretary of Defense Carter noted in November 2016, "While we didn't build anything new for 25 years, and neither did our allies, others did—including Russia, North Korea, China, Pakistan, India, and for a period of time, Iran. We [now] can't wait any longer."[4]

Belief in a benign world order is self-serving for satisfied, status-quo powers, and thus has been extremely difficult for the West to discard. However, Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and its on-going pressure and explicit nuclear first-use threats against NATO

Global Zero, May 2012), p. 6, available at http://www.globalzero.org/files/gz_us_nuclear_policy_commission_report.pdf.

[3] Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Defense Programs, *Strategic Planning Guidance FY 2018-2022*, February 2016, p. 2.

[4] Quoted in, Jamie McIntyre, "Carter Says Nuclear-Armed Foes Catching Up to the US," *Washington Examiner*, November 3, 2016, at http://www.washgiontonexaminer.com/carter-says-nuclear-armed-foes-catching-up-to-the-us/article/2606380.

states and neutrals have demonstrated today's stark reality.[5]

The Putin regime, for example, appears to believe that it has an exploitable escalation advantage; that is, the West is expected to stand down in the face of Russian nuclear escalation threats or employment. According to open sources, we saw this dynamic play out in Russian exercises as early as *Zapad* 99.[6]

Russia's explicit nuclear-first use threats and reported planning for first-use employment reflect a partial failure of Western deterrence strategies, and the mounting palpable fears of some US allies reflect a partial failure of assurance.[7] This is not speculation about some dark future; these partial failures are here and now.

This apparent reality now compels some NATO members to consider difficult choices: last year for example the Undersecretary of State in Poland's Defense Ministry stated publicly that Poland may have to choose between creating its own non-nuclear deterrent or "drift towards a 'Finlandized' status in order to decrease the likelihood of Russian attack."[8] Anyone who misses the message

[5] Then-Commander of the US European Command, Gen. Philip Breedlove, said in Feb. 2016, "Russia's continued aggressive actions and malign influence remain a top concern for our nation and my highest priority as EUCOM Commander. "General Philip Breedlove, Commander, U.S. European Command, U.S. European Command Posture Statement 2016, February 25, 2016, at http://www.eucom.mil/media-library/article/35164/u-s-european-command-posture-statement-2016.

[6] Dave Johnson, "Nuclear Weapons in Russia's Approach to Conflict," *Recherches & Documents*, No. 6 (November 2016), p.13, www.FRSTRATEGIE.org.

[7] There are many open discussions regarding allied concerns. See for example, Bradley Peniston, "A Key NATO Ally Looks Nervously at Putin—And Trump," *Defense One*, January 23, 2017, http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2017/01/key-nato-ally- looks-nervously-putin-and-trump/134765/.

[8] Tomasz Szatkowski as quoted in Giampaolo Di Paola, François Heisbourg, Patrick Keller, Richard Shirreff, Tomasz Szatkowski, and Rolf Tamnes, *Alliance at Risk: Strengthening European Defense in an Age of Turbulence and Competition* (Washington, D.C.: The Atlantic Council, February 2016), pp. 25-26, http://publications.atlanticcouncil.org/nato-alliance-at-risk/alliance-at-risk.pdf.

contained in such public statements simply does not want to hear it.

A well-known commentator recently said publicly that such allies are just "nervous nellies,"[9] and their fears should not drive US policies; a former senior defense official asked rhetorically, "Why should we be responsible for their paranoia?" Such disdainful, condescending statements fail to recognize that our allies do understand their own security conditions, and if we care about our alliances (which we must), we cannot disdain their security concerns.

There is now something of a consensus in Washington regarding these new threat realities and the corresponding revived importance of nuclear deterrence and assurance. So, we can move logically to our second question**:** What do these new realities suggest regarding new US requirements for deterrence and assurance? This should be a central question of the new US Nuclear Posture Review and also a serious question for the new Ballistic Missile Defense Review.[10] The first-order generalized answer is the requirement for US flexibility and resilience to adapt as necessary to a hostile, dynamic, and unpredictable environment. That answer alone is no small change from the previous dominant post-Cold War policy direction which sought largely to limit and reduce US nuclear capabilities on a continuing and progressive basis.

But, to answer the question of requirements in greater detail depends on the answer to a prior question that to my knowledge few have asked and no one has yet answered in detail: What are the specific factors that underlie our

[9] Joe Cirincioni quoted in, Josh Rogin, "U.S. allies unite to block Obama's nuclear 'legacy'," *Washington Post*, August 14, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/allies-unite-to-block-an-obama-legacy/2016/08/14/cdb8d8e4-60b9-11e6-8e45-477372e89d78_story.html?utm_term=.14d3f106368c.

[10] Aaron Mehta, "Trump Signs Order Promising a 'Great Rebuilding' of the Military," *Defense News*, January 27, 2017, http://www.defensenews.com/articles/report-draft-executive-order-would-give-pentagon-short-term-funding-boost.

opponents' felt freedom to contest US deterrence strategies, change post-Cold War boundaries, and threaten us, our allies and neutrals with nuclear first use?

Recent recommendations regarding new requirements in Europe range widely—from doing nothing; to heightening Western conventional capabilities and their readiness; to matching Russia's numerous nuclear escalation options with the deployment of multiple new types of US strategic and theater nuclear strike capabilities.

What often is missing from these recommendations, however, is their linkage to any explanation of why Russia believes it has an escalation advantage, and how the recommended responses address the factors underlying that Russian belief.

For example, if the Russian perception of advantage flows from particular political conditions or lax Western signaling, then our new requirements must be geared toward fixing those political conditions or communication lapses. If instead, Russian perceptions of advantage are based more on operational military considerations, nuclear and/or non-nuclear, then that must be the object of our focus. Obviously, these possible factors are not mutually exclusive—Russian perceptions of advantage may follow from a combination of factors.

In the absence of establishing the linkage between specific problems and remedy, any recommended fix may be deemed as helpful or unhelpful as the next—with the exception of "do nothing," which should be considered a non-starter because it would leave in place conditions that are too dangerous to be allowed to continue.

I wish Russian leaders would make our work in this regard easy by publicly identifying and weighting the factors they believe give Russia an escalation advantage. Unfortunately, they do not. Consequently, as was the case during the Cold War, we are reduced to

interpreting shadows on the wall—fully aware that Russian *dezinformatsiya* can distort the shadows.

That said, based on numerous open Russian writings and speeches over years, there are some consistent themes that *I suspect* underlie Moscow's perceptions of an exploitable escalation advantage over NATO; from there it is possible to derive a few corresponding Western requirements.

I do not present these in order of importance because I don't know *how or if* Russians weigh these factors, but they reportedly do assess the correlation of forces carefully and broadly, and take it seriously. We can start with the psychological and political factors: Russian goals, stakes, and will. Such factors may seem amorphous to some here today, but they are at the heart of deterrence and assurance considerations.

Russia is driven to correct the perceived injustices of the post-Cold War order forced on it by the West. The reigning belief in Moscow is that the West has further highly-aggressive designs against Russia, including regime change, and that Moscow must act to restore its power position or it will suffer further. Russia's goal of overturning the post-Cold War settlement makes friction with the West inevitable, and involves high stakes.

Importantly in this regard, both cognitive studies and historical analyses consistently indicate that, in general, the drive to recover something dear that has been lost, including honor—as appears to inspire Russian leaders—will also inspire considerable willingness to risk further loss. (Gambling casinos live on this very human penchant).

Russia believes it has the need and the will to overturn the status-quo, while it judges NATO's will and decision-making to be less uniform and determined to resist *if the risk of war looms, particularly nuclear war*. Moscow's apparent self-image and skepticism regarding NATO in this regard

constitutes a perceived exploitable advantage that threatens deterrence.

Please note that I am not saying Russia wants war, but that its calculation of an asymmetry in the readiness to risk war, including nuclear war, is key to our considerations of deterrence and new requirements.

In short, Russia appears to have some felt-freedom to move against the West given its perception of this asymmetry of need and will. Just how much freedom Russia believes it has to move, I believe, is not fixed. It depends on Russian calculations of NATO's determination and strength to resist. That is a calculation I believe the West can affect by its statements and actions.

For example, some commentators say that the Putin regime has dangerous designs on Baltics states, others say it has no such designs. My point is that there probably is not a fixed answer to this question. Rather the Putin regime is pragmatic and the West can affect its designs and actions vis-à-vis the Baltics and elsewhere. This constraint is what makes Russia today so different from Germany in the late 1930s, and why deterrence is so critical.

What is required in response? Most generally, the West must end Russian perceptions that its will and readiness to break the West at the risk of war is greater than the West's will and readiness to prevent it from doing so.

We can help in this regard with consistent, assertive alliance-wide declaratory policies and actions communicating the message that the United States and NATO will not prove wobbly, *even under threat of nuclear war*, i.e., that Moscow has no exploitable political-psychological advantage in terms of *goals, stakes and will*. This is a tall order, but there is ample room for improvement in Western efforts to do so.

A related theme in Russian writings that underlies this perception of exploitable advantage, perhaps unsurprisingly, involves the apparent belief that Russia has

corresponding force posture advantages over the West, nuclear and non-nuclear. These range from much greater local conventional force capability and readiness in the short-run, to nuclear escalation options to which NATO is thought to have no acceptable response given Russian skepticism about Western will and nuclear credibility.

The interaction here between Western non-nuclear defense preparedness and the perceived credibility of Western nuclear escalation options is important: the lower the credibility of Western nuclear escalation options, the greater is the likely requirement for forward defense. To use Cold War terms, a conventional "trip wire" that is believed by Moscow to lead to nothing much, will be of no value for deterrence or otherwise.

In addition, the greater the Western effort to put defensive capabilities in place to protect NATO front-line states, the more likely it will be that Moscow will see Western escalation commitments as credible. Why? Because it will demonstrate Western willingness to put itself on the line for this cause. The West understood this point well during the Cold War. The difference now, of course, is that NATO front-line states are former parts of the Soviet Union or former members of its Warsaw Pact.

That said, addressing Russia's perceptions of exploitable advantage cannot escape the nuclear dimension. Given Russian views regarding escalation, the credibility of the West's nuclear escalation threat is central. There is no non-nuclear prescription that can fully address Russia's perception of an escalation advantage that is at the heart of the West's deterrence problem.

Western options that could help in this regard include the obvious, such as: increasing DCA survivability and readiness; increasing the active defense of key NATO nodes and assets against conventional and nuclear strike; advancing the delivery date of the F-35 and B61-12

combination;[11] and having some very low-yield options available on accurate US strategic missile systems.

Other less obvious options include, for example, inviting allied personnel from front-line states such as Poland to serve as DCA pilots. Whether the West needs new nuclear strike capabilities, particularly given Russian violation of the INF Treaty, is an open question.

However that question is resolved, a more assertive supporting nuclear declaratory policy should complement any such steps. The long-held notion that uncertainty and ambiguity with regard to Western escalation will be adequate to support deterrence needs to be reconsidered. The historical evidence is overwhelming that uncertainty and ambiguity sometimes are not adequate to deter; explicit and direct threats are necessary in some cases. The Putin regime may be such a case. A useful example of a more direct declaratory policy was provided in 2016 by the then-new British Prime Minister, Theresa May when asked in Parliament if she would ever authorize a nuclear strike. She responded yes without hesitation. Prime Minister May added, "The whole point of a deterrent is that our enemies need to know that we would be prepared to use it. . . We must send an unequivocal message to any adversary that the cost of an attack on our United Kingdom or our allies will be far greater than anything it might hope to gain."[12] I have no doubt that Moscow paid considerable attention to that unambiguous deterrence signal.

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[11] See Orianna Pawlyk, "F-35 Could Carry B61 Nuclear Warhead Sooner Than Planned," *Tech*, January 10, 2017, http://defensetech.org/2017/01/10/f-35-carry-b61-nuclear -warhead-sooner-planned/.

[12] Theresa May, as quoted in House of Commons Hansard, "UK's Nuclear Deterrent," *Parliament.uk*, July 18, 2016, https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2016-07-18/debates/16071818000001/UKSNuclearDeterrent?highlight=Care.

There is much more to say about this critical question of linking Western fixes to the real deterrence problem, but I must stop at this point to stay within my allotted time. I look forward to our Q and A session.

The Emerging Nuclear Environment: Two Challenges Ahead*

My assigned task here is to discuss challenges ahead in the nuclear environment. There are, of course, a variety of interrelated challenges in the international environment that cross multiple domains, but my task here is to discuss nuclear challenges. That will be my focus.

There are two distinct but related nuclear challenges: 1) the challenge of external nuclear developments among potential adversaries; and, 2) the internal challenge of establishing an enduring, effective Western response to those foreign developments.

External Nuclear Developments

There are multiple emerging or potential nuclear challenges, including from North Korea, China, and Iran. But, here I will comment on only the most apparent, immediate external nuclear challenge—which I believe to be Russia. The Russian nuclear challenge follows from the combination of Russia's goal to revise the existing international political order, and the apparent role Moscow envisages for its nuclear forces in advancing that goal.

What is the geographic extent of Russia's revisionist goal? The answer to this key question is unclear. Perhaps the geographic extent corresponds to that of the former territory of the Soviet Union, or perhaps to the expanse of the earlier Imperial Russia. It is not obvious what the current leadership in Moscow believes to be the rightful boundaries of Russia. Whatever may be the case, it is clear

* Original publication: Keith B. Payne, "The Emerging Nuclear Environment: Two Challenges Ahead," *Information Series*, No. 436 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 2, 2019).

that Moscow's leadership aspires to return to past greatness, and doing so involves geography.

While political geography may seem an archaic national focus to many in the West, it remains a prominent theme in Russian security thinking. This should be no surprise given Russian history and the value of its expansive territory for power and survival—from Napoleon's invasion in 1812 to Hitler's invasion in 1941.

It also is unclear whether, or how much of Russia's geographic goal would be satisfied with: 1) Political/economic hegemony over its desired historic space; 2) the actual incorporation within Russian borders of now-external territory and ethnic Russian populations; or, 3) a combination of these two.

The first of these—seeking political/economic hegemony--is a threat to the sovereignty of Russia's neighbors. The second of these--the incorporation of territory and ethnic Russian populations into the Russian homeland--is a possible threat to neighbors' national survival.

Over the past ten years, we have seen evidence of both approaches: Russia's operations in Crimea suggest the goal of expanding Russian borders and absorbing ethnic Russian populations. Russia's political and economic efforts elsewhere suggest the goal of establishing a form of economic and political hegemony.

Whatever are the parameters and nature of Russia's territorial ambitions, it is clear that, given the expansion of NATO since the end of the Cold War, Russia's revisionist goal may be satisfied at the expense of our allies' and partners' sovereignty or territory. As a former U.S. intelligence official reportedly stated, "Everything for Vladimir Putin is a zero-sum game, and we are his main enemy. The Russians are continually probing us, and they're going to keep going as far as they can until we push back in such a way that we deter them from taking even

more aggressive action."[1] This Russian ambition and perspective is the disturbing reality we now confront.

In contrast to this disturbing reality, the possible good news is that the Putin regime--while revisionist and expansionist—also appears to be pragmatic and calculating. These characteristics are significant because a potential opponent's pragmatism, and related willingness to stand back following the calculation of risk, are necessary for deterrence to operate to prevent or defer aggression.

The good news here is that Russia appears not to be akin to National Socialist Germany in this regard. Where contemporary Russia appears pragmatic and calculating, Hitler had set expansionist goals and a timeline, and his dedication to the realization of those goals was not highly subject to pragmatism or the calculation of risk. Instead, Adolf Hitler often boasted of his unalterable goals and unhesitating decisions: "Neither threats nor warnings will prevent me from going my way. I follow the path assigned me by Providence with the instinctive sureness of a sleepwalker."[2] With such an adversary, effective strategies of deterrence may be extremely difficult or even impossible. But, that does not appear to be Russia.

This difference between contemporary Russia and National Socialist Germany of the 1930's is critical. Where Russia sees opportunity and the potential for expansion at tolerable risk and cost, it will likely act, including with hard and soft power. However, where Russia's geographic appetite is opposed by countervailing Western power, Russia's behavior will likely be limited by its pragmatism

1 Quoted in Guy Taylor and Ben Wolfgang, "'Zero-sum game': Russian Aggression tests Trump, US Power," *The Washington Times*, November 27, 2018, at https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/nov/27/russia-ukraine-kerch-strait-incident-tests-trump-u/.

2 Adolf Hitler, Speech, Munich Exhibition Halls, March 14, 1936. Quoted in Max Domarus, *Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945, The Chronicle of a Dictatorship*, *Vol. II, 1935-1938* (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1992), p. 790.

and related willingness to stand back in the face of too much calculated risk and cost.

I do not mean by this that Russia is likely to adopt amicable intentions in response to Western power. While an amicable relationship is a long-term goal, deterrence is not about creating amicable intentions. It is about preventing aggression in the context of less-than-amicable relations. The combination of Russian pragmatism and risk calculation suggests that in the face of countervailing Western power, there is room for Moscow to moderate its provocative pursuit of revisionist goals. This is good news because it means that there is the *potential* for Western power to deter extreme Russian behavior, at least in principle.

A Nuclear Challenge

The key question that follows is: How are these apparent Russian geopolitical aspirations and regime characteristics related to a Russian nuclear challenge? A very concise answer is as follows: Russia's leadership reportedly believes that Moscow can use the threat of nuclear first-use, or actual limited nuclear first-use if necessary, to help advance its goal of revising the political order in Eurasia.[3]

In short, there is a link between Russia's nuclear capabilities and its expansionist goals that includes two mechanisms. First, Moscow appears to believe that it can use nuclear threats against U.S. allies and partners to move them away from policies and positions Moscow opposes, and to compel their conciliation in crises. This apparent coercive role for nuclear threats is a return to Soviet Cold War practice.[4] It goes beyond traditional Western notions

3 See the discussion in, Mark Schneider, "Russia and Conventional Deterrence," *Information Series*, No. 434, National Institute Press, December 13, 2018.

4 See Hans Speier, *Force and Folly* (Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1969), pp. 70-99.

of limiting the scope and purpose of nuclear deterrence to the protection of a country's existence.

Rather, Russia appears to have lowered the threshold for making nuclear threats to include preventing Western actions that seem to have little to do with threats to Russia's survival; to put it differently, Russia appears to have expanded the range of foreign behaviors it believes it can influence via explicit nuclear threats.

For example, Russia has made explicit nuclear threats to allies regarding participation in the U.S. ballistic missile defense (BMD) program: In 2015, Russia's Ambassador to Denmark, Mikhail Vanin, reportedly made an explicit nuclear targeting threat: "I don't think that Danes fully understand the consequence if Denmark joins the American-led missile defence shield. If they do, then Danish warships will be targets for Russian nuclear missiles."[5]

The second linkage between Russia's geographic aspirations and nuclear weapons is that Moscow appears to believe that it can employ limited nuclear strikes against U.S. allies and possibly against the U.S. itself to prevent a cohesive, powerful Western response to Russia's use of hard power in support of its expansionist goals. This is the much-discussed Russian approach to "de-escalation." The underlying concept appears to be that a conflict is de-escalated because Russia's opponent decides to cease resistance in the face of limited Russian nuclear use.

In 2015, NATO Deputy Military Commander, Lieutenant General Sir Adrian Bradshaw, pointed out, "Russia might believe the large scale conventional force it has shown it can generate on very short notice…could in the future be used not only for intimidation and coercion but potentially to seize NATO territory after which the threat of

5 Julian Isherwood, "Russia warns Denmark its warships could become nuclear targets," *The Telegraph*, March 21, 2015, available at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/denmark/11487509/Russia-warns-Denmark-its-warships-.

escalation might be used to prevent reestablishment of territorial integrity."[6] This apparent Russian notion again has little to do with Russia using nuclear threat or escalation in the protection of its existence; escalation here would be in the service of expansion.

I believe that this combination of Russian expansionist goals and nuclear concepts is the most obvious and immediate nuclear challenge. The questions that arise from this combination are: First, what is the basis for Russia's felt freedom to lower the threshold for nuclear threats and potentially nuclear first-use? What are the gaps, as perceived by Moscow, in the existing Western deterrence position that allow this perceived freedom? And, second, how can the West moderate Russian views about the potential value of nuclear threats and nuclear first-use in support of its expansionist goals?

The short answer to this latter question is that the West must take advantage of Russian pragmatism and risk calculation to move it away from nuclear threats and any anticipation of success via nuclear first use. What does this require in principle? The West must move Russia to see that:

1) its frequent nuclear threats are counterproductive; and

2) any level of nuclear first use would risk unleashing an uncontrollable process with potentially intolerable consequences for Russia.

This does not mean that the West must adopt the apparent Russian view that nuclear escalation is controllable. No, it means that the West must lead Russia to understand that: 1) it cannot fracture NATO cohesion via nuclear threats; and

6 Adrian Bradshaw, "The Latest Security Challenges Facing NATO," *Royal United Services Institute*, February 20, 2015, https://rusi.org/multimedia/latest-security-challenges-facing-nato.

2) it would not be able to control nuclear escalation to its advantage and success. Rather, such escalation would always entail too much risk. Western nuclear deterrence posturing and capabilities alone probably cannot produce this change in Russian thinking, but it cannot be accomplished without nuclear deterrence.

A Domestic Nuclear Challenge

At the outset of this discussion I suggested that there are two different but related nuclear challenges. One external, the other domestic. I have briefly described what I believe to be the most obvious and immediate external nuclear challenge: It is the linkage between Russian national aspirations and Moscow's apparent views regarding the value of nuclear weapons in the pursuit of those aspirations. The domestic challenge confronting us is whether there will be clear-eyed recognition of these external nuclear threat developments, and the corresponding establishment of an enduring and responsive deterrence policy and posture. Throughout much of the Cold War, the United States sustained a bipartisan deterrence policy and posture vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. It was sufficiently effective to help bound U.S.-Soviet hostilities throughout the Cold War.

Doing so again in this new post-Cold War era will cut against considerable established thought: For almost three decades, the common Western expectation has been that great power nuclear threats were a thing of the past. That expectation led the United States and allies in a very particular direction. This direction was generally based on the underlying bipartisan presumption that nuclear deterrence and capabilities were of sharply declining value, and that continually reducing and limiting nuclear capabilities was synonymous with reducing nuclear dangers. That is, the security value of continuing to reduce and limit U.S. nuclear systems was deemed to be greater

than the potential value of continuing to modernize and replace those nuclear systems.

If you doubt my point, I encourage you to read or reread President George H. W. Bush's landmark September 21, 1991 speech introducing the Presidential Nuclear Initiative, and President Obama's landmark 2009 Prague speech in favor of nuclear disarmament. The common apparent underlying current in each noted speech is the presumption that the great power nuclear environment was moving in an increasingly benign direction, would continue to do so, and that continuing reductions in U.S. nuclear forces would reduce nuclear dangers rather than risk endangering Western security.

There is this enduring strain in U.S. thinking about nuclear capabilities--that they should continually be reduced because greater safety is to be found in ever-lower numbers and greater limitations. I understand and would agree with that thought in the right context, but not in the context of the deep U.S. nuclear reductions already made and the emerging external nuclear challenges we now see.

Instead, effective nuclear deterrence appears to be of increasing value, and U.S. nuclear capabilities again are needed to make deterrence as effective as possible given the reality of external nuclear challenges. That is, modernizing U.S. nuclear forces now in support of deterrence is more likely to reduce nuclear dangers than would their continuing reduction at the possible expense of sustaining effective deterrence capabilities.

This does not mean that the United States needs to increase the number of its strategic nuclear weapons, nor that future nuclear reductions must be avoided. Rather, it means recognizing that sustaining nuclear deterrence, and the needed nuclear posture for deterrence at multiple levels, is again a key to addressing emerging external nuclear dangers. That recognition should underlie how we think about these issues. The related internal challenge is

whether the United States and key allies will be able to establish and sustain the domestic political consensus necessary for an enduring countervailing nuclear policy and posture designed to help address the gaps that Russia apparently perceives in the West's deterrence position. These are the gaps that appear to give Russia, *according to its perceptions*, the liberty to: 1) engage in unprecedented coercive nuclear threats, and, 2) potentially engage in coercive nuclear first-use to "de-escalate" or end a conflict on its favored terms.

That Russia perceives such liberty is, I believe, unarguable given its open statements and behavior. What may be the Western deterrence gaps in Russian perception is an important question for another day. The answer may be a moving target with multiple parts, but it is important to note that this is all about Russian perceptions and decision making. It is Moscow's perceptions that matter in this regard; it is irrelevant whether or not we in the West believe that Moscow *should* perceive whatever gaps it may see. Whether they are real or not by our calculations, they need to be addressed to move Russian views in a more benign direction.

Consequently, I will conclude with the two basic questions regarding our internal nuclear challenge. Will we have the courage and stamina to ask ourselves, without flinching, what are the possible gaps in our deterrence position as perceived by Russia? And, will we have the unity and stamina to do what we must do, possibly over many years, to address those gaps? That is the domestic challenge. It is the flip side of the external challenge.

I will conclude here by noting that I have no doubt that we will successfully address the external nuclear challenges if we are able to address the internal nuclear challenge. To do so will require the level of consistent bipartisanship that last enabled us to more than survive the Cold War.

Multilateral Deterrence: What's New and Why it Matters*

Deterrence theorists, policy makers, and commentators are now eagerly discussing "trilateral deterrence." This, of course, refers to the simultaneous deterrence engagement of three great nuclear powers, the United States, Russia and China.

This brief review of deterrence in new global conditions is divided into two parts: The first identifies some inconvenient truths about what we can know about the functioning of deterrence; the second begins a discussion of *why* new multilateral deterrence conditions have implications for U.S. deterrence strategies and best practice. It is commonplace to assert that trilateral deterrence is different and must affect U.S. deterrence policy—explaining why and how that is true is not commonplace, but it is important to start.

Inconvenient Truths About Deterrence Prognostication

First, some inconvenient truths. Discussions about how changes in the structure of international relations will affect the functioning of deterrence can be interesting and more or less informed, but it is important to acknowledge that no one can be high on the learning curve regarding the functioning of deterrence in a new trilateral (or more, multilateral) deterrence dynamic.

It took over three decades during the Cold War for the United States to reach a bipartisan consensus on U.S. deterrence goals and related measures of force

* Original publication: Keith B. Payne, "Multilateral Deterrence: What's New and Why it Matters," *Information Series*, No. 522 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, May 16, 2022).

requirements—not for a lack of brilliant minds working on the subject. We are quite early in the process of trying to understand deterrence in a very different international structure and current discussions often are dogged by continued reference to accepted wisdom inherited from the 1960s.

Aside from the most obvious points about deterrence, we are unavoidably in the world of speculation and conjecture, including what the ubiquitous word "stability" means and what in practice will help or hinder it. A former Secretary of the Navy, Richard Danzig, has quipped with regard to forecasting international relations in general that we are "driving in the dark."[1] Another has rightly suggested: "To state the obvious, this is not an exact science. It's more like looking at a fog bank and trying to see what shape is in the fog. What is it that you can kind of see but can't fully make out?"[2]

There is nothing wrong with speculation and conjecture about the future functioning of deterrence, as long as everyone understands that informed speculation is the limit of what now is possible. Obviously, planning must be done and policy makers must establish some basis for doing so—there is no pause button on history. But, in contrast to the thousands of commentators' confident claims since the 1960s that one step or another surely would make or break deterrence, predictions about deterrence demand great humility rather than hubris.

Indeed, the most pervasive myth in this field is that confident prediction about the precise functioning of

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[1] Richard Danzig, *Driving in the Dark: Ten Propositions About Prediction and National Security* (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2011), available at https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNAS_Prediction_Danzig.pdf?mtime=20160906081652&focal=none.

[2] Newt Gingrich, "Newt Gingrich: My Predictions for next 10 years—I expect these big changes," *FoxNews.com*, January 3, 2021, available at https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/future-predictions-for-2020s-newt-gingrich.

deterrence is possible. The difficulty in reaching confident conclusions beyond the most obvious is not a matter of finding the right analyst or methodology. The problem is our unavoidable ignorance of the many factors and conditions that can lead to deterrence failure or success. That is, the functioning of deterrence can be affected by an extremely wide range of factors—some of which may be well-known, others may be somewhat obvious (but not their significance in decision making), and others may be completely obscure. And, unfortunately, we do not know the importance for deterrence of what we do not know.

This harsh reality was true in the bipolar world of the Cold War; it is even more significant in a world of three great nuclear powers. Those factors key to deterrence working or failing are multiplied with every new entry into the deterrence dynamic—the imponderables multiply with every new possible interaction. It is for this reason, among others, that trilateral deterrence is different from bilateral deterrence. The reality is that multilateral deterrence is more complex and unpredictable—the uncertainties, imponderables and unknowns with every new party are not simply additive; they are multiplied.

Consequently, those who make or comment on deterrence policy must implicitly or explicitly fill in the unknowns and imponderables about the functioning of deterrence with presumptions and/or evidence about opponents and contexts that are incomplete and speculative. There are better and worse ways to do so, but our understanding of opponents and context will likely never be adequate for highly-confident predictions in almost any context. Simply put, regardless of the deterrence model underling predictions about how deterrence will function—whether on paper or in mind—for virtually any actual engagement we will not know with confidence how close or far it is from capturing reality. In short, reality matters and predicting the functioning of deterrence in a

multilateral context confronts expanding uncertainties and unknowns; that is the inconvenient truth.

Even explaining why deterrence worked or failed *in the past* is a challenge given our frequent ignorance of the specific factors that led to its apparent functioning or failure. With an abundance of historical evidence, we still often only know with confidence that deterrence either failed or failed to apply. We typically do not know with precision *why* deterrence failed because opponents do not often explain *why* they took an action that we hoped they would be deterred from taking. And, only rarely is evidence available to tell us *why* deterrence worked because all we see is that nothing much happened. Again, opponents rarely tell us why they decided *not* to do something they otherwise would have done, i.e., why they were deterred.

The Past as Prelude

This author has examined scores of case studies from antiquity to the present in which deterrence either failed or failed to apply. The unavoidable conclusion from examining the past is that deterrence fails for many different reasons in many different contexts, often surprisingly.

A common theme in many cases of deterrence failure is that the party hoping to deter misjudged the situation because it largely misunderstood the opponent's goals, motivations, attention, determination, risk tolerance, perceptions of necessity, opportunity, and the stakes in contention, along with many other possible factors that tend to shape how leaderships calculate risk, cost and gain. More than any other single factor, the deterrer's ignorance and lack of attention is a condition that contributed to deterrence failure when it was expected to provide security. This ignorance can be lessened with serious effort, but not eliminated.

In most cases involving the United States, deterrence failures came as surprises to Washington. For example, on September 19, 1962, *Special National Intelligence Estimate 85-3-62*, *The Military Buildup in Cuba*, essentially reported that the Soviet Union would not likely place missiles in Cuba because doing so "would indicate a far greater willingness to increase the level of risk in US-Soviet relations than the USSR has displayed thus far and consequently would have important policy implications with respect to other areas and other problems in East-West relations."[3] Less than one month later, photographic evidence proved that the Soviets had placed missiles in Cuba. Sherman Kent, then-head of the National Board of Estimates, stated of this mistake regarding Soviet decision making, "There is no blinking the fact that we came down on the wrong side." Kent concluded, that "We missed the Soviet decision to put the missiles into Cuba because we could not believe that Khrushchev could make a mistake."[4]

U.S. expectations regarding opponents' calculations of risk and benefit have *not* always been based on a firm understanding of the opponent or the context. This is *not* a criticism of U.S. intelligence, it is a reflection of the limits on prediction in international relations. If an opponent's behavior is shocking, rather than acknowledge ignorance, U.S. commentators and some officials often assert that the opponent must suffer from a lack of reason; we could not otherwise so misjudge their perceptions and calculations. In truth, only infrequently in history do leaders long remain in power if they suffer from serious psychopathologies. Much more likely is that we misunderstand how opponents perceive their goals, risks and opportunities.

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[3] Sherman Kent, "A Crucial Estimate Relived," in, *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates, Collected Essays* (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1994), accessed at <www.cia.gov/csi/books/shermankent/toc.html> on August 9, 2000.

[4] Ibid.

The "so what" following from this discussion of theory and history is that even the most confident-sounding claims about whether and how deterrence will work in real-world cases reflect more or less informed speculation. The future now appears to be even more complex in this regard, with additional uncertainties, imponderables and unknowns. That is the inconvenient truth.

Recent Developments

Recently, different commentators have observed with confidence that the likelihood of Russian nuclear employment in the Ukraine War is now increasing, or to the contrary, that it is highly unlikely. What we know is that Russia either will or will not employ nuclear weapons or other WMD. There can be very little basis for great confidence in predictions as to which is more or less likely because that decision will depend on the uncertain perceptions, values and psyches of a small number of foreign individuals in unique and stressful circumstances—hardly the basis for highly-confident prediction. This limitation in the ability to anticipate the functioning of deterrence has become more pronounced in a multilateral deterrence context.

Moscow's incentives to employ WMD may well increase if Putin doubles down to prevent a loss he cannot tolerate. CIA Director William Burns has stated that Putin "doesn't believe he can afford to lose" because he has "staked so much on the choices that he made to launch this invasion."[5] This may be a key consideration because cognitive studies suggest that individuals often are highly risk tolerant in this type of condition—it is called the

[5] Lawrence Richard, "Putin believes 'doubling down' key to winning in Ukraine, thinks he 'can't afford to lose'," *Fox News*, May 8, 2022, available at https://www.foxnews.com/world/putin-doubling-down-win-ukraine-cant-aford-to-lose-cia-chief-warns.

"gamblers' fallacy."[6] The risks for Moscow of employing nuclear weapons, however, may be sufficient to overcome the motivations. As noted above, projections on the matter—whatever their opinion—must be speculative. We will become more aware with enough strategic warning or only after the fact, but we simply cannot be confident which factors will be decisive in Putin's decision making. We can *hope* that Moscow and Beijing will make decisions based on parameters that seem reasonable to us, and thus are predictable, but that expectation has often proved wrong in the past.

What we do know with confidence is that for deterrence to function by design in any context, opponents must decide that some level of accommodation or conciliation to U.S. demands is more tolerable than actions that would risk the U.S. deterrent threat. There must be this space for deterrence to work.

The priority deterrence question that now follows from this discussion is important and should be stated plainly: How do we simultaneously deter multiple revanchist great powers, Russia and China, that appear driven by the common belief that their respective expansionist goals are of such existential importance that they are willing to brandish nuclear first-use threats to advance them, and may see limited nuclear employment as a way to work around U.S. deterrence policies?

For example, a Russian decision to employ nuclear weapons would likely be a coercive tactic to paralyze further Western support for Ukraine and thereby enable Moscow to achieve a bloody victory, i.e., "escalate to win." Russia reportedly already has warned the United States in

[6] See for example, William J. Gering and Adrian R. Willoughby, "The Medical Frontal Cortex and the Rapid Process of Monetary Gains and Losses," *Science*, Vol. 22, March 22, 2002, pp. 2279-2282.

a demarche of "unpredictable consequences" if it provides "sensitive" arms to Ukraine.[7]

The prominent Cold War "balance of terror" model of deterrence stability tells us that this should not be a problem because no *rational* leadership would actually employ nuclear weapons in this way. And, in fact, commentators often now again assert with confidence that Putin's threats are a bluff or that he must be "unhinged." Such a conclusion likely reflects an enduring inadequacy in our understanding of how differently opponents can define what is rational behavior. There may be comfort in projecting onto opponents, including Putin, Western notions of what is rational because that means Putin's nuclear threats are only a bluff—what a relief. Yet, Russia's and to some extent China's nuclear first-use threats, and the possibility of employment, are here and now; they demand that we consider anew how best to deter in contemporary conditions and the capabilities needed to support deterrence best practice.

We do not know how deterrence will be tested; we can only prepare as best we can, while "driving in the dark," and hedge against a wide range of plausible deterrence challenges.

Contemporary Deterrence Conditions and Their Implications for U.S. Deterrence Strategies

Recognition of the inconvenient truths about deterrence prediction and contemporary conditions leads to the second part of this discussion: How and why a multidimensional deterrence context should affect U.S. deterrence considerations and practice.

[7] Karen DeYoung, "Russia Warns U.S. to Stop Arming Ukraine," *The Washington Post*, April 14, 2022, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/04/14/russia-warns-us-stop-arming-ukraine/.

The most basic point in this regard is the need to reduce ignorance, to the extent feasible, with regard to those basic factors that can drive multiple opponents' relevant decision making, i.e., as noted above, their goals, motivations, attention, determination, risk tolerance, perceptions of necessity, opportunity, and the stakes in contention, *inter alia* (even the personal health conditions of a given leader can be important in this regard). The need to do so is not new to considerations of multilateral deterrence, but pursuing an understanding of opponents for deterrence purposes is a task made much more challenging by the expansion of the number of opponents and contexts to be so understood. During the bipolar Cold War, the focus was on the Soviet Union; other countries were considered "lesser included cases,"[8] i.e., if the Soviet Union was deterred reliably, others would be too. A multilateral deterrence context does not afford that convenient shortcut; the potential for great variation in the decision making and behavior of multiple foreign leaderships cannot be so dismissed.

All attempts to reduce ignorance will be frustrated, at least in part, by a lack of data, ambiguous data, and conflicting data; this is unavoidable. However, the goal of reducing ignorance for deterrent purposes is *not* perfect knowledge, which is unobtainable. The goal is a greater awareness of the opponent so that basic mistakes in U.S. deterrence strategies can better be avoided and deterrence is thus more likely to work in practice.

[8] James Anderson, "China's Arms Buildup Threatens the Nuclear Balance," *The New York Times*, July 29, 2020, available at https://nyti.ms/3f6A4NH; and, Rachel Cohen, "USAF Rethinks Relationship Between Conventional, Nuclear Weapons," *Air Force Magazine Online*, August 19, 2020, available at https://www.airforcemag.com/usaf-rethinks-relationship-betweenconventional-nuclear-weapons/.

The Analytical Challenge

As noted, the analytical challenge of usefully reducing ignorance in a multilateral deterrence context is greater than in the Cold War bilateral context because with each new party involved, the number of factors to understand expands. Equally important, the interactions of those factors become more complex as multiple leaderships observe the interactions of each party, which may shape the perceptions and decision making of all those involved and thus U.S. deterrence requirements. The United States is not simply deterring Russia and China sequentially or in isolation, but with each watching each and possibly shifting calculations based upon what they see in each engagement.

An obvious example of this added complication is now trying to understand how the war in Ukraine may influence China's perception of the opportunities, costs and risks of moving violently against Taiwan, and how that may affect needed U.S. efforts to deter China from doing so. In short, the task includes trying to understand how developments in one geographic area could affect the decision making of opponents in distant areas, and thereby shape U.S. deterrence goals and practice in those distant areas. This is the opposite of the U.S. Cold War focus on the Soviet Union, with the expectation that all others were "lesser included cases."

The need, therefore, is for great attention to the identification and understanding of the many different (and in some cases unique) decision-making drivers and how they interact across an increasing number of leaderships—most obviously including China and Russia, but also those countries whose behavior could seriously play in deterrence engagements among the three great nuclear powers, e.g., North Korea and Iran.

The common Cold War analytic practice of positing non-descript Countries A and B, and then essentially using

game theory and deductive logic to project the functioning of deterrence between the two, and the requirements for deterrence, was woefully inadequate at the time. In the contemporary multilateral deterrence dynamic, the leaderships of the United States, China and Russia have different worldviews and are in many ways unique decision makers. Projections based on positing the interaction among three *non-descript* Countries A, B, and C simply washes out the key factors that are likely to determine if and how deterrence actually functions. Such projections are as likely to mislead as they are to enlighten.

Deterrence Policy and Practice

There are several additional implications for the practice of deterrence in a new multilateral deterrence dynamic that may be identified briefly here. For example, given a multilateral deterrence context and the associated uncertainties of prognostication, it is important to emphasize at least three directions in U.S. deterrence policy: hedging against opponents' coordination; hedging against uncertainty in deterrence requirements; and, hedging against the likely increased potential for deterrence failure.

Hedging Against Opponents' Coordination

The nature of the contemporary trilateral context demands U.S. consideration of the possibility that Russia and China will coordinate their actions to advance their respective goals in confrontations with the United States. This is an unprecedented possibility (likelihood?) with numerous implications, including, for example, the possibility of Russia and China confronting the United States with two simultaneous and coordinated regional wars and the corresponding U.S. need to deter their threats of limited theater nuclear escalation in two different geographical

locations simultaneously. This is a deterrence challenge that U.S. theater nuclear capabilities may be unprepared to meet given the apparent near elimination of U.S. forward-deployed and deployable theater nuclear weapons proportional to the potential theater nuclear threats.[9]

At the strategic nuclear level of consideration, the coordination concerns include the possibility that Beijing's and Moscow's combined strategic capabilities will present a new problem for the continuing survivability of U.S. strategic retaliatory forces—problems that have not been of concern since the massive Soviet ICBM deployments of the 1970s and early 1980s created a "window of vulnerability" for U.S. ICBM capabilities. If so, the adequacy of U.S. deterrence capabilities must be paced against the combined forces of two nuclear great powers—a wholly unprecedented condition.

Hedging Against Expanded Uncertainties Regarding Deterrence Requirements

The multiplication of uncertainties in the formulation of deterrence strategies and the potential for coordination between Russia and China increase the imponderables involved in predicting "how much is enough?" for deterrence. Arriving at that standard has always been more art than science, but it is made even more problematic by the expansion of participants in a multilateral deterrence context—particularly with the reality of two expansionist, hostile great nuclear power opponents. Indeed, there can be no single "assured destruction" standard that defines the U.S. strategic deterrent, as was U.S. practice for decades

[9] Mark Schneider, "Does the United States Have Any Real Capability to Forward Deploy Nuclear Weapons Rapidly Outside of NATO?," *RealClearDefense*, August 27, 2021, available at https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2021/08/27/does_the_united_states_have_any_real_capability_to_forward_deploy_nuclear_weapons_rapidly_outside_of_nato_europe_791788.html.

during the Cold War. Instead, there must now be multiple, simultaneous measures of adequacy for different opponents and contingencies, and all of those measures must take into account the uncertainties involved in their definition. And, once those measures are agreed upon, it must be recognized that they will shift over time, perhaps rapidly, in a dynamic deterrence threat environment. Given the many unavoidable uncertainties involved, for example, no one can know with confidence what U.S. deterrence requirements will be in 2030. Nevertheless, we must plan now for that timeframe. As a result, the need to hedge against setting that standard incorrectly, particularly too narrowly, has become even more acute.

A contemporary question that illustrates this problem is whether the United States should proceed with development of the nuclear, sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) as is recommended by the senior-most U.S. military leaders,[10] or cancel it as reportedly is directed in the Biden Administration's 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*.[11] Does hedging against the expanding unknowns regarding deterrence requirements recommend the continued development of this capability?

Given opponents' coercive regional nuclear first-use threats—made most obvious by Russia's stream of recent, explicit regional nuclear threats—diverse U.S. theater response options that *are proportional to the threats* and readily available in different theaters, may well be of great value for credible deterrence. In the emerging multilateral deterrence context, as senior U.S. military leaders have observed, *prudent* planning for deterrence certainly suggests continued development of the SLCM-N. The need

[10] Valerie Insinna, "Grady 'aligned' with Milley on embattled low-yield nuke program," *BreakingDefense.com*, May 5, 2022, available at https://breakingdefense.com/2022/05/grady-aligned-with-milley-on-embattled-low-yield-nuke-program/.

[11] Ibid.

to hedge against increasing uncertainties helps to explain why that is true.

Hedging Against the Possibility of Deterrence Failure

Finally, the expansion of uncertainties and unknowns regarding the functioning of deterrence applies to both *how* and *whether* deterrence will function. Despite commentators' frequent assertions that deterrence will likely continue to work as expected, the inconvenient truth is that no one knows if such hopeful predictions are true or false, or even what probability may be assigned to them as being true. The Cold War-era notion that such predictions can be made with confidence was never highly credible; they now are based on sand. Consequently, to the extent that the United States is unprepared for the possibility of nuclear deterrence failure, it is unprepared for the realities of a multilateral deterrence context.

The implications of this harsh reality are profound. For example, the Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, ADM Charles Richard, has cautioned that "Every operational plan in the Department of Defense, and every other capability we have in DOD, rests on the assumption that strategic deterrence, and in particular nuclear deterrence, … is holding right," and that, "if that assumption is not met, particularly with nuclear deterrence, nothing else in the Department of Defense is going to work the way it was designed."[12] Given this, the military-operational issues raised by the expanding uncertainties regarding the functioning of deterrence are profound for the United States. For example, after three decades of focusing on rogue states and terrorists, how able is the

[12] Quoted in Amy Hudson, "Richard Says Nuclear Deterrence Connected to All Other DOD Capabilities," *Air Force Magazine*, May 7, 2021, available at https://www.airforcemag.com/richard-says-nuclear-deterrence-connected-to-all-other-dod-capabilities/.

United States now to confront nuclear first-use threats and to fight in a nuclear environment?

This short discussion is not the place to elaborate on the many issues raised by the uncertainties of multilateral deterrence and the corresponding need to hedge against the prospect of deterrence failure. Suffice to say here that the implications are extremely significant for how the United States can seek most prudently to ensure the safety of its citizens and allies. Most obvious perhaps is the potential value of at least limited active and passive strategic defenses to help mitigate the consequences of a limited nuclear attack, and to reduce the coercive value of opponents' threats to launch such attacks. Prominent scholars, including Herman Kahn and Colin Gray, emphasized the need in the past for U.S. defensive capabilities to mitigate the catastrophic consequences of deterrence failure. To the considerable extent that the level of reasonable confidence in deterrence functioning shapes the potential value of such defenses, they can only be regarded as increasingly prudent in a multilateral deterrence context. That is, as confidence in the predictable functioning of deterrence is increasingly open to question, the potential value of defenses must increase. This is another inconvenient truth.

Conclusion

In summary, for deterrence planning, a multilateral context is materially different from a bilateral context, and those differences must be taken into account in planning for deterrence and its possible failure. The emergence of a multilateral deterrence context presents some unprecedented challenges for the United States. It expands the uncertainties, imponderables and unknowns regarding the functioning of deterrence—which remains essential while also more uncertain. In this context, given the considerable variation in opponents' worldviews and how

they define reasonable behavior, the Cold War practice of focusing on the greatest deterrence challenge and considering all others to be lesser included cases is an obvious mistake—despite the attractiveness of its relative ease. Increasingly necessary is to be as informed as possible about the decision-making drivers of multiple opponents in diverse circumstances. Positing non-descript countries A, B, and C, and extrapolating expected behaviors on that basis is likely to reduce the prospects for deterrence success—even more so now than in the past.

Identifying the many ways in which a multilateral deterrence context is different from the past and the significance of those differences for U.S. deterrence planning is likely to be a generational process. That said, it is time to get beyond noting that this is an important topic and then defaulting to Cold War accepted wisdom. The "greatest generation" of deterrence scholars did the heavy lifting for their time and helped to preserve superpower peace through the Cold War. Deterrence conditions have changed dramatically, however, and it is time for a new generation to get back to this serious work.

Rethinking Deterrence: How and Why*

It is a pleasure to return to Hudson Institute. In 1978, I met Herman Kahn, co-founder of Hudson Institute, at its much earlier location in Croton-on-Hudson, NY. I went to work for him a few months later. While working for Herman, he encouraged me to devote my studies to the subject of deterrence—I have done so for over four decades.

A New Deterrence Context: New Challenges

Many folks now ask me about the emerging "trilateral deterrence" threat environment. This refers to the simultaneous deterrence engagement of three great nuclear powers, the United States, Russia and China. I frequently hear that this trilateral context is different, so we must rethink U.S. deterrence policy.

But, *how* is it new, and *why* must we rethink deterrence policy? Those are the key questions now. My first comment in this regard is that *the basic nature of deterrence endures, and what is new* with trilateral deterrence is not primarily the obvious fact that there now are three great nuclear powers involved.

The more significant new condition is that the leaderships of Russia and China have worldviews that conflict sharply with that of the United States and they appear to be forming a quasi-alliance against the United States to realize their common goal of overturning the classical liberal world order. In pursuit of this goal, both Russia and China show their willingness to exploit conventional and nuclear forces to pursue their

* Original publication: Keith B. Payne, "Rethinking Deterrence: How and Why," *Information Series*, No. 533 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 7, 2022).

expansionist goals and are challenging long-standing defensive U.S. deterrence redlines.

What we now confront is the threatened use of nuclear weapons for revanchist purposes. We are accustomed to thinking of deterrence as serving *defensive* purposes. But Russia's and China's coercive nuclear first-use threats are here and now in support of their common goal of overturning the existing world order. This is not the Cold War deterrence concept with which we are familiar. It is unprecedented and compels us to rethink our deterrence policies.

This new deterrence dynamic is a real challenge because we have generally convinced ourselves that only irrational leaderships could consider the first use of nuclear weapons for expansionist purposes. Very recently a senior NATO official expressed that belief to me with absolute confidence.

References now to Putin as being "unhinged" given his explicit nuclear threats follow the enduring U.S. tradition of labeling opponents who behave in shocking, disturbing ways as irrational. But such comments usually reflect only our lack of understanding of how differently opponents can define what is rational behavior—that they do not buy into our enlightened interpretation of rational.

There is great comfort in projecting onto opponents, including Putin, Western notions of what is rational: it means that Putin's current nuclear threats must be a bluff, because actual nuclear employment would be irrational. What a relief. Yet, Russia's and China's revanchist goals require violating U.S. redlines, and their nuclear first-use threats now demand that we rethink how best to deter in contemporary conditions.

The priority deterrence question that now follows from this discussion is new; I can put it plainly: How do we simultaneously deter two revanchist great powers that are driven by the common belief that their goals are of existential importance, and that limited nuclear threats and

possibly employment are the way to defeat defensive U.S. deterrence policies?

That is an unprecedented question and our challenge. Deterrence remains the same in principle, but elements of our long-favored Cold War approach to deterrence must change. We do not know how deterrence will be tested in the future; we can only hedge as best we can against a wide range of plausible deterrence contingencies.

That hedging becomes much more complicated and demanding in the new multilateral deterrence context because Russia and China appear to interpret "rational" in ways surprisingly different from our traditional expectations regarding nuclear deterrence—which will affect if and how deterrence can function.

Deterrence Literacy

A problem in this regard is the generally modest level of deterrence literacy in Western countries. With a few exceptions, the U.S. public debate on the subject is shallow at best—perhaps because there has been so little attention paid to great power deterrence for three decades. I simply stop reading those many commentaries on deterrence that start with the mistaken assertion that U.S. deterrence policy is the "mutually assured destruction" (MAD) doctrine of the 1960s.

As a society, we have great apparent trouble understanding the realities of our past and present approaches to deterrence—much less rethinking it in new conditions. We generally treat deterrence as if it's akin to basic arithmetic—read a couple of books, attend a couple of classes, and you've mastered it. The extreme consequences of whether we can make deterrence work or not do not match the general lack of attention to it.

Those officials actually responsible for deterrence policy are expected somehow to be on-the-spot experts. It is not

merely my concern that society does not seem to invest much into the subject. In 2017—following increasingly egregious behavior by Russia and China—Gen. Kevin Chilton, a former Commander at Strategic Command, lamented the lack of attention to the subject: "Unfortunately, since the end of the Cold War…there has been a dearth of attention paid to the rationale for the nuclear deterrent. The underlying principles and rationale for the deterrent have not gone away, but we have stopped educating, thinking, and debating, with informed underpinnings, the necessity and role of the US nuclear deterrent in today's world…. We have raised three generations of Air Force officers who may not have been exposed to the most fundamental and yet relevant arguments surrounding deterrence… "

Most recently, ADM Charles Richard observed that, "Even our operational deterrence expertise is just not what it was at the end of the Cold War. So we have to reinvigorate this intellectual effort. And we can start by rewriting deterrence theory." He went on to note that Strategic Command is working on this "furiously."

There is real hope for improvement. But the general public debate on the subject remains shockingly ill-informed—far less informed than it was in the mid-1970s. Much has been lost since then, and we need to catch up quickly.

Inconvenient Truths About Deterrence Prognostication

An inconvenient truth about deterrence is that there are inherent unknowns that render it a more or less uncertain business in most circumstances.

I recently wrote an article entitled, *Deterrence is Not Rocket Science: It is More Difficult*. That title may be surprising, but its validity should be self-evident. It is

provided by Emanuel Derman, a physicist turned Wall Street quant, in his book on financial modeling: "In physics you're playing against God, and He doesn't change His laws very often. In finance [I add, as in deterrence] you're playing against God's creatures, agents who value assets based on their ephemeral opinions."

The problem in predicting the functioning of deterrence is that there are few reliable laws. Leadership decision making can be driven by an extremely wide range of "ephemeral opinions"—some of which may be well-known to us, others may be somewhat obvious, and others may be completely obscure or seemingly irrational. And, we do not know the importance of what we do not know.

This was so in the Cold War's bilateral deterrence context, *but the uncertainties expand in the emerging multilateral deterrence context*. With every new entry into a hostile deterrence context the uncertainties, imponderables and unknowns are multiplied. We are moving deeper into the world of speculation and conjecture, including uncertainty about what the ubiquitous word "stability" means and what in practice will help or hinder it. This problem was present to an extent during the bipolar Cold War; it is even more significant in the new deterrence context.

The Analytical Challenge Ahead

So, how do we need to rethink deterrence policy in the emerging multilateral deterrence context? The most basic task in this regard is to reduce uncertainties by understanding, to the extent feasible, those basic factors that can drive multiple opponents' relevant decision making, i.e., their goals, motivations, attention, determination, risk tolerance, perceptions of necessity, opportunity, and their attachment to the stakes in contention, *inter alia*.

The need now is for understanding opponents' different (and in some cases unique) decision-making drivers, and how they interact across an increasing number of leaderships. We are not deterring China and Russia sequentially or in isolation; each is watching every move. Events in one theater likely will affect the deterrence dynamics in other theaters. This need for understanding is not new, but the analytical challenge is now greater because with each new party involved, the number of factors to understand expands and anticipating deterrence outcomes becomes more complicated.

This approach to deterrence, now called tailoring, is the antithesis of our declared practice during much of the Cold War. We tended to focus on deterring a single opponent, the Soviet Union, and assumed that it shared our basic deterrence calculations, and that all other opponents were "lesser included cases." These conveniences, valid or bogus at the time, made for easy, even simplistic, deterrence calculations and are now inadequate at best. Instead, the need now is for the hard work to understand the complexity of multilateral deterrence decision making and to hedge against the uncertainties involved in the application of deterrence in this new context.

Deterrence Policy and Practice: Hedging in the Emerging Multilateral Deterrence Context

Given this emerging deterrence context, it is important to emphasize the need now to hedge against: 1) coordinated Sino-Russian actions; 2) the increased uncertainty in deterrence requirements; and, 3) the increased uncertainties regarding the potential for surprising deterrence failure. I will elaborate on each in order.

First: Hedging Against Prospective Sino-Russian Coordination

The United States must consider the possibility that Russia and China will coordinate their actions to advance their respective goals in confrontations with the United States.

The danger of a coordinated Sino-Russian "entente" is real and growing and presents the possibility of Russia and China confronting the United States with two simultaneous and coordinated regional wars. This is a deterrence contingency that U.S. conventional and theater nuclear capabilities may be unprepared to meet given the great reduction in U.S. forward-deployed forces since the end of the Cold War and the apparent near elimination of U.S. forward-deployable theater nuclear weapons.

History has repeatedly demonstrated that the perceived weakness of status quo powers can be highly provocative to revisionist powers and lead to deterrence failure. A perceived lack of U.S. preparation for two simultaneous regional wars now could embolden both Moscow and Beijing to seek to achieve their goals via the use of force—undercutting U.S. extended deterrence goals.

The Two-War Standard Left Behind. For years, U.S. military planners designed a strategy that called on the United States to be prepared to fight two major regional contingencies (MRCs) simultaneously. This two-war standard became the benchmark against which the adequacy of U.S. forces was judged. Yet, by 2010, the United States had shifted from the two-MRC force-sizing construct to focus on counter-terrorism and irregular warfare.

Restoring the two-war force-sizing standard now appears to be logical and prudent to bolster the deterrence of Sino-Russian aggression. Addressing this need would be prudent for extended deterrence purposes, but insufficient. Why so? Because the threat of nuclear use will hang over

any U.S. conflict with Russia and China. The harsh deterrence reality is that both China and Russia have declared the realization of aggressive, expansionist goals as being of existential importance. Establishing the U.S. conventional capability to counter a two-front conventional war could compel Russia and China to accept the risk of engaging in nuclear escalation, if needed, to paralyze U.S. support for allies and thereby secure "existential" goals.

Consequently, U.S. conventional and nuclear capabilities together must provide Russia and China with seamless and overwhelming disincentives to their initiating attacks or engaging in nuclear escalation in the event of a conflict.

Sino-Russian Coordination: Potential Deterrence Challenges at the Strategic Force Level. Working hard to ensure that U.S. strategic nuclear forces are *manifestly* survivable is a fundamental, on-going priority of U.S. deterrence policy. In the foreseeable future, Beijing's and Moscow's combined strategic nuclear and advanced conventional capabilities may expand to present a new challenge for the continuing survivability of U.S. strategic retaliatory forces. If the threat of such joint action seems to be far-fetched, recall that in 1969 the Soviet Union reportedly invited the United States to engage in a joint strike against China's nuclear facilities.

Many commentators continue to assert that concern about a strike against U.S. strategic forces is a thing of the distant past. They have dismissed the threat of such an attack out of hand since the end of the Cold War. But, three developments suggest otherwise: 1) the potential for Sino-Russian coordination; 2) their expanding nuclear force numbers; and, 3) their extreme dedication to revanchist goals. These together may compel the subject again to be at the forefront of U.S. deterrence considerations in a decidedly more challenging threat context.

Deterrence Implications of the Potential for Sino-Russian Coordination: U.S. Deterrence Threat Options. A corresponding concern regarding strategic deterrence involves the threat options that the United States can credibly brandish simultaneously against Russia and China—each of which has an expansive number of targets the United States may need to hold at risk for deterrence purposes.

The question is whether that portion of the U.S. force posture that could survive a combined Sino-Russian strategic attack would have sufficient capacity and flexibility to support credible U.S. deterrence threat options against both countries simultaneously or sequentially.

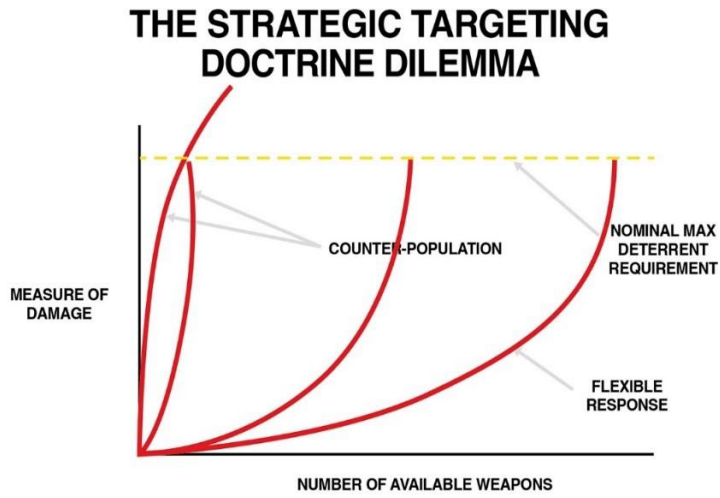
For example, if a sizable number of the U.S. warheads on ballistic missile carrying submarines were to survive a Sino-Russian strategic attack, would that level of U.S. retaliatory potential provide a credible deterrent to a Sino-Russian attack in the first place, or to follow-on Sino-Russian strikes if deterrence fails to prevent an initial Sino-Russian first strike?

If U.S. retaliatory capabilities were to be reduced substantially by a Sino-Russian counterforce attack, the U.S. strategic deterrent could be seen as limited to an incredible and morally repugnant "counter-city" deterrent option. The critical question is whether that type of deterrent threat is an acceptable measure of retaliatory capabilities for U.S. deterrence purposes. A "counter-city" approach to deterrence has rightly been rejected by all U.S. administrations for decades on a fully bipartisan basis because it may be incredible as a deterrent and for its moral repugnance.

For decades Washington has instead pursued a "flexible response" deterrence policy intended to hold at risk a range of opponents' critical assets while avoiding societal damage to the greatest extent practicable. For this approach to deterrence, the U.S. force posture must include diverse

options and the targets to be held at risk reportedly may need to include opponents' military capabilities, command and control capabilities, and civilian leadership.

But such a deterrence strategy depends on the combined size and survivability of the U.S. force posture. The graphic below is by the former Commander of Strategic Command Commander, ADM Richard Mies. It offers a notional illustration of this challenge:



This graphic indicates that as the number of available retaliatory weapons declines, the United States moves further away from having the capacity needed to support a "Flexible Response" approach to deterrence and moves towards a "Counter-Population" deterrent. The bottom line here is that the United States must now hedge against being in a position of having such limited retaliatory threat options that they are incredible for deterrence, morally intolerable and legally problematic.

Sino-Russian Coordination: Potential Deterrence Challenges at the Theater Nuclear Level. Given the potential for Sino-Russian coordination, the United

States must also now hedge against the threat of opponents' regional nuclear first use in *two* theaters *simultaneously*. This is a novel challenge that the United States most likely must meet if U.S. extended deterrence commitments are to be credible.

Is the United States currently prepared to deter Sino-Russian nuclear threats in Europe and Asia, without risking escalation to a potentially suicidal strategic nuclear level? The significant imbalance in theater nuclear capabilities suggests otherwise. Should Moscow and Beijing believe that the United States lacks either the will or the capability to respond *proportionally* to their regional first use of nuclear weapons, extended deterrence will likely be undermined, and the risks of regional aggression will grow.

To hedge against this unprecedented deterrence challenge, a reconsideration of the size, characteristics, and deployment of U.S. theater nuclear forces is warranted. The prospective SLCM-N is an obvious step in that direction, but it may not survive the U.S. political process based on the argument that such forces reflect a rejection of deterrence in favor of "war-fighting." This argument has been resurrected from the 1980s and fails Deterrence 101. It misses the potentially essential deterrence requirement for such U.S. forces in the emerging threat environment.

Second: Hedging Against Expanded Uncertainties Regarding Deterrence Requirements

Defining the adequacy standard for deterrence means answering the question "how much is enough?". Answering that question has always been more art than science. But, identifying "how much is enough?" is even more problematic in the emerging multilateral deterrence context. Deterrence requirements will be different across time and place. The multiplication of uncertainties related

to deterrence increases the difficulty of identifying an informed adequacy measure for deterrence.

There can now be no single measure that defines the adequacy of the U.S. strategic force posture, as was declared U.S. practice for more than a decade during the Cold War. Needed now are multiple, simultaneous measures of adequacy that take into account the uncertainties that follow from the variation in contexts and opponents' "ephemeral opinions." Further, once those measures are identified, they will likely shift over time, perhaps rapidly. There are no enduring conclusions in this regard.

As a result, the need to hedge against setting deterrence adequacy standards *too narrowly* has become acute. The narrower the measure of deterrence adequacy, the greater the presumption that opponents' decision making is reliably predictable and that the future will unfold as expected—an extremely optimistic presumption.

It is important to recall that the parameters of the current U.S. nuclear rebuilding program and New START ceilings were largely set over a decade ago—at a time of great optimism regarding U.S. relations with Russia and China. The need now to hedge against intense Russian and Chinese hostility and *expanded deterrence uncertainties* suggests the corresponding need to rethink whether the measures of deterrence adequacy from over a decade ago remain suitable for defining "how much is enough?". That is the critical question. The underlying conditions have since shifted dramatically, so likely must our measures of adequacy.

This is not a plea for more nuclear weapons, per se. I do not know where this rethinking ultimately will lead. But I do know that this is the question in the emerging threat environment. Answering it must precede many other moves, including the possible resumption of arms control negotiations.

Third: Hedging Against the Possibility of Deterrence Failure

Finally, the expansion of uncertainties regarding the functioning of deterrence applies to both *how* and *whether* deterrence will work as we hope. Pointing to the potential for deterrence failure may sound extraordinary only because we have become so accustomed to believing nuclear deterrence works predictably, reliably, even easily.

We can, with serious effort, greatly reduce the uncertainties regarding deterrence, but they cannot be eliminated, and those factors that have led to deterrence failure over the course of centuries are likely to be more pronounced in the emerging deterrence context. As confidence in the reliable, predictable functioning of deterrence wanes in the multilateral context, the capability to reduce damage in the event of deterrence failure becomes increasingly important.

To the extent that the United States does not hedge against the possibility of deterrence failure, it is unprepared for the realities of the multilateral deterrence context. This is why there is a new need to emphasize hedging against the possibility of failure in our deterrence calculations. The implications of this harsh reality are profound. Most obvious perhaps is the potential value of even limited active and passive strategic defenses to help reduce the prospective destruction from limited nuclear attacks, and to help mitigate the debilitating effects of Russian, Chinese, and North Korean coercive threats to launch such attacks.

This is a significant departure from the still-prevalent policy notion that unmitigated U.S. societal vulnerability to Russia and China is a useful and necessary component of strategic stability, and that defenses can provide no meaningful protection against attack.

Conclusion

The basic principles of deterrence are enduring and unchanged, but the application of deterrence must adjust to different opponents and contexts.

The emergence of a multilateral deterrence context in which two great nuclear powers share intense hostility toward the United States and existential, revanchist goals presents some unprecedented challenges for the United States. This context expands the uncertainties, imponderables and unknowns regarding the functioning of deterrence—which remains essential for U.S. and allied security, while also being more uncertain. When deterrence is essential but also uncertain, we are in a rough place; we must work to hedge against those uncertainties as best we can.

Given the considerable variation in opponents' worldviews and how they define reasonable behavior, it is increasingly necessary to be as informed as possible about the decision-making drivers of multiple opponents in diverse circumstances, and to adjust U.S. deterrence strategies accordingly.

Identifying the additional many ways in which the multilateral deterrence context is different from the past and what that means for U.S. deterrence policy is likely to be a generational process. A significant element of this serious work is to understand opponents, and to hedge against the challenges presented by the evolving context. Those challenges now include hedging against: 1) the potential for Sino-Russian coordination in hostilities against the United States at the regional and strategic levels; 2) the expanded uncertainties regarding the calculation of "how much is enough?" for U.S. forces to support multiple, tailored U.S. deterrence strategies; and, 3) the expanded uncertainties about the reliability of deterrence, i.e., uncertainties regarding ***if*** deterrence will "work."

The "greatest generation" of deterrence scholars, particularly including Herman Kahn and Colin Gray, did the heavy lifting for their time and helped to preserve superpower peace through the Cold War. It is time for a new generation to get back to this serious work.

Nuclear Deterrence in Question: How We Got Here, and What to Do*

Every new presidential administration has sought to put its mark on U.S. nuclear deterrence policies and capabilities. New administrations like to give names to their deterrence policies to suggest that they have come up with something new and different, when, in reality, there has been little truly new for many years. Most recently, the Biden Administration introduced "integrated deterrence," which involved nothing truly new beyond the name. Continuity is the real hallmark of U.S. nuclear deterrence policy—even as the world has become much more dangerous.

In late 2024, anticipating a new administration taking office in 2025, my colleagues and I began working on a strategic deterrence review study. In 2023, the Strategic Posture Commission provided an outstanding report. With this new study, we hoped to add to the Strategic Posture Commission's report if we could, and comment on new developments since that report was written.

Our new study was published in June 2025 in a report entitled, *A New Strategic Review for a New Age: 2025*. Our goal was to produce and circulate the study's conclusions in time to help *inform the new administration and Congress* with regard to a sharply worsening nuclear threat environment, and to identify U.S. options for sustaining nuclear deterrence in this environment.

Additional contributors to this new study have unparalleled expertise and experience in the field: General Kevin P. Chilton (Ret.); Michaela Dodge; Robert Joseph; Mitch Kugler; Frank C. Miller; ADM Charles Richard (Ret.);

* Original publication: Keith B. Payne, "Nuclear Deterrence in Question: How We Got Here, and What to Do," *Information Series*, No. 639 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 6, 2025).

Thomas Scheber; Mark B. Schneider; and, David J. Trachtenberg.

I will take just a few minutes to provide a brief overview of the study's main conclusions. My main focus today, however, will be on the factors that have led to the unprecedented threats we now face. Why look back? Because we need to recognize the hole we are in and stop digging.

Contemporary U.S. plans for nuclear force modernization and the New START Treaty were established in tandem approximately 15 years ago, at a time when U.S. officials generally still believed that U.S. relations with Russia and China were relatively benign and would *improve further*. Great power conflict was considered a thing of the past and the need for strategic deterrence and nuclear weapons was vanishing rapidly. The only remaining threats were from a few third-tier rogue states and terrorists. Nuclear weapons were considered irrelevant to these remaining threats. Consequently, many American officials considered the need for nuclear weapons and deterrence to be greatly diminished or non-existent. The 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review* explicitly identified non-proliferation as the priority goal, not nuclear deterrence, and reducing the role and number of U.S. nuclear weapons was considered a key to nuclear non-proliferation.

As my former Hudson Institute colleague, Professor Paul Bracken, said of the time: "All were on board to oppose nuclear arms…. Academics, think tanks and intellectuals quickly jumped on the bandwagon. For a time, it really looked like there was going to be an antinuclear turn in U.S. strategy."[1] This hubris reflected what was, and remains, a gross misreading of history.

[1] Paul Bracken, "Whatever Happened to Nuclear Abolition?" *The Hill*, March 19, 2019, https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/434723-whatever-happened-to-nuclear-abolition.

In addition, Washington continued to enjoy the post-Cold War peace dividend and, in 2001, gave up maintaining a two-war standard for non-nuclear U.S. preparedness. Only one year prior to Russia's initial attack on Ukraine in 2014, the United States was still withdrawing tanks from Europe. American leaders at the time expressed shock at this aggressive Russian behavior; it contradicted their celebrated narrative dominating Washington that great power conflict was a thing of the past.

History was supposed to have transcended the old-school hostilities and aggression of the past. Secretary of State John Kerry said Russia's 2014 aggression against Ukraine sprang not from an expansionist, aggressive agenda, but from its feelings of "weakness." You see, Russia was more pathetic and unsophisticated than aggressive and expansionist. Kerry added that, "you just don't, in the 21st century, behave in 19th-century fashion by invading another country…."[2] That was the supposed New World Order reality. As an astute academic commentator noted recently, such expectations reflected "ideological certitude bordering on geostrategic arrogance, one that still infuses the nation's policy debates."[3]

Not everyone at the time had such naïve thoughts about the state of international affairs and the supposed New World Order. My late colleague, Colin Gray, said early in the post-Cold War period that we were then in only a short pause of great power hostilities, and that "another bloody century" would resume. In fact, Colin dismissed then-prevalent expectations of a cooperative New World Order

[2] Quoted in Rebecca Kaplan, "John Kerry warns of consequences for Russia after Ukraine invasion," CBS News, Face the Nation, March 2, 2014, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/john-kerry-warns-of-consequences-for-russia-after-ukraine-invasion/.

[3] Andrew A. Michta, "The Next U.S. National Security Strategy Risks Misreading History Again, *RealClearDefense*, September 22, 2025, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2025/09/22/the_next_us_national_security_strategy_risks_misreading_history_again_1136169.html.

and pointed to "the strong possibility that world politics two to three decades hence will be increasingly organized around the rival poles of U.S. and Chinese power," and that China then "would menace Japan." He also fully expected that Russia would again confront the West militarily and "immediately would threaten independent Ukraine [and] the Baltics."[4]

Unfortunately, as Colin expected, the post-Cold War's superficial tranquility was but a brief interlude before a return to sharp hostilities and conflict. Nevertheless, Western officials on a bipartisan basis continued to welcome the largely academic trope that the bad old history was over, and that great power military conflict and nuclear weapons were things of the past. A New World Order was at hand, and we could now generally forget old fears, especially those that drove any need for nuclear weapons; instead, we could enjoy a well-deserved peace dividend.

That hapless interpretation of twenty-first century international relations was the backdrop for New START and the current U.S. strategic nuclear program. That program reflects a continuation of what former Defense Secretary Robert Gates has called America's three decades-long "holiday from history." It was consciously structured to comport with a significant reduction of the U.S. nuclear force structure under the New START Treaty, and not add new capabilities. Washington continues to adhere to this framework while Russia and China have engaged in unprecedented nuclear and conventional force expansions, in parallel with their increasingly aggressive foreign policy agendas.

Indeed, Russia has so blatantly violated the New START Treaty that we are unlikely to know Russian strategic

[4] Colin S. Gray, *The Second Nuclear Age* (London: Lynn Reiner Press, 1999), pp. 39-41.

nuclear force numbers at this point.[5] Russia shut down on-site inspections years ago; at the time of the hearings on New START, these inspections were celebrated as the means of having force numbers transparency. Thanks to Moscow, that transparency has been gone for years. With breathtaking hypocrisy, after years of New START violations, likely including exceeding warhead limits, Russia now offers to extend observance another year.

Perhaps more importantly, both Russia and China see nuclear weapons not simply as the basis for defensive deterrence, as the West understands the value of nuclear weapons. They have deployed nuclear weapons not only to deter U.S. attacks—although folks who want to rationalize Russian and Chinese behavior make that claim. Moscow and Beijing also value nuclear weapons for the coercive cover they provide for their aggressive expansionism. The basic notion is not complex—if they can paralyze the West with various types of nuclear threats, they will have a relatively free hand to act aggressively at the time and place of their choosing. This is aggression backed by nuclear coercion. It is the difference between a nuclear deterrence posture that says, if you attack, I will escalate, and a nuclear coercion posture that says, if you respond to my aggression, I will escalate. The difference in words here is minimal; the difference in intention is enormous. Too many in the West still do not understand this—perhaps because it suggests that the reasons for Russian and Chinese armaments include their aggressive, expansionist foreign designs rather than U.S. belligerence.

We have seen this coercive nuclear formula in play in Europe since 2022, and we may see it play out vis-à-vis Taiwan in the near future. In fact, we may confront coordinated Russian and Chinese aggression under the

[5] See Mark B. Schneider and Keith B. Payne, *Tailored Deterrence and Low-Cost Nuclear Weapons Upload* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 2025), pp. 3-6.

cover of nuclear threats. A primary goal of U.S. nuclear deterrence has been to prevent nuclear coercion. To date, our ability to do so, and to convince threatened allies that we can do so, has been a mixed bag at best. As a consequence, increasingly fearful allies now have open discussions of independent nuclear capabilities, including South Korea, Japan, Germany, and, to some extent, even Australia. If this trend continues, nuclear proliferation will be unleashed, not because the United States has *sustained* its nuclear capabilities, as was the earlier contention, but because the United States has *not* sustained a credible extended nuclear deterrence.

Unfortunately, history has given us a nuclear threat environment that is much more dangerous than was expected in 2010. The likely inadequacies of U.S. nuclear forces in this environment are the direct result of opponents who have aggressive agendas and their military buildups, in combination with our own naïve arms control initiatives and behavior.

Washington's arms control mistakes seem to get a pass as a prime contributor to where we are now. Saying so is painful, but not saying so is a mistake because it encourages repetition.

It would be wise to recognize Washington's past arms control mistakes so that we just might not repeat them in the future. For example, the George H. W. Bush Administration's celebrated 1991 Presidential Nuclear Initiative was a reflection of naïve expectations about Russia. Its near elimination of U.S. non-strategic nuclear weapons (in combination with the earlier 1987 INF Treaty) has led to an enormous asymmetry in non-strategic nuclear capabilities in favor of Russia and China, and to the corresponding fragility of our current extended deterrence posture. To expect arms control agreements to solve our problems now would be comparably naïve.

But, regardless of how we got here, we are where we are. The immediate question before us now is whether the Trump Administration will now adjust the current nuclear modernization program to the reality of an unexpectedly dangerous threat environment.

Washington essentially now has three options:

1. It can define down what is necessary for deterrence and happily announce that the current modernization program is *adequate or much more than enough*. This is the "less is enough" approach that is now advocated by some prominent commentators (I call this the "Minimum, Easy Deterrence" school solution).

   Or,

2. Washington can maintain its long-standing definition of adequacy, and hope against hope that deterrence simply is not tested while we await the replacement systems coming online. This is the "do-nothing new" path preferred by many in the hope that the apparent threats either are not real, or will somehow go away. (I call this the "Hope is a strategy" school solution).

   Or,

3. Washington can move forward urgently to strengthen the U.S. nuclear deterrence position. This is the "do more now" approach suggested by the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission. (I call this the "Threat-based" school solution).

Our recently released study concludes that this third option is the *most prudent* given Chinese, Russian and North Korean goals and posturing over the past decade.

Neither of the first two options acknowledges that the increased nuclear threat over the past decade has affected U.S. nuclear deterrence requirements. But, as Winston Churchill said, "it is necessary sometimes to take the enemy into consideration."

Following Churchill's wise advice now suggests that, given the heightened threat context, Washington must strengthen the U.S. deterrence posture for the United States and for allies. The 2023 Strategic Posture Commission used the words "urgent" or "urgently" over 40 times in this regard. Many of our allies have slowly, grudgingly come to the same conclusion.

Unfortunately, given the past four decades of deep U.S. strategic and non-strategic force reductions, and the atrophying of the U.S. nuclear infrastructure, the United States is largely limited by the existing number of available strategic bombers, missiles and warheads in its near-term capacity to strengthen its nuclear force posture.

Today, the United States reportedly has approximately 1,660 deployed strategic nuclear weapons.[6] With this level of capability, even with the planned U.S. force replacement program, the United States likely cannot fully hold at risk Russian and Chinese targets related to deterrence, particularly given Beijing's new nuclear force expansion and its breathtaking construction of underground facilities.

Nuclear force upload, that is, adding existing weapons to existing platforms, is a timely, low-cost option for strengthening deterrence in the near term. In fact, nuclear upload is likely the only way America can adequately enhance the strategic nuclear force size and flexibility needed to tailor deterrence in the near term.

The entire U.S. strategic nuclear triad likely could be uploaded before the first element of the planned modernization program becomes operational. *Upload is not*

[6] Schneider and Payne, *Tailored Deterrence and Low-Cost Nuclear Weapons Upload*, op. cit., p. 14.

a substitute for the modernization program because the existing Triad is aging out rapidly, but it may be critical for deterrence in the near term.

Upload, even under the limits of New START, could provide approximately 2,200 warheads. This number is possible because of New START's liberal bomber weapons counting rules. If not constrained by New START, the United States could have a deployed strategic ballistic missile force of approximately 2,626 warheads—depending upon decisions related to necessary missile range and the required number of single warhead missiles.[7] Bomber weapons could add somewhat to that number via uploading. The Trident SLBM force reportedly could be uploaded in months and the Minuteman ICBM force in about three to four years.[8] The planned follow-on systems could extend the upload of these legacy systems.

The cost of upload would likely be quite modest—largely transportation and warhead installation. An August 2020 report of the Congressional Budget Office concluded that: 1) Expanding nuclear forces to the Moscow Treaty limit (2,200) warheads "would not increase the Department of Defense's (DoD's) costs relative to its current plans…."; and 2) "Increasing warhead loadings to reach the START II limits [3,500 warheads] would incur about $100 million in onetime costs for DoD."[9] These numbers do not account for the considerable inflation factor since 2020.

In sum, nuclear weapons upload of legacy and eventually replacement forces is a near-term and likely low-cost option. To do otherwise will be to risk that the planned

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[7] Schneider and Payne, *Tailored Deterrence and Low-Cost Nuclear Weapons Upload*, op. cit., Tables 1 and 2.

[8] As reported in, Peter Huessy, "Arms Control Challenges: Past & Present," *Warrior Maven*, June 8, 2023, https://warriormaven.com/global-security/arms-control-nuclear-deterrence.

[9] Congressional Budget Office, "The Potential Costs of Expanding U.S. Strategic Nuclear Forces If the New START Treaty Expires," August 2020, https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2020-08/56475-START.pdf.

nuclear modernization program will be too slow and too limited for confident deterrence in a rapidly worsening threat environment.

What about arms control in this context? Some former U.S. officials continue to claim that arms control can solve or help solve the current threat challenges, and that an agreement *against* uploading is the priority. This is no surprise; Americans typically want to solve nuclear threat problems via arms control: technical/contractual solutions to political problems are attractive because political solutions are very difficult.

Yet, as I mentioned earlier, China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran are not interested in what we call "stability." They seek a new world order at the expense of the United States and allies. As long as these authoritarian regimes continue to view the United States as the impediment to their drive to reorganize the world order, it is simply naïve to expect them to accept meaningful limitations on the military means that undergird their drive to reorder the globe. Colin Gray's study of arms control history years ago led to his famous, pithy conclusion that meaningful arms control is either "impossible or unimportant."[10] What he meant is that truly useful arms control agreements with dedicated enemies is impossible, and with dedicated friends it is unimportant. I believe that conclusion fully applies today vis-à-vis Russia, China, North Korea and Iran. Expecting otherwise will likely be the basis for another costly mistake.

What about missile defense in this context? For deterrence purposes, missile defense is no substitute for offensive capabilities that can hold at risk what opponents value. But it can complement those capabilities.

Progressively moving now to protect U.S. nuclear retaliatory capabilities, including nuclear command, control, and communications, is an urgent priority. The

[10] Colin S. Gray, *House of Cards* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. X.

more effectively the United States provides this protection, the more able it will likely be to deter war—there are no trade-offs in this regard.

Critics of homeland missile defense now repeat the same arguments I have heard since the 1960s: 1) Homeland missile defense cannot work; 2) homeland defense will destabilize deterrence; and 3) homeland defense will lead our opponents to arms race. These three arguments have driven U.S. missile defense policy for decades.

But, for all their repetition and policy influence, these arguments are demonstrably bogus or logically incoherent in the contemporary threat context: 1) Homeland missile defense likely cannot be 100 percent effective against a large-scale nuclear attack, but that is the standard for "can it work?" put forth as a strawman by missile defense opponents. Homeland defense that is far from perfect likely *can work* in extremely helpful ways for deterrence and if deterrence fails; 2) Rather than destabilizing deterrence, U.S. homeland missile defense will more likely *strengthen* deterrence in many plausible scenarios. It is the *presence* of our nuclear retaliatory and defensive capabilities that can *create* needed deterrence effects, *not the absence* of U.S. defensive capabilities; and 3) Our opponents *have been arms racing for more than a decade*—U.S. homeland missile defense now is hardly the cause of their racing.

I believe I have taken as much time as is permitted for my remarks, so I will conclude by simply saying that we and our allies are in an unprecedentedly precarious place. International political hostilities are now as ripe as they were prior to World War II, but the instruments of destruction—conventional, nuclear, chemical and biological—are much more lethal and in the hands of many. The great Australian scholar Hedley Bull described a leadership tendency that captures how we got here: "…history is littered with catastrophe unthinkable and unimaginable to its victims, who placed their trust in a logic

of history which deserted them in their hour of need." [11] Much of Washington has misread history for three decades—to our great contemporary disadvantage.

Recognizing where we are, how we got here, and moving quickly to strengthen our position may yet help deter war. Winston Churchill warned that it is a "mistake to mix up disarmament with peace. When you have peace, you will have disarmament." The contemporary corollary of Churchill's wise warning is that we must not "mix up" deterrence with war. Deterrence prevents war and, if we had a reliable political settlement, deterrence would not be such an urgent concern. However, I do not expect Russia, China, North Korea, or Iran to soon give up their aggressive drive to overturn the world order at our expense. That would constitute a political solution to current threats. Until then, our goal must be for U.S. and allied deterrence positions to persuade opponents, on every occasion, that their aggression is not worth the risk or cost.

[11] Hedley Bull, *The Control of the Arms Race* (New York, NY: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1965), p. 48.

TAILORING DETERRENCE: WHY AND WHAT?

Nuclear Deterrence In a New Era: Applying "Tailored Deterrence"*

Introduction: On Deterrence

Carl von Clausewitz writes that the nature of war has enduring continuities, but its characteristics change with different circumstances.[1] Similarly, the fundamental nature of deterrence has endured for millennia: a threatened response to an adversary's prospective provocation causes that adversary to decide against the provocation i.e., the adversary is deterred from attack because it decides that the prospective costs would outweigh the gains. Effective deterrence shapes the calculations and thus the decision making of an adversary in a more benign direction than otherwise would have been the case.

While this threat-based nature of deterrence endures, its character must adapt to different circumstances. Numerous factors can necessitate adapting a deterrence strategy for greatest effect, including the character, attention, and health of the adversary, the deterrence goal, the historical and cultural contexts, and the available channels of communication, *inter alia*.

For example, in one case, the most effective deterrent may be based on a threat to punish the adversary in a manner that aligns with the adversary's fears. Depending

* Original publication: Keith B. Payne, "Nuclear Deterrence In a New Era: Applying "Tailored Deterrence"," *Information Series*, No. 431 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, May 21, 2018).

[1] This is a theme of the first chapter of the first book in *Vom Keiege* (On War). See, Carl Von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege* (Hamburg, Germany: Nikol Verlag, 2008), p. 49.

on the opponent and context, this threatened punishment could be communicated via a variety of possible channels and be based on a range of possible threat instruments, including military and financial sanctions. In another case, the necessary deterrent threat may be to deny the adversary its specific political or military objectives. [2] In yet another case, a combination of unique punishment and denial threats may be necessary to deter. And, in all of these cases, effective deterrence may require adjusting the means of communicating the needed threats and the level of logical credibility that is attached to the threat.

Understanding the basic threat-based nature of deterrence is not an intellectual challenge. That simplicity is deceptive, however, *because understanding how to adjust the character of deterrence strategies in practice across different adversaries and contexts is a significant challenge*. Doing so is complicated by adversaries' divergent worldviews, values, goals, priorities, risk tolerances, motivations, levels of pragmatism and determination, channels of communication, and perceptions of US credibility.[3] The significance of meeting that challenge is of unparalleled value when the deterrence goal is the prevention of nuclear attack.

The introduction of nuclear weapons in 1945 and their extreme lethality against most societal targets dramatically expanded both potential security threats and the corresponding means of deterrence, as was recognized almost immediately by some at the time. As Bernard Brodie famously observed in a 1946 publication, "If [a nation that considers launching an attack] must fear retaliation, the fact

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[2] For an early discussion of the distinction between deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial see, Glen H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 3-16, 33-40.

[3] The diversity of such variables and their significance to the functioning of deterrence is presented in, Keith B. Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), pp. 1-77.

that it destroys its opponent's cities some hours or even days before its own are destroyed may avail it little. Thus far, the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them."[4] The advent of nuclear weapons did not alter the nature of deterrence, but it did alter its character.

The contemporary emergence of new types of threats, and new domains of conflict, such as modern biological weapons, and cyber and space respectively, has again affected the character of deterrence. But its nature endures. The fundamental questions about deterrence remain as elaborated by Raymond Aron and Herman Kahn during the Cold War: who deters whom, from what action, by threatening what response, in what circumstances, in the face of what counterthreats?[5]

Despite the continuity in the basic nature of deterrence, significant geopolitical, doctrinal and technological developments now demand that we again adapt our deterrence goals, means and applications to fit a new strategic landscape. During the Cold War, US nuclear deterrence strategies had to adapt to the *relatively* slow changes and enduring continuities of the US-Soviet bipolar strategic environment, and thereafter to the dramatic systemic transformation brought on by the collapse of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact. A basic task now is to understand how a third and dramatically different new strategic threat environment demands that we, again adjust the character of deterrence.

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[4] Bernard Brodie (ed.), *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company), 1946, p. 76.

[5] Herman Kahn, *Thinking the Unthinkable in the 1980s* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), p. 120. Raymond Aron, *The Great Debate: Theories of Nuclear Strategy* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1965), p. 163.

Flexibility, Deterrence Tailoring, and Hedging

By definition, effective deterrence requires that US deterrence strategies be sufficiently credible and intolerable to different adversaries to shape their decision making decisively. This deterrence requirement for US threats that are both intolerable and credible follows as day follows night from the threat-based nature of deterrence. The great potential variation in adversaries noted above demands that we adjust the character of our deterrence strategies, i.e., we "tailor" them, as necessary to the unique characteristics of diverse adversaries and circumstances.

The failure to understand the unique characteristics of diverse adversaries has, on numerous past occasions, led the United States to be shocked by unexpected foreign actions. For example, in 1941, Assistant Secretary of State Dean Acheson reassured President Roosevelt that, "no rational Japanese could believe an attack on us could result in anything but disaster for his country."[6] Despite Acheson's confident prediction, four months later Japan struck Pearl Harbor—apparently in the belief that Japan was "doomed" if it did not act.[7]

The need to tailor deterrence to the unique character of adversaries and context is likely to apply to the form and substance of our deterrence threats, the source of their delivery, their timing, content, format, and the channels of their communication. As a relatively early discussion of the need to adjust deterrence strategies to the differing possible opponents and contexts concludes, "If one does not threaten

[6] Quoted in Scott Sagan, "The Origins of the Pacific War," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Spring 1988), p. 906.

[7] See, for example, Louis Morton, "Japan's Decision for War," *Command Decisions* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959). See also, Richard Betts, *Surprise Attack* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1982), pp. 133-137.

the right target for the right reasons, it may not matter how well one does it."[8]

It should be noted that the need to tailor deterrence strategies is not a new idea. For many decades scholars of deterrence pointed in their own words to the need to do so.[9] The 1983 bipartisan *Report of the President's Commission on Strategic Forces* ("Scowcroft Commission") essentially presented the need to tailor deterrence to the specific "set of beliefs in the minds of the Soviet leaders, given their own values and attitudes."[10] The catch-word "tailoring" itself came into play more recently.[11] The 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) culminates a decades-long road to the elevation of tailoring deterrence to a fundamental principle of US policy.[12]

The breadth of the spectrum of adversaries with highly-lethal capabilities will affect the degree to which the United States must have sufficient flexibility of deterrence threats and planning to tailor its deterrence strategies. In this regard, the new strategic environment is very different from the Cold War and the immediate post-Cold War period.

During the Cold War, the number of deterrence variables was limited because the US focus was largely on a

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[8] Peter Karsten, Peter Howell and Artis Frances Allen, *Military Threats: A Systemic Historical Analysis of the Determinants of Success* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. xii.

[9] See for example, Alexander George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), pp. 82-83;

[10] Brent Scowcroft, Chair, *Presidents Commission On Strategic Forces*, April 6, 1983, p. 3.

[11] My own discussion of the need to adjust deterrence strategies given the diversity in adversary decision-making dates back to 1982; my use of the corresponding phrase "tailored" deterrence dates back at least to 1996. See, *Nuclear Deterrence in U.S.-Soviet Relations* (Boulder, CP: Westview Press, 1982), pp. 57-60; and, Keith B. Payne, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), p. 127-128.

[12] U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2018), pp. 25-37, available at https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF.

single threatening superpower. Now, in an era of Great Power confrontation and uncertainty, the spectrum of potential adversaries with highly-lethal capabilities has grown and there is considerable variation in their character; conflict scenarios range from the relatively familiar to the largely unfamiliar; and the stakes at risk differ widely and can shift unpredictably.

In addition, the number and character of great powers, rogue states and terrorist organizations that may join the array of contemporary adversaries is uncertain, as is the nature of the future threats they may pose. Deterring contemporary adversaries is a challenge; deterring future adversaries yet to emerge is, by definition, a challenge of unknown dimensions. This reality is why the US flexibility to tailor deterrence and to "hedge" against uncertainty and risk is so critical for US and allied security, as is emphasized in the 2018 NPR.[13]

From a "New World Order" to a New Era of Confrontation and Uncertainty

Each *Nuclear Posture Review*, including the 2018 NPR, has emphasized that US nuclear policy and deterrence strategy must be responsive to the evolving character of the threat environment in which US nuclear policy and deterrence must operate.[14] This is a significant point of consensus because the dramatic developments in the international

[13] U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review* (2018), op. cit., pp. 37-40.

[14] See, William J. Perry, *Annual Report to the President and the Congress* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, February 1995), Part IV, "Nuclear Posture Review," pp. 83-92, available at http://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/annual_reports/1995_DoD_AR.pdf?ver=2014-06-24-152712-813; U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, December 2001), available at http://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/NCB/06-F-1586_Nuclear_Posture_Review.pdf; U.S.; Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, April 2010); U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review* (2018).

threat environment over the past decade have included such profound changes that US nuclear policy and considerations of deterrence must adjust to be responsive. As the former Commander of US European Command, Gen. Philip Breedlove rightly said in 2017, "The United States and its security partners have impressive military forces that should be capable of bolstering deterrence against these new challenges. But achieving this favorable outcome will require policymakers to implement critical reforms in order to prepare their forces for a more diverse and challenging future."[15] What are the new challenges that carry such significant implications?

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a striking reduction in the generally perceived level of nuclear threat from Russia and China, and a corresponding reduction in the generally perceived value of US nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence. During the immediate post-Cold War era, the general belief was that the prospect for interstate nuclear crises and the need for nuclear deterrence was dwindling. The hope and even common expectation—shared by many senior officials and frequent commentators alike—was that nuclear threats and the potential for nuclear employment belonged to the past, never to return.[16] Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the United States moved further away from interest in

[15] Gen. Philip Breedlove, former Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, in, "Memo to Washington: Reforming National Defense to Meet Emerging Global Challenges," *Mitchell Institute Policy Papers*, Vol. 5 (March 2017), p. 2.

[16] "The risk of nuclear confrontation between the United States and either Russia or China belongs to the past, not the future..."James Cartwright, Chair, Global Zero U.S. Nuclear Policy Commission, *Modernizing U.S. Nuclear Strategy, Force Structure and Posture* (Washington, D.C.: Global Zero, May 2012), p. 6, available at http://www.globalzero.org/files/gz_us_nuclear_policy_commission_report.pdf. Renewed hostility with Russia is described as, "hardly more likely to be revived than the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries between Catholics and Protestants in Europe." Carl Kaysen, Robert S. McNamara, and George W. Rathjens, "Nuclear Weapons After the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (Fall 1991), p. 96.

nuclear weapons and focused heavily on defeating terrorism.

Washington paid limited attention to nuclear deterrence or modernizing US weapons; the emphasis instead was on how to reduce nuclear force numbers and their salience. The Obama administration in particular highlighted nonproliferation and the elimination of nuclear weapons rather than deterrence as the priority goals of US nuclear policy. The Obama Administration's 2010 NPR explicitly elevated nonproliferation "for the first time" to the highest priority of US nuclear policy.

This prioritization was significant because the Administration considered the continuing reduction in the role and number of nuclear weapons as a means to promote the priority nonproliferation goal.[17] President Obama himself emphasized this linkage, saying that continued nuclear force reductions, "will then give us greater moral authority to say to Iran, don't develop a nuclear weapon; to say to North Korea, don't proliferate nuclear weapons." [18] Correspondingly, senior Department of Defense (DoD) officials listed "preventing nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism," and "reducing the role of nuclear weapons in US strategy" as the top US objectives, and stated explicitly that the DoD assessed US deterrence requirements against these priority metrics.[19] The Administration continued to affirm deterrence, but subordinated it to the priority goal of nonproliferation, which in turn was believed to demand the continued

[17] See the U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2010), op. cit., p. vi.

[18] Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama at Strasbourg Town Hall," *ObamaWhiteHouseArchives.gov*, April 3, 2009, available at https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-strasbourg-town-hall.

[19] Testimony of James Miller, as quoted in, "The Current Status and Future Direction for U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy and Posture," *112th U.S. Congress*, House Armed Services Committee, November 2, 2011, p. 62, available at https://fas.org/irp/congress/2011_hr/nw-posture.pdf..

reduction of the US instruments of nuclear deterrence. This was indeed unprecedented, as rightly noted in the 2010 NPR.

During this period, the United States self-consciously sought to take the lead in moving away from nuclear weapons and toward "nuclear zero." [20] Doing so was expected to advance nonproliferation and serve the desired broader long-term goal of establishing cooperative international norms and institutions, and transitioning away from the "harsh world of security competition and war."[21]

This idealistic theme pervaded numerous official statements about nuclear policy and the goal of "nuclear zero," which dominated public discussion. And, even while potential adversaries were establishing or enlarging their nuclear and missile capabilities, commentators such as Joseph Cirincione claimed that with the ending of the Cold War, "…the ballistic missile threat is generally in decline around the world and particularly in regards to our nation," and that, "We could quickly reduce our existing nuclear arsenal from the 10,000 hydrogen bombs we now have down to the low hundreds, without any threat to our own national security."[22]

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[20] President Obama's 2009 Prague speech promoting the goal of nuclear disarmament, and his September 20, 2016 speech to the United Nations are masterpieces of idealist thought applied to international relations and U.S. nuclear policy in particular. See, Barack Obama, "Remarks By President Barack Obama In Prague As Delivered," *ObamaWhiteHouseArchives.gov*, April 5, 2009, available at https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered; Barack Obama, "Address by President Obama to the 71st Session of the United Nations General Assembly," *ObamaWhiteHouseArchives.gov*, September 20, 2016, available at https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/20/address-president-obama-71st-session-united-nations-general-assembly.

[21] As the international system known for millennia is described in, John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), pp. 17-18.

[22] Joseph Cirincione, "Replacing a Failed Nuclear Strategy," *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting (American Society of International Law)*, Vol. 101, March 28-31, 2007, pp. 443-444, 446.

The assessment that, 1) with the passing of the Cold War, interstate nuclear threats are largely a thing of the past and US nuclear deterrence requirements greatly eased, and, 2) continuing US nuclear reductions are a key to nuclear non-proliferation, has been at the heart of virtually every argument *against* US efforts to modernize the residual "legacy" US nuclear force posture inherited from the Cold War.

For scholars from the realist school, this assessment and associated policy recommendation were obviously imprudent because, despite the end of the Cold War, military threats and the potential for Great Power confrontation, including nuclear crises and conflict, had hardly been purged from the international system. As Colin Gray observed in 2005, "If 'the war that will end war', in the words crafted by H.G. Wells on 14 August 1914, its even greater successor twenty years later, and then the atomic discovery, did not suffice to oblige humankind to change its political habits, it is difficult to see what could do so in the future."[23] An Air Force General Officer's quip portrayed the realist skepticism regarding the continued US push for nuclear zero, "I hope that day comes soon. And when it does, I want to invite you all over to my house for a party. I'd just ask that you don't feed any of the hors d'oeuvres to my unicorn."[24]

But the West generally welcomed the sanguine expectations and claims that because the Cold War had ended, interstate nuclear threats and the need for nuclear deterrence was largely a thing of the past. As then-Commander of European Command, General Philip Breedlove remarked in 2016, "We embarked on a policy of 'hugging the bear' with what we perceived was a former

[23] Colin S. Gray, *Another Bloody Century* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 2005), p. 63.

[24] Quoted in, Keith B. Payne and James Schlesinger, et. al., *Minimum Deterrence: Examining the Evidence* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2013), p. 3.

adversary turned strategic partner."[25] This optimistic narrative fit well with the enduring idealist strain in American foreign policy. It also was promoted by a professional anti-nuclear lobby and embraced by those captured by the hubris and feel-good emotion of it all.

In a departure from this general narrative that culminated in the 2010 NPR, the 2018 NPR emphasizes that while countering proliferation and terrorism remain key US goals, effective nuclear deterrence again is the priority of US nuclear policy. Correspondingly, Secretary of Defense Mattis recently identified the modernization of US nuclear deterrence capabilities as the highest priority of the DoD FY 2019 budget request.[26]

The reason for this renewed US focus on deterrence, including nuclear deterrence, is clear: as if to confirm realists' skepticism, key potential adversaries viewed the idealistic US nuclear disarmament agenda as a subterfuge,[27] and refused to follow the US lead. Instead, they continued to emphasize the roles of nuclear weapons and to modernize and/or expand their arsenals. Rather than a more benign "new world order," the strategic environment is now characterized by the intensification of great power competition, coercive nuclear threats, and the increasing integration of nuclear weapons into adversary declaratory policy and war planning.[28]

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[25] Philip Breedlove, "U.S. European Command Posture Statement 2016," *EUCOM.mil*, February 25, 2016, available at http://www.eucom.mil/media-library/article/35164/u-s-european-command-posture-statement-2016

[26] *Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, Senate Armed Services Committee, Written Statement for the Record*, April 26, 2018, p. 5.

[27] Russian President Putin, when presented with the proposal for nuclear zero, reportedly viewed the proposal "as just another U.S. trick to weaken his country, according to two accounts of the meeting." See, Jim Hoagland, "Nuclear Crossroads," *The Washington Post*, December 14, 2008, p. B 7.

[28] As a 2008 report by DoD and DOE stated, Russia has "increased training for nuclear operations in all Russian military branches," and "has re-incorporated theater nuclear operations into its military planning." See, U.S. Department of Energy and U.S. Department of Defense, National Security and Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century, September 2008, p. 8, available at

Secretary of Defense Mattis stated in April 2018 testimony before Congress that, "Long-term strategic competition—not terrorism—is now the primary focus of US national security."[29] Why? Because "Nations as different as China and Russia have chosen to be strategic competitors as they seek to create a world consistent with their authoritarian models and pursue veto power over other nation's economic, diplomatic, and security decision."[30]

Russia

Moscow clearly feels that it must correct an unacceptable loss of position supposedly imposed on it by the West following the collapse of the Soviet Union.[31] Unsurprisingly, Moscow is pursuing Great Power competition aggressively, with a revanchist agenda backed by coercive nuclear threats—its nuclear threats to Western countries surpass even those of the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

For example, in March 2015, the Russian Ambassador to Denmark, Mikhail Vanin said, "If Denmark joins the American-led missile defense shield…then Danish warships will be targets for Russian nuclear missiles."[32] Russia also made coercive nuclear threats to Sweden,

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http://www.aps.org/policy/reports/popareports/upload/nuclear weapons, pdf.

[29] Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, *Senate Armed Services Committee, Written Statement for the Record*, April 26, 2018, p. 3.

[30] Ibid, p. 3.

[31] For an overview, see, Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power* (Washington, D.C.: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2017), pp. 14-17, available at http://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Russia%20Military%20Power%20Report%202017.pdf.

[32] Julian Isherwood, "Russia warns Denmark its warships could become nuclear targets," *The Telegraph*, March 21, 2015, available at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/denmark/11487509/Russia-warns-Denmarkits-warships.

apparently to pressure it away from interest in joining NATO.[33] And, Russian President Putin stated explicitly that Russia was prepared to put its nuclear weapons on alert as part of its operations against Crimea in 2014, and reportedly did so during its military operations against Georgia in 2008.[34] NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg wrote in 2015:

> Russia has conducted at least 18 large-scale snap exercise, some of which have involved more 100,000 troops. These exercises include simulated nuclear attacks on NATO allies (eg. ZAPAD) and on partners (eg. March 2013 simulated attacks on Sweden), and have been used to mask massive movements of military forces (February 2014 prior to the illegal annexation of Crimea) and to menace Russia's neighbors.[35]

Perhaps the most visible of these Russian nuclear threats was offered by President Putin on March 1, 2018, when his "State of the Union" speech was accompanied by an animated video depicting a Russian multi-warhead nuclear missile strike on what appears to be Florida.[36] Russia's nuclear posturing in this regard is not limited to such an extreme declaratory policy: various nuclear force programs,

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[33] "Security official warns about dangers of anti-missile shield for Baltic states," *TASS*, June 24, 2015, available at http://tass.ru/en/russia/803499. See also, "Russia vows harsh response if Sweden joins NATO," *UNIAN Information Agency*, July 21, 2015, available at http://www.unian.info/world/1102979-russia-vows-harsh-response-if-swedenjoins-nato.html.

[34] Frank Miller, "Keynote, 2015 USSTRATCOM Deterrence Symposium," *STRATCOM.mil*, July 29, 2015, available at http://www.stratcom.mil/Media/Speeches/Article/986412/keynote-2015-usstratcom-deterrence-symposium/.

[35] Jens Stoltenberg, The Secretary General's Annual Report 2015 (Brussels, Belgium: NATO, January 2016), p. 19, available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pfd_2016_01/2016128_SG_AnnualReport_2015_en.pdf.

[36] See for example the CNN presentation of this animation at, https://youtu.be/3iQ3CyX1U04.

according to Gen. Valery Gerasimov, the chief of the Russian General Staff, already have resulted in the modernization of three-fourths of Russia's "ground, air and sea strategic nuclear forces."[37]

In addition, during the Cold War and the decades immediately thereafter, the United States devoted immense efforts to the negotiation of nuclear arms control treaties and agreements with first the Soviet Union and later Russia. Yet, Russia now engages in continuing, willful noncompliance with many, perhaps most of its arms control commitments, most notably the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF).[38]

China

China continues to avoid transparency and arms control in favor of strategic opacity, and is provoking US allies severely as Beijing seeks to overturn the existing order in Asia. As the *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* states:

> China is leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to their advantage. As China continues its economic and military ascendance, asserting power through an all-of-nation long-term strategy, it will continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and

[37] "Russia's Nuclear Forces Can Inflict 'Unacceptable Damage' on Any Aggressor—MOD," *Sputnik News*, November 7, 2017, at, https://sputniknews.com/military/201711071058879855-russia-nuclear-forces-damage-aggressor/.

[38] See the discussion in, Franklin C. Miller and Keith B. Payne, "No More US-Russian Arms Treaties Until Moscow Stops Violating Existing Treaties and Agreements." *Information Series*, National Institute for Public Policy, No. 418, March 9, 2017.

> displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future. The most far-reaching objective of this defense strategy is to set the military relationship between our two countries on a path of transparency and non-aggression. [39]

China's illegal expansionism and rapidly growing military capabilities, nuclear and non-nuclear, pose a direct threat to US allies and interests. US allies, particularly Japan are highly concerned about China's military rise, and the threatening position it has taken in Asia.[40] Japanese Prime Minister Abe has likened China's military rise and the current situation in Asia to the ominous developments in Europe prior to World War I.[41]

These respective Russian and Chinese goals and worldviews are important to US considerations of deterrence because cognitive studies that were not available in the 1960s or 1970s indicate that *decision makers typically are willing to accept greater risks to recover that which they perceive to be rightfully theirs, but have lost*.[42] The Western goal of preserving the international order which these Great Powers now seek to overturn will be particularly

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[39] U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, January 2018), p. 2, available at https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf.

[40] Chris Ford, a noted Asian security expert, and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation, has described China as, "…a wealthy but insecure and prickly power prone to regional bullying—one that has not been socialized to modern forms of international behavior but instead still nurses revanchist dreams of geopolitical 'return' to a position of global centrality it believes it had, it lost, and it is today desperate to regain." See, "China's Global Ambitions and U.S. Interests," New Paradigms Forum, November 5, 2015, at http://www.newparadigmsforum.com/NPFtestsite/?p=1971.

[41] "Japanese PM Shinzo Abe urges Asia military restraint," *BBC.com*, January 22, 2014, available at http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-25851960.

[42] Thomas Scheber, "Evolutionary Psychology, Cognitive Function, and Deterrence," in Keith B. Payne, ed., *Understanding Deterrence* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 65-92.

challenging as they seek to recover what they believe to be rightfully theirs, but are now denied by Western opposition. Russia's illegitimate occupation of Crimea and China's expansion into the East and South China Seas certainly appear to reflect this dynamic.

North Korea

North Korea's extreme nuclear threats and long-range means of delivery now pose a clear and present danger to the United States and allies. At this point, North Korea may be merely months away from the capability to launch nuclear armed missiles at US cities.[43] The potential is clear for North Korea to threaten the use of such capabilities against the United States and allies for coercive purposes. As then-CIA Director Mike Pompeo said in January 2018:

> And so we do believe that Kim Jong-un, given these tools sets, would use them for things besides simply regime protection. Now, that is to put pressure on what is his ultimate goal, which is reunification of the peninsula under his authority. And so we don't think it's the case that he's simply going to use this tool set for self-preservation. We think he'll use it in a way that is either—call it what you will, call it—coercive is perhaps the best way to think about how Kim Jong-un is prepared to potentially use these weapons.[44]

In addition, with the ultimate goal of unifying the Korean Peninsula under its rule, North Korea is expanding its nuclear capabilities. From the 1990s to the mid-2000s,

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[43] As reportedly stated by the Director of Central Intelligence Mike Pompeo. See, Associated Press, "CIA head: NKorea months from perfecting nuclear capabilities," *CNBC.com*, October 20, 2017, available at https://www.cnbc.com/2017/10/20/cia-head-nkorea-months-from-perfecting-nuclear-capabilities.html.

[44] CIA Director Mike Pompeo, American Enterprise Institute, January 23, 2018.

North Korea used its nuclear program to extort diplomatic concessions, economic assistance, and food aid from us and our allies. Secretary of Defense Mattis has stated that North Korea now has the capability to strike, "everywhere in the world, basically."[45] If North Korea realizes the capability to threaten the United States with nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), the prospect is for even greater demands and coercive nuclear threats by the "shakedown state."[46] Whatever may come of forthcoming diplomatic efforts, absent virtually a complete and enduring reversal of North Korean behavior, it is imperative for US and allied security, and for the assurance of US allies, that the United States be capable of deterring and defending against this eccentric rogue power.

Iran

Iran seeks hegemony in the Middle East and threatens US allies and friends in the process. Iranian leaders correspondingly express extreme hostility toward us and our allies—most recently labeling the United States Iran's "number one" enemy.[47] Despite the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran has continued to pursue robust missile programs, including the development of long-range missiles. Iran's *Simorgh* space launch vehicle (SLV) provides technical advances that could shorten Iran's pathway to acquiring an ICBM capability. As a 2017 National Air and Space Intelligence Center (NASIC) report

[45] Quoted in, Zachary Cohen, et al., "New Missile Test Shows North Korea Capable of Hitting All of US Mainland," *CNN*, November 29, 2017, at http://www.conn.com/2017/11/28/politics/north-korea-missile-launch/index.html.

[46] Nicholas Eberstadt, "The Shakedown State," American Enterprise Institute, October 31, 2003, available at www.aei.org.

[47] Parisa Hafezi, "Supreme Leader Khamenei says U.S. is Iran's 'number one enemy,'" Reuters, November 2, 2017, at, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-irsn-usa/supreme-leader-khamenei-says-u-s-is-irans-number-one-enemy-idUSKBN1D211H.

states: "Tehran's desire to have a strategic counter to the United States could drive it to field an ICBM. Progress in Iran's space program could shorten a pathway to an ICBM because space launch vehicles (SLV) use inherently similar technologies."[48] If so, protecting and assuring US allies and partners in the region may become increasingly challenging given the potential for coercive Iranian missile threats.
While terrorist organizations continue to threaten us and our allies, we must now recognize the reality of both Great Power and rogue state revisionist international goals, nuclear threats and their potential for nuclear employment.

Clinging to Demonstrably False Expectations

Despite the now-manifest realities of a dynamic threat environment in which significant interstate nuclear threats are a prominent feature, the claim continues to be repeated that because the Cold War is over, US deterrence requirements have eased and the United States can further eliminate its nuclear capabilities, including at least one leg of the nuclear triad. For example:

> Thankfully those [Cold War] days are over. The Soviet Union disappeared 25 years ago. Current Russian belligerence, although worrisome, does not constitute a renewed Cold War…Our submarines alone give us an assured deterrence…The United States does not need to arm its bombers with a new generation of nuclear-armed cruise missiles…Similarly, the United

[48] National Air and Space Intelligence Center (NASIC) and the Defense Intelligence Ballistic Missile Analysis Committee, *Ballistic and Cruise Missile Threat* (Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, OH: NASIC, June 2017), p. 2, available at http://www.nasic.af.mil/Portals/19/images/Fact%20Sheet%20Images/2017%20Ballistic%20and%20Cruise%20Missile%20Threat_Final_small.pdf?ver=2017-07-21-083234-343.

> States should cancel plans to replace its ground-launched ICBMs….[49]

It is obvious that the 20th Century Cold War is over. But that fact certainly does not justify the linked claims that contemporary US nuclear requirements thus are minimal, and that, "our submarines alone give us an assured deterrence." This oft-repeated argument is a non sequitur presented as if a known, self-evident fact. It is, instead highly-speculative and imprudent in a subject area that demands the greatest prudence. Why? Because it posits: 1) a continuing and relatively benign nuclear threat environment that, unfortunately, does not exist; and 2) the undoubtedly mistaken claim that a specific, relatively static force structure can be known to provide "assured deterrence" in a dynamic threat environment.

Confident claims of what assuredly will deter simply ignore the inherent uncertainties regarding the functioning of deterrence, and the reality that deterrence strategies must adapt to fit shifting adversaries and contexts. No one, regardless of their position or experience, can claim with any credibility to know in advance that a relatively modest and static set of US nuclear capabilities will provide "assured deterrence" across a broad spectrum of known and now-unknown opponents and contingencies, particularly for the many future decades in which US nuclear deterrence capabilities are expected to function. Static deterrence postures do not long survive dynamic threat environments.

Indeed, the nuclear threat environment in this era of confrontation and uncertainty poses more diverse and severe challenges to US deterrence strategy than were

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[49] William J. Perry and James E. Cartwright, "Spending Less On Nuclear Weapons Could Actually Make Us Safer," *Washington Post*, November 16, 2017, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinion/spending-less-on-nuclear-weapons-could-actually-make-us safer/2017/11/16/396ef0c6-ca56-11e7-aa96-54417592cf72_story.html?utm_term=.2fe3b14ea6c7.

operative during much of the Cold War, with greater uncertainties about the future. In 2016, then-DNI Clapper observed in his opening statement to Congress on the *Worldwide Threat Assessment*, "Unpredictable instability has become the 'new normal,' and this trend will continue for the foreseeable future."[50] In this new era, the range of possibilities and uncertainties has expanded regarding plausible answers to the enduring deterrence questions posed by Aron and Kahn: whom must we deter, from what action, by threatening what response, in what circumstances, in the face of what counterthreats?

Implications for US Deterrence Strategies and Capabilities

The basic nature of deterrence endures. US security does not require new theories of deterrence; it does demand broader familiarity with *what already is known about deterrence and greater facility with its implementation in a dynamic threat environment*. This includes attention to the requirements posed by diverse adversaries and contexts, and to the US flexibility needed to tailor deterrence strategies and capabilities accordingly. We must pursue the hard work of understanding how to deter a more diverse set of adversaries and potential adversaries,[51] from a wider

[50] James R. Clapper, "Remarks as delivered by The Honorable James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence," *DNI.gov*, February 9, 2016, available at https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/2016-02-09SSCI_open_threat_hearing_transcript.pdf.

[51] As then-Commander of Strategic Command, ADM Cecil Haney rightly stated, "To address the spectrum of conflict, we must have a comprehensive understanding of the strategic environment as perceived from an adversary's point of view. We must understand capability and intent so that we can deny enemy action, threaten the important areas the adversary values, and prevent misperceptions and actions from escalating. We must have a deep understanding of the adversary." See, ADM. Cecil D. Haney, "An Interview with Cecil D. Haney," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, October 2016, available at http://ndupress.ndu.edu/JFQ/Joint-Force-Quarterly-83/Article/979753/an-interview-with-cecil-d-haney/.

array of specific actions, in a similarly wider array of plausible circumstances, while also hedging against the unknown and unexpected.

Deterring Limited First-Use Threats

In particular, we must understand how to deter Great Powers and nuclear-armed rogue states from exploiting limited nuclear threats or use for coercive purposes in support of their respective goals to change established orders and borders in Europe, Asia, and prospectively the Middle East.

As noted above, for over a decade Russia has engaged in coercive nuclear first-use threats and emphasized the value of limited nuclear first-use as a tool of statecraft in support of its revisionist agenda. Its apparent notion of "escalate-to-deescalate" essentially envisions nuclear weapons as coercive means to defeat the West's will and capability to respond in strength to Russia.[52] Moscow appears to expect that its nuclear threats, or limited, low-yield first-use if necessary, will compel Western capitulation in crises or conflict.[53]

As the National Intelligence Council states in its 2017 *Global Trends* report: "Russian military doctrine purportedly includes the limited use of nuclear weapons in a situation where Russia's vital interests are at stake to

[52] See especially, U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review* (2018), op. cit., pp. 8-9.

[53] Dr. Mark Schneider, Senior Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy has produced unparalleled open source work. I draw here from his work. See for example, "Deterring Russian First-Use of Low-Yield Nuclear Weapons, *Real Clear Defense*, March 12, 2018, at https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/03/12deterring_russian_first_use_of_low_yield_nuclear_113180.html. See also the discussion in Colin S. Gray, "Strategic Sense and Nuclear Weapons Today," *Information Series*, National Institute For Public Policy, No. 425, December 11, 2017, p. 4; and, Keith B. Payne and John S. Foster, *Russian Strategy: Expansion, Crisis and Conflict* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2016).

'deescalate' a conflict by demonstrating that continued conventional conflict risks escalating the crisis to a large-scale nuclear exchange."[54] Evelyn Farkas, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, described this element of Russian military doctrine concisely in Congressional testimony regarding Russian military doctrine: "The Russian armed forces developed a further means to attempt to deter the West using nuclear or asymmetric weapons—the concept of 'escalating to de-escalate.' The rationale is that by raising the price to the adversary—through a cyberattack or limited use of a nuclear weapons—Russia could force the enemy to capitulate."[55]

This Russian concept of using limited nuclear first-use threats to compel capitulation appears not to be restricted to the defense of agreed Russian borders, but also to support the expansion of Russia's area of dominance by deterring or countering any robust NATO response.[56] As Jacek Duralec, a scholar with a Polish government-sponsored think tank, concludes: "The expanded function of Russia's nuclear arsenal…is not just for traditional deterrence, which is aimed at preserving the status quo; it is also to be used as a tool of intimidation and coercion, supporting territorial change."[57] Indeed, senior DoD officials of the Obama Administration described this "escalation to deescalate"

[54] National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends: Paradox of Progress* (Washington, D.C.: Director of National Intelligence, January 2017), p. 36, available at https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/nic/GT-Full-Report.pdf.

[55] Dr. Evelyn N. Farkas, *Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee on "Understanding and Deterring Russia: U.S. Policies and Strategies,"* February 10, 2016, p. 2.

[56] Adrian Bradshaw, "The latest security challenges facing NATO," *RUSI.org*, February 20, 2015, available at https://www.rusi.org/go.php?structureID=videos&ref=V54E7621089708#.VTFlcJN4d0T.

[57] Jacek Durkalec, "Russia's evolving nuclear strategy and what it means for Europe," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, July 5, 2016, available at http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_russias_evolving_nuclear_strategy_and_what_it_means_for_europe.

facet of Russian doctrine as a "reckless gamble for which the odds are incalculable and the outcome could prove catastrophic.[58]

Some commentators, however, now claim that "escalate-to-de-escalate" is *not* a facet of Russian military doctrine—because, they say, there are few if any corresponding statements by Russian officials.[59] This claim ignores or dismisses key countervailing facts.

First, numerous US officials with full access to pertinent information about Russian military doctrine confirm Russia's "escalate-to-deescalate" concept. For example, in 2016 then-Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter stated, "It's a sobering fact that the most likely use of nuclear weapons is not the massive nuclear exchange of the classic Cold War-type, but rather the unwise resort to smaller but still unprecedentedly terrible attacks, for example, by Russia or North Korea to try to coerce a conventionally superior opponent to back off or abandon an ally during a crisis."[60] In 2017, DIA Director, Lt. Gen. Vincent Stewart said Russia has built nuclear de-escalation "into their operational concept, we've seen them exercise that idea,"[61] and the former Commander of US European Command, Gen. Philip Breedlove, said, "Russia (and even North Korea) view

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[58] Robert Scher, "Statement of Robert Scher Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans, and Capabilities" *114th U.S. Congress*, House Armed Services Committee, March 2, 2016, p. 3, available at http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS29/20160302/104619/HHRG-114-AS29-Wstate-ScherR-20160302.pdf.

[59] Olga Oliker and Andre Baklitskiy, "The Nuclear Posture Review and Russian 'De-Escalation:' A Dangerous Solution to a Nonexistent Problem," *War on the Rocks*, February 20, 2018, https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/nuclear-posture-review-russian-de-escalation-dangerous-solution-nonexistent-problem/.

[60] Quoted in, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, *Remarks by Secretary Carter to Troops at Minot Air Force Base, North Dakota,* Department of Defense, September 26, 2016, at, https://www.defense.gov/News/Trnscripts/Transcrpt-View/Article/956079/remarks-by-secretary-carter-to-troops-atminot-air -force-base-north-dakota/.

[61] Quoted in, *S Armed Services Hearing on Worldwide Threats, Political Transcript Wire*, May 23, 2017, available at, https://dialog.proquest.com.

nuclear weapons not merely as a strategic deterrent, but as practical weapons for employment to control escalation to Russia's advantage and to quickly terminate conflicts on Russian terms."[62] In 2015, Lt. Gen. David Hogg, then-US Military Representative to the NATO Military Committee, said that, "There is a Russian document [that] states that they will escalate to de-escalate and will be the first to issue a nuclear strike."[63]

Second, senior Russian military officials have stated explicitly that such details of Russian doctrine are now in classified Russian documents,[64] which may explain why some skeptical academic commentators find open references to "escalate to de-escalate" too difficult to locate. Third, there are, nevertheless, multiple instances of Russian leaders openly discussing this facet of Russian doctrine, including recently.

For example, in 2008, Colonel General Nikolai Solovtsov, then-Commander of the Strategic Rocket Force, stated that "special actions" could, "prevent the escalation of a high-intensity non-nuclear military conflict against the Russian Federation and its allies" by demonstrating "the high combat potential of Russia's nuclear missile arms and the determination of Russia's military-political leadership as regards their use, so as to compel the aggressor to cease military operations;"[65] and, "the striking power of the

[62] Gen. Philip Breedlove, "Memo to Washington: Reforming National Defense to Meet Emerging Global Challenges," op. cit., p. 5.

[63] Kathy Eastwood, "Hogg speaks to cadets on NATO, the challenges it faces," *Army.mil*, September 8, 2015, available at https://www.army.mil/article/155107/Hogg_speaks_to_cadets_on_NATO__the_challenges_it_faces/.

[64] "Army: Closed part of new military doctrine to define legal aspects of forces' employment, nuclear weapon—Gen. Staff," *Interfax,* August 14, 2009 (Transcribed by World News Connection). See also, "Russia Classifies Information on Pre-emptive Nuclear Strikes—Military," BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union, September 5, 2014, available at, https://dialog.proquest.com.

[65] "Russia's Strategic Missile Troops chief sees political function of nuclear arms," *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union*, September 14, 2008, available at, https://dialog.proquest.com.

Strategic Missile Forces is most efficient and convincing in the de-escalation actions."[66] In 2017, President Putin expressed the following in an open decree: "During the escalation of military conflict, demonstration of readiness and determination to employ non-strategic nuclear weapons capabilities is an effective deterrent."[67]

"Escalate-to-de-escalate" appears to be quite real, and effective US deterrence now requires that the United States work to deny Moscow its apparent confidence that it can defeat US and NATO deterrence strategy via limited nuclear first-use escalation threats or employment in crisis or conflict. To do so, however, presumes an understanding of the basis on which Moscow now perceives a gap in the US/NATO deterrence strategy that facilitates Moscow's belief in the possible success of limited nuclear first use threats or actual limited first use.

Fundamental deterrence questions are, what "gaps" does Moscow perceive in Western deterrence strategies, and how can those perceptions be corrected? Answering these questions and closing whatever gaps inspire such Russian confidence is an example of what it means to tailor deterrence to meet the requirements of the times.

Rather than simply denying the reality of the "escalate-to-de-escalate" facet of Russia's military doctrine, some commentators assert that "there is no deterrence gap" because Russia should not doubt existing US deterrence

[66] Quoted in Stephen Blank, "The Russian Military Faces the Future," in Richard Weitz, *Can We Manage Declining Russia?* (Washington, D.C.: Hudson Institute, 2011), p. 240.

[67] Decree of the President of the Russian Federation, *FUNDAMENTALS of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations for the Period until 2030*, July 20, 2017, available at http://dnnlgwick.blobore.windows.net/portals/0/RMSI_RusNavyFundamentalsENG_FINAL%20 (1).pdf?sr=b&si=DNNFileManagerPolicy&sig=i110Z1rxZVzKbB%2BdHJ1CZuTxvwL3N7W34%2FLpksgT1Bs%3D.

capabilities.[68] Therefore, so goes this argument, the United States need do nothing with regard to its nuclear force posture to close a non-existent gap. In particular, the rebuilding of the US nuclear posture initiated by the Obama Administration and continued by the Trump Administration "should be scaled back."[69]

The existence of such a gap or gaps per Russian perceptions, however, is undeniable.[70] Moscow now manifestly considers itself to have the freedom to engage in coercive nuclear first-use threats against the United States and allies, and to exercise its forces accordingly. Understanding the basis for that perceived freedom is to identify the West's deterrence gap(s) that the United States must close in order to preserve effective deterrence.

Identifying the reasons why Moscow believes it has the freedom to make coercive nuclear first-use threats is a challenge because it requires "getting inside" the thinking of senior Russian civilian and military leaders. Nevertheless, on the basis of open Russian writings, it is reasonable to suggest that one underlying reason for Russia's feeling of nuclear license is Moscow's perception of an advantage in will and cohesion.[71]

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[68] William Perry and Tom Collina, "The US Does Not Need New Tactical Nukes," *Defense One*, April 26, 2018, at https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2018/04/us-does-not-need-new-tactical-nukes/147757/?oref=d-river. See also, Arms Control Association, et. al, "Letter to Senator McConnell," *Union of Concerned Scientists*, May 4, 2018, available at https://s3.amazonaws.com/ucs-documents/nuclear-weapons/NGO-Low-Yield-D5-Congress.pdf.

[69] Perry and Collina, "The U.S. Does Not Need New Tactical Nucs," op. cit.

[70] "Russian views on the utility of nuclear weapons are a sharp departure from most Western thinking and thus represent a potentially dangerous risk during a crisis. *The more Russian decision-makers believe this gap in perceptions exists*, the more tempted they could be to threaten the use of nuclear weapons during a crisis, or actually employ them to shock Western policymakers into compliance with Russian political objectives." (Emphasis added). Gen. Philip Breedlove, "Memo to Washington: Reforming National Defense to Meet Emerging Global Challenges," op. cit., p. 8.

[71] See U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review* (2018), op. cit., pp. xi-xii, 9, 31, 53-55.

If so, NATO must work to bring to end such disdain for NATO's will and cohesion. Efforts to do so may be seen in the recent public statements by NATO General Secretary, Jens Stoltenberg, including: "We are sending a very clear message: NATO is here, NATO is strong and NATO is united."[72] NATO activities that reinforce that message by demonstrating alliance cohesion and determination to prevent Russian expansionism are likely to be critical.

In addition, DoD has concluded that "Russia's belief that limited nuclear first use, potentially including low-yield weapons, can provide such an advantage is based, in part, on Moscow's perception that its greater number and variety of non-strategic nuclear systems provide a coercive advantage in crisis and at lower levels of conflict."[73] Adversaries will seek out and exploit weaknesses, and Moscow appears to see NATO's relatively much smaller and narrow non-strategic nuclear potential as an exploitable weakness.

This is an important point because an oft-repeated critique of the 2018 NPR is that it is internally contradictory in this regard: to wit, the NPR asserts that Moscow's perceptions of advantage over the West are "mistaken," but then proceeds to recommend "supplements" to the existing US nuclear force posture to correct those perceptions of advantage. But, if the Russian perceptions are in fact mistaken, according to this critique, then the recommended "supplements" advanced in the 2018 NPR are wholly unnecessary. Thus the 2018 NPR supposedly is internally contradictory.[74]

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[72] Quoted in, Matt Drake, "NATO Launches New Force in Response to 'Russian aggression' in 'New Cold War' Escalation," *Express*, October 10, 2017, at https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/864337/WW3-new-cold-war-nato-russia-nato-putin-soldiers-crimea-poland-romania.

[73] U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review* (2018) op. cit., pp. xi-xii.

[74] Adam Mount and Abigail Stowe-Thurston, "What is US nuclear policy exactly?," *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, April 18, 2018, available at https://thebulletin.org/what-us-nuclear-policy-exactly11709.

This critique reflects little understanding of deterrence and war causation in general. The 2018 NPR rightly emphasizes that Russia's "mistaken" perceptions must be corrected for US deterrence purposes. Why? Because deterrence is a matter of perceptions shaping decision making. Whether or not Russian perceptions of advantage are valid or vapid does not determine their deterrence significance. If Moscow perceives exploitable advantages, and acts on those perceptions—valid or otherwise—deterrence can fail. Indeed, mistaken perceptions have long been known to be a basis for high-risk ventures and war—it matters only if such perceptions are believed by the adversary, not if those perceptions are accurate or mistaken.[75]

If Moscow perceives an exploitable advantage stemming from its much greater theater nuclear capabilities and options, then the United States must determine the most efficient way to close that perceived "gap." The easiest and most convenient response to a Russian perception of advantage is simply to assert that Moscow surely cannot doubt an enduring claim of the Western deterrence theory canon, i.e., that greater nuclear force numbers provide no deterrence advantage,[76] and lecture Moscow on the error of its apparent belief that its significantly greater theater nuclear force numbers and options bestow an exploitable advantage. Such a scolding and self-serving US response may well be easy and convenient, but not convince Moscow leaders that their entrenched thinking is in error and restore deterrence.

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[75] See for example, John G. Stoessinger, *Why Nations Go To War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), pp. 205, 213-218.

[76] This tenet of the deterrence canon is derived from confident statements such as the following by noted academic Robert Jervis: "It does not matter which side has more nuclear weapons…Having a larger nuclear stockpile yields no such gains. Deterrence comes from having enough weapons to destroy the others' cities; this capability is an absolute, not a relative one." "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 94, No. 4 (Winter 1979-80), p. 618.

If not, a key US and NATO deterrence goal must be to take further steps needed specifically to counter Moscow's confidence in its possession of exploitable nuclear advantages that allow it to so threaten the West. Doing so at this point is an excellent example of what it means to "tailor" deterrence.

Closing a non-strategic nuclear capability gap almost certainly will not necessitate mimicking the extraordinary Russian theater nuclear arsenal, but it will likely demand an expansion of Western nuclear options with a *focus on their credibility in Russian perception*. Getting this right will be one of the most important deterrence challenges of the coming decade for the United States and NATO. Parallel efforts in Asia in support of Asian allies also will likely be critical.

DoD has decided to "supplement" the existing US nuclear force posture with two added low-yield nuclear capabilities to help ensure the deterrence of adversaries' limited nuclear-escalation threats. These supplements are a near-term, low-yield ballistic missile warhead and a later sea-based cruise missile.[77] The most common criticism of this move, in addition to the demonstrably-fallacious claim that there "is no deterrence gap" to close, is that the pursuit of such low-yield options presumes the unwarranted assumption that nuclear war can be controlled: "Perhaps the biggest fallacy in the whole argument [for added supplements] is the mistaken and dangerous belief that a 'small' nuclear war would somehow stay small. That if Russia used a 'low-yield' weapon, the US would respond in kind, and that things could stay at that level. There is, of course, no experience to support this dubious theory."[78]

This charge—that the US initiative for two low-yield options is based on a US presumption that nuclear war can be controlled—is wholly in error. There is no underlying US assumption that a limited nuclear conflict would reliably

[77] U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review* (2018), pp. 52-55.

[78] William Perry and Tom Collina, op. cit., p. 2

stay limited. Indeed, no one knows if nuclear escalation can be controlled; the deterrence value of these low-yield supplements is to help in a credible way to *ensure that revisionist powers understand that they must stand back from limited nuclear escalation threats or attacks because they can have no confidence that they can control escalation to their advantage*. It is to help ensure that such adversaries understand that the United States has *credible* response options to their limited nuclear threats or strikes—and therefore can deter such actions, rather than capitulate to them.[79]

This discussion of deterrence in a new threat environment suggests six broad deterrence "lessons" for the future.

Six Lessons for the Future

First, Clausewitz' emphasis on the extreme value of "prudence" in defensive war applies equally to deterrence.[80] In a dynamic strategic threat environment of confrontation and uncertainty, the range of US deterrence goals and the nuclear requirements needed to support them can never be considered fixed. They will shift over time. It simply is prudent to pursue the flexible and resilient US deterrence capabilities needed to tailor US deterrence strategies as necessary to diverse and shifting adversaries, threats, and contexts.

To be sure, since the early years of the Cold War, successive US presidents have demanded more flexible deterrence strategies and nuclear forces. The sense behind that demand is ever more apparent with the need to tailor deterrence strategies to an expanding number of potential adversaries and highly-lethal threat scenarios—and prospectively to threats now unknown.

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[79] Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, *Senate Armed Services Committee, Written Statement for the Record*, April 26, 2018, pp. 6-7.

[80] Clausewitz, *Vom Kreige*, op. cit., p. 655.

Consequently, while the previous US declaratory policy of "no new" nuclear capabilities might have been compatible with an era in which nuclear threats and U.S. deterrence requirements were expected to continually fade,[81] such a policy is ill-suited to contemporary realities. Because the United States must be able to adapt its nuclear deterrence strategies and related capabilities to evolving and shifting threats, and hedge against future risks, "new" types of US nuclear capability may be needed periodically, and sustaining the scientific and industrial infrastructure needed to produce those capabilities is essential. To adopt an *a priori* policy of "no new" capabilities is to presume that deterrence requirements are static, which they are not.

Second, the great deterrence value of the US nuclear triad is the resilience and flexibility inherent in the diversity of the triad's platforms and weapons. That value is not fading, as was claimed often during the immediate post-Cold War years. It is increasing, as has the urgency of advancing the fledgling programs underway to replace all three legs of the US triad that are reaching the ends of their already-extended service lives.[82] The nuclear infrastructure enabling US nuclear capabilities has suffered decades of very limited investment, and its recapitalization now demands comparable urgency.[83]

Third, a frequent critique of past and present US nuclear policy initiatives that emphasize the need for nuclear force posture "flexibility" is that this direction is for nuclear

[81] President Obama "disavowed the development of any new nuclear weapons." See, John Caves, "Avoiding a Crisis of Confidence in the U.S. Nuclear Deterrent," *Strategic Forum*, No. 252 (January 2010), p. 4.

[82] See, U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review* (2018), op. cit., pp. 44-50. See also, Keith B. Payne and John S. Foster, et. al., *A New Nuclear Review For a New Age* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2017), pp. 79-140.

[83] See Thomas Scheber and John Harvey, *Assessment of U.S. Readiness To Design, Develop and Produce Nuclear Warheads: Current Status and Some Remedial Ste*ps (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2015).

"warfighting" and contrary to the goal of deterrence. For example:

> Nuclear weapons are not and must not become 'flexible options' for use in nuclear warfighting…Building a new nuclear weapon that provides such flexibility risks undermining deterrence by introducing uncertainty into an adversary's decision-making.[84]

This familiar argument misses the most fundamental point about deterrence: for US nuclear deterrence strategies to provide the desired deterrent effect, the adversary must believe, at some level, that its provocation will elicit a US nuclear response. The 2018 NPR specifies that only the most extreme provocation would do so.[85] But if the adversary doubts that a US nuclear response would follow an extreme provocation, it will, by definition, doubt the credibility of the US deterrence strategy. The notion that deterrence is undermined by US nuclear weapons that facilitate an adversary's perception that they could, in fact, be "used" under extreme circumstances reflects an elementary misunderstanding of the fundamental requirements for credible deterrence. Indeed, flexibility that facilitates an adversary's perception of a credible response to an extreme provocation is likely to be essential for deterrence in at least some plausible cases. This reality is at the heart of the 2018 NPR's recommendation of "supplements" to the US nuclear force posture. This is about strengthening deterrence, not "nuclear warfighting."

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[84] Dianne Feinstein and Adam Smith, "Cancel the New Nuclear Cruise Missile," in, *10 Big Nuclear Ideas for the Next President, Plough*, edited by Tom Collina and Geoff Wilson, Ploughshares Fund, November 2016, p. 21. This is the same critique that greeted the "Schlesinger Doctrine" in 1974—which included a move to incorporate flexible options into U.S. nuclear planning. See, Keith B. Payne, "The Schlesinger Shift: Return to Rationality," in, Keith B. Payne, C. Johnson Conover, Bruce William Bennett, *Nuclear Strategy: Flexibility and Stability* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1979), pp. 23-37.

[85] See U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review* (2018), op. cit., p. 21.

Fourth, "Strategic stability" is a venerable concept from the pioneering work of deterrence theorists in the 1960s. As popularized, it came to mean a condition in which both sides in a bilateral relationship possess survivable nuclear retaliatory capabilities, and thus neither side is expected to have a driving incentive to employ nuclear weapons first given the prospective costs of conflict. An enduring condition of mutual vulnerability to retaliatory strikes is considered the basis for a "stable" mutual deterrence relationship. As the late Thomas Schelling described this relationship, "Human and economic resources were hostages to be left unprotected."[86]

Schelling's conceptual work was particularly significant in emphasizing that few developments other than the "reciprocal fear of a surprise attack" could "destabilize" an otherwise "stable" condition of mutual deterrence.[87] Such fears in Moscow, Schelling contended, could be triggered by the US deployment of strategic forces that could potentially degrade the retaliatory potential of Soviet strategic offensive forces—thus causing Moscow to question the credibility of its nuclear deterrent and consider striking first itself in a crisis.[88]

This conceptual construct became a guiding principle for US deterrence policy.[89] Numerous official US statements deemed the survivability and effectiveness of

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[86] See Thomas Schelling, "What Went Wrong With Arms Control?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Winter 1985/86), p. 222.

[87] See the classic texts by Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 207-229, 231-233; and, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 225-227; see also, Schelling, "Reciprocal Measure for Arms Stabilization," in, *Arms Control, Disarmament and National Security*, Donald Brennan, ed. (New York: George Braziller, 1961), pp. 167, 170.

[88] See Thomas Schelling, "What Went Wrong With Arms Control?" op. cit., pp. 221-223, 232-234.

[89] See the discussion in Keith B. Payne, *The Great American Gamble: Deterrence Theory and Practice From the Cold War To The Twenty-First Century* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2008), chapters 3, 4 and 5.

Soviet retaliatory strategic capabilities to be critical for "strategic stability."[90] Those US strategic forces that might threaten to degrade the effectiveness of the Soviet Union's strategic offensive forces, such as US strategic ballistic missile defense (BMD) and countersilo-capable offensive systems, typically were considered inherently "destablilizing."

However, the great deterrence theorists of the 1960s developed the concept of "strategic stability" in the unique context of the US-Soviet bipolar Cold War, and its applicability outside that now-non-existent context is likely limited. The general Cold War principle that particular types of US forces should be expected to inspire the "fear of a surprise attack" and drive Moscow toward a nuclear first strike against the United States might have pertained in the particular circumstances of the Cold War—although even at the time it was highly speculative. But, in the contemporary era, the spectrum of potential adversaries will have varying and possibly eccentric views regarding their perceived incentives and disincentives to launch an attack given the diversity of worldviews, fears, motivations, capabilities, goals and risk tolerances. The "real world" range of leadership decision making and calculations that might lead to state decisions to attack or to stand down is simply much broader and more variable than the narrowly rational

[90] This can easily be seen, for example, in the U.S. government's Cold War *Arms Control Impact Statements*. These identified the "Strategic Stability" framework as a primary basis for judging U.S. force programs and correspondingly placed positive value on the survivability of Soviet strategic nuclear forces. See for example, House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Joint Committee Print, *Fiscal Year 1985 Arms Control Impact Statements, Statements Submitted to the Congress by the President Pursuant to Section 36 of the Arms Control and Disarmament Act* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1984), p. 95. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Joint Committee Print, *Fiscal Year 1982 Arms Control Impact Statements, Statements Submitted to the Congress by the President Pursuant to Section 36 of the Arms Control and Disarmament Act* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1981), p. 107.

decision-making model presumed in the strategic stability construct.[91]

In the contemporary era, there can be no generally-applicable "rule of thumb" derived from the US-Soviet experience for predicting that a particular set of US capabilities will be "stabilizing" or "destabilizing" across a spectrum of potential adversaries and contexts. In some cases, for example, rather than being a source of deterrence "instability" as envisaged in the Cold War construct, US BMD capabilities able to defeat an adversary's prospective missile attack may well be key to denying the political or military value that would underlie an adversary's decision to attack, i.e., missile defense in such a case would rightly be deemed "stabilizing."

This is no small point given the policy significance that has been—and continues to be—attached to the concept of "strategic stability" in the United States. In the contemporary threat environment, and likely in many other possible threat environments dissimilar to the Cold War, US deterrence considerations should be informed and governed by the unique deterrence requirements that pertain to different adversaries and different contexts, *not by the general application of the Cold War concept of "strategic stability"—which may be as misleading as it is useful*.

Fifth, US civilian and military leaders need to be active in efforts to improve the understanding of deterrence in general, and the value of and requirements for nuclear deterrence in particular. The public debate on these issues typically is dominated by academic writers and political

[91] This point, and the presentation of evidence supporting it, is presented in, Keith B. Payne, et al., *Understanding Deterrence* (London: Routledge, 2013). For a discussion of decision-making types known to lie well outside the "strategic stability" rational model see, Yehezkel Dror, "High-Intensity Aggressive Ideologies as an International Threat," *The Jerusalem Journal on International Relations,* Vol. 9, No. 1 (March 1987), and, Dror, *Crazy States: A Counterconventional Strategic Problem* (Lexington, MA: Heath Lexington Books, 1971).

activists who continue to favor nuclear disarmament or "minimum deterrence."[92] This enduring condition of the public debate threatens the continuity of US nuclear capabilities and also societal recognition of the value of the service provided by the uniformed and civilian men and women who work to sustain credible US nuclear deterrence capabilities.

Those governmental stakeholders with the greatest authority and professional responsibility to advocate for US nuclear capabilities and the Service personnel involved must, as the 2014 *Independent Review of the Department of Defense Nuclear Enterprise* led by Gen. Larry Welch and Adm. John C. Harvey recommends, "own the mission," and "Establish and support programs that maintain high awareness of verbal and written public declarations that question the need for nuclear forces and respond with equally public declarations."[93] This well-reasoned recommendation has not yet led to any apparent fruit. Doing so now is particularly critical as the public debate regarding the initiatives of the 2018 NPR unfolds.

Sixth, for decades the US has been devoted to the process of nuclear arms control. Most discussions of deterrence and nuclear forces must pay homage to the goal of negotiated nuclear reductions lest they seem unsophisticated. Unsurprisingly, there are calls now for further arms control efforts to solve the deterrence challenges that have been created intentionally, indeed

[92] A National Institute study determined that over an eighteen-month period (2015-2016), articles in major US publications expressing approval of or opposition to modernizing US nuclear capabilities ran approximately 5:1 against modernization. For a comprehensive examination of "minimum deterrence" see, Keith B. Payne and James Schlesinger, et. al., *Minimum Deterrence: Examining the Evidence* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2013).

[93] Larry D. Welch and John C. Harvey, Jr., *Independent Review of the Department of Defense Nuclear Enterprise* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, June 2014), p. 10, available at https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/Independent-Nuclear-Enterprise-Review-Report-30-June-2014.pdf.

eagerly, by foes, including the mounting North Korean nuclear threat and the great theater nuclear force asymmetry in Russia's favor.[94]

Arms control can, in principle, contribute to US security by establishing restraints on forces and threatening behavior. However, expecting arms control with potential adversaries to solve the US security problems they have purposefully created is naïve in the absence of: 1) serious US verification and enforcement efforts and mechanisms;[95] and, 2) the types of incentives that make agreements and compliance an adversary's preferred choice, e.g. to gain relief from feared US capabilities. We learned this lesson with the 1987 INF Treaty. As then-Secretary of State George Schultz stated: "If the West did not deploy Pershing II and cruise missiles, there would be no incentive for the Soviets to negotiate seriously for nuclear reductions," and, "strength was recognized as crucial to diplomacy."[96]

For much of a decade, however, the United States appears to have expected nuclear arms control returns without the necessary investment to warrant adversary

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[94] The New York Times Editorial Board, "Is North Korea's Nuclear Test a Sign of Hope?," *The New York Times*, November 29, 2017, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/29/opinion/is-north-koreas-nuclear-test-a-sign-of-hope.html. Joe Cirincione, "North Korea Just Got a Little Scarier," *The Huffington Post*, April 6, 2016, available at https://www.huffingtonpost.com/joe-cirincione/north-korea-just-got-a-li_b_9628268.html. Christopher Woolf, "The case for Trump negotiating with North Korea," *PRI.org*, July 5, 2017, available at https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-07-05/case-trump-negotiating-north-korea. See also, Strobe Talbott, "U.S.-Russia arms control was possible once—is it possible still?," *Brookings.edu*, December 12, 2017, available at https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/12/12/u-s-russia-arms-control-was-possible-once-is-it-possible-still/.

[95] Ironically, some noted arms control enthusiasts have criticized the 2018 NPR for highlighting the importance of enforcing arms control agreements. Michael Krepon, "The Most Dangerous Word in the Draft Nuclear Posture Review," *Defense One*, January 23, 2018, available at https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2018/01/most-dangerous-word-draft-nuclear-posture-review/145403/.

[96] George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993), pp. 351, 375.

interest, i.e., a position of US strength to back US diplomacy. The reality that "strength" is necessary for diplomacy was replaced by the idealistic expectation that US self-restraint would be mimicked by others. The result of this US lapse into idealism is contemporary Russian disdain for US arms control enthusiasm, as reflected in the statement by then-Russian Presidential Chief of Staff, Sergei Ivanov: "When I hear our American partners say: 'Let's reduce something else,' I would like to say to them: 'Excuse me, but what we have is relatively new.' They [the US] have not conducted any upgrades for a long time."[97] The lessons of the past should once again inform US arms control expectations and actions in this new era of intense Great Power competition—whether in prospective diplomatic engagements with Russia, North Korea or Iran.

[97] Interfax, "Russia not interested in U.S.-proposed arms reduction - Russian presidential chief-of-staff," *RBTH.com*, March 5, 2013, available at https://www.rbth.com/news/2013/03/05/russia_not_interested_in_us-proposed_arms_reduction_-_russian_presidenti_23504.html.

Fundamental Deterrence Challenges and Tailoring*

Introduction

The bipartisan endorsement of adapting, or "tailoring," deterrence to the potentially unique characteristics of particular opponents and contexts is a milestone in the evolution of U.S. deterrence policy. It has tremendous implications for the character of the U.S. nuclear and non-nuclear force posture intended to support deterrence and extended deterrence to allies.

For example, the basic rationale for tailoring deterrence is recognition of the diversity of opponents' interpretations of what constitutes "rational" or "reasonable" goals and behavior. An overarching deterrence policy requirement designed to enable the United States to tailor its deterrence strategies and redlines across the range of opponents and potential contingencies mandates a force posture that can adapt U.S. deterrence strategies to opponents' divergent goals, value hierarchies, risk and cost tolerances, levels of determination, modes of communication, and perceptions of the United States—among the many factors that can shape enemy responses to U.S. deterrence threats and redlines.[1]

In 1995, without using the term "tailoring," two prominent scholars, Gordon Craig and Alexander George, presented the basic rationale for adapting deterrence strategies to the opponents' particular characters: "Not all actors in international politics calculate utility in making

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* Original publication: Keith B. Payne, "Fundamental Deterrence Challenges and Tailoring"," *Information Series*, No. 664 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 7, 2026).

[1] See for example, Keith B. Payne, "Understanding Deterrence," in, Payne, ed., *Understanding Deterrence* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 3-37.

decisions in the same way. Differences in values, culture, attitudes toward risk-taking, and so on vary greatly. There is no substitute for knowledge of the adversary's mind-set and behavioral style…."[2] Given this reality, tailoring is needed because, "…if one does not threaten the right target for the right reason, it may not matter how well one does it."[3]

A U.S. force posture consistent with a policy of tailoring deterrence to a variety of opponents and contingencies must be sufficiently diverse and flexible to hold at risk the potentially wide spectrum of assets that those opponents deem of highest value—potentially including numerous hardened, defended point targets. It also must be able to pose a credible deterrence threat to opponents who arise relatively quickly or are recognized belatedly. Consequently, tailoring mandates a larger and more diverse standing arsenal of forces supporting deterrence than is favored by those who advocate for what has been referred to as "minimum deterrence" or "easy deterrence."[4] It is this force posture implication of tailored deterrence regarding the number and diversity of U.S. nuclear forces that leads some who recognize the logic of tailoring deterrence, nevertheless, to reject it as policy guidance. They tend to place priority on facilitating lower U.S. force numbers over optimizing prospective deterrent effect.

Intelligence and Tailoring Deterrence

Recognition that opponents can vary widely in their perceptions of, and responses to, U.S. deterrence efforts

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[2] Gordon Craig and Alexander George, *Force and Statecraft: Diplomatic Problems of Our Time*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.188.

[3] Peter Karsten, Peter Howell, and Artis Allen, *Military Threats* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. xii.

[4] See for example, Keith B. Payne and James Schlesinger, *Minimum Deterrence: Examining the Evidence* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2013), pp. 3-8, 9-13.

correspondingly elevates the demands on U.S. intelligence and analysis that supports deterrence. The need is to understand the factors that inform and animate foreign leaderships in different circumstances and how those factors are likely to affect their perceptions of, and responses to, U.S. deterrence strategies. This need is a contemporary deterrence application of Sun Tzu's emphasis in *The Art of War* on the importance of knowing the enemy.[5]

This intelligence task is not "one and done" because opponents and crises can emerge rapidly and their respective responses to U.S. deterrence strategies can vary depending on the stakes and circumstances of a confrontation. The demand for continuing analysis of opponents and circumstances is seemingly unlimited and must be bounded in practice by the priority threats of the time.

Challenges to Tailoring

Various challenges to tailoring as a deterrence requirement are well-known at this point. They tend to focus not on the principle itself—which is self-evidently reasonable—but on the difficulties involved in knowing opponents and in applying that knowledge to deterrence in operational practice.[6] "Knowing" the opponent will always be incomplete and applying what is known to deterrence practice is an art—ever subject to uncertainties and change. The goal is for complete knowledge and deterrence certainty, but neither is achievable in practice; deterrence can never be ensured. The tailoring goal that is achievable

[5] Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Research and Reinterpretation by J. H. Huang (New York: William Morrow, 1993), pp. 52, 161.

[6] See for example, Keith B. Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), pp. 98-114; and, Sean P. Larkin, "The Limits of Tailored Deterrence," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 4th Quarter, Issue 63 (2011), pp. 47-57.

is more modest: to make fewer mistakes and reduce uncertainties so deterrence can "work" as effectively as may be possible.

The harsh reality is that the practicable deterrence goal of doing better with tailoring, even with its limits, should not be sidelined in favor of the unobtainable goal of deterrence perfection without challenges. Even with the most sophisticated and dedicated tailoring, the functioning of deterrence will not be fully predictable. That is an unavoidable reality that must be acknowledged and against which the United States must hedge. Indeed, given the inescapable possibility of deterrence failure, global nuclear disarmament would be a far better alternative if it were plausible.

However, the often-suggested disarmament alternative to deterrence—despite its superficial appeal—is not a serious option. It would require the prior transformation of the international order and human relations the likes of which have never been known in all of recorded history, and hardly appear to be on the horizon.[7] In 2009, America's original, bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission rightly concluded: "The conditions that might make possible the global elimination of nuclear weapons are not present today and their creation would require a fundamental transformation of the world political order."[8] An option that is not now remotely plausible is not an option. Unless or until that dramatic transformation takes place, we must make deterrence as foolproof as is possible. Tailoring can help.

[7] See the discussion in, Keith B. Payne, *Chasing a Grand Illusion: Replacing Deterrence With Disarmament* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2023).

[8] See, William J. Perry and James R. Schlesinger, et al., *America's Strategic Posture* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2009), pp. xvi, 17.

Fundamental Challenges and Tailoring Deterrence

Not often discussed are the fundamental difficulties that attend tailored deterrence—and *any* form of deterrence, whatever its title. This difficulty is as true for tailored deterrence as it will be for any future approach to deterrence, and as it has been for all previous approaches to strategic deterrence, whether the Johnson Administration's "Assured Destruction," the Nixon Administration's "Schlesinger Doctrine," the Carter Administration's "Countervailing Strategy," or the Biden Administration's "Integrated Deterrence." The names change, as do some key points in the concepts of operation, but the general principles of deterrence have endured for thousands of years, as does the fundamental challenge facing deterrence strategies regardless of their particular methodologies and titles.

This ubiquitous difficulty is that deterrence can fail regardless of the underlying concept, operational approach, forces assigned for that purpose, or the excellence in its presentation. There is no set of threats and redlines that, "of course," has predictable deterring effect, regardless of the skill in application. Why so? Because for deterrence to function, there must be sufficient "space" in opponents' decision-making for U.S. deterrence strategies to function. That is, for deterrence to "work," opponents must be open to pragmatically or grudgingly standing back from the goal or purpose that would otherwise animate their provocation. For example, opponents with the goal of territorial expansion, or with fears that would otherwise drive them to a pre-emptive strike, must have the pragmatism and felt freedom of decision-making to stand down from attack in favor of abiding by the demands placed on them by U.S. deterrence redlines and threats. The problem, of course, is that opponents may not have that pragmatism or felt freedom to stand down—regardless of the character of the

U.S. deterrence strategy. This is an inconvenient truth confronting tailored deterrence, and any other form of deterrence.

Examples in history of opponents who appear not to have had the felt freedom to pragmatically stand down, even in the face of highly lethal threats, are many and varied. In some cases, leaders have been *unwilling* to stand down from decisions and actions that appear to have been irrational given the potential consequences they faced. The reasons spurring leaders on in such cases have been, *inter alia,* spiritual, ideological, the preservation of national pride/honor, and/or deeply personal.

It is attractive to believe that leaders will not behave in this fashion, i.e., that some form of deterrence can be made to "work" because foreign leaders ultimately will prove to be rational, in a familiar/predictable manner, and "every nation has its price when it comes to being deterred."[9] But that appears not to be the case.

As noted above, leaders can define rational or reasonable behavior very differently, and thereby make decisions that follow an idiosyncratic thought process and appear to be irrational. Experience throughout history offers many vivid examples, including, *inter alia*, the islanders of Melos in 416 B.C., Adolf Hitler and his reoccupation of the Rhineland in 1936, the Japanese War Minister in 1945, the Cuban leadership in 1962, Arab leaders in 1973, and Iraq's Saddam Hussein in 1991.[10]

In short, historically, it appears that opponents' decision-making dynamics at work have periodically rendered deterrence inherently unpredictable and

[9] See the testimony of Gen. Eugene Habiger in, U.S. Senate, Committee on Armed Services, *Department of Defense Authorization For Appropriation For Fiscal Year 1999 And The Future Years Defense Program, Part 7*, Hearings, 105th Congress, 2nd Session (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998), p. 494.

[10] For lengthy discussions these examples, see, Keith B. Payne, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), chapters 3 and 4; and, Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*, op. cit., pp. 39-73.

problematic regardless of the redlines and plausible consequences. The frequent assertion that a rational opponent will be an inherently deterrable opponent is a dangerous misnomer. In some cases, opponents' decision-making may effectively be immune to external deterrence threats and redlines. Indeed, in extreme cases, leaders actually have made decisions that appear intended to contribute to the destruction of the societies for which they were responsible, including Adolf Hitler in the "Führer Bunker" in 1945.[11]

It is critical to emphasize that this challenge to deterrence has to do with the insulation of some opponents' decision-making to deterrence threats, not the specifics of the threat. This is the most fundamental challenge to successfully operationalizing tailored deterrence, and any other deterrence strategy. The incomparable strategist Sun Tzu identified effective deterrence as the highest form of strategy: "Achieving victory in every battle is not absolute perfection: neutralizing an adversary's force without battle is absolute perfection."[12] However, deterrence of any form is not always practicable. This suggests the great potential value of hedging deterrence strategies by casting as wide a net as is reasonably possible, including via conscious tailoring, but also to hedging against the real possibility that deterrence will fail or simply not apply given opponents' decision-making parameters. The critical questions in such potential cases are: is the opponent likely to be subject to deterrence effect under the circumstances of the engagement? how prepared is the United States for deterrence failure? how much should be invested, and in what ways, in that preparation? and, how should those preparations be integrated with tailored deterrence strategies, i.e., strategic deterrence/defense integration?

[11] Ibid., pp. 71-72.

[12] Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, op. cit., p. 48.

The open history of U.S. planning in this regard is a decidedly mixed bag.

What Advantage Tailoring?

What is a potentially unique advantage of efforts to tailor deterrence given this fundamental challenge to deterrence in general? That advantage may, on occasion, be profoundly important. The efforts to understand opponents in context mandated by tailoring, as described above, can help us to recognize when and why an opponent may *not* be subject to our deterrence tools. Expecting deterrence to "work," when, in fact, only physical control of the opponent would advance U.S. goals, can lead to placing priority on the wrong strategy for the opponent and occasion. In such cases, confidence in any plausible formulation of deterrence to achieve U.S. goals could be a lethal mistake—other strategies must take precedence.

Efforts to tailor deterrence can help us to recognize when deterrence should, or should not, be the priority strategy. Key questions to address in this regard include, *inter alia*: do we know with whom we need to communicate and can we communicate reliably with them? does the target of our communication understand our redlines and fear the associated threats? are our redlines and threats *as perceived by the opponent* credible (or as Herman Kahn put it, "not incredible") both in the operational sense and as the opponent perceives our will to execute those threats? does the opponent have the "space" in its decision-making to stand back from the behavior we seek to deter, or is pragmatism by the opponent unlikely under the circumstances?[13]

If even one of the answers to these questions is "no," the prospects for deterrence functioning as we envision are

[13] In 1996, a longer list of such key questions was originally presented in, Payne, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age*, op. cit., pp. 126-127.

likely to be reduced; if many of these questions are so answered, deterrence may not be the optimal strategy. The crucial question then is, what is the alternative to deterrence?[14] Recognizing the difference is no small advantage and efforts to tailor deterrence can help us to recognize that difference.

Should we expect to be able to address any of these key questions with complete confidence? Of course not. As this author concluded in 2001, "Accumulating pertinent information about a challenger will never be complete, and the relevant information is likely to change over time."[15] This is the norm. Few questions in the realm of national security can be answered with complete confidence, yet significant decisions hang on our best approximations. For example, we likely do not know precisely how many nuclear weapons Russia, China or North Korea possess, or their respective war plans for nuclear employment. But we plan, nevertheless, based on what we conclude is most likely. That said, there are indicators of how the key questions noted above may be addressed and answered to the imperfect degree possible—of course, we must actually look for those indicators.

In short, tailoring is not a magic wand that can ensure the predictable functioning of deterrence; nothing can do that. Nevertheless, it is a practicable option that is valuable for its potential to increase the opportunities for recognizing when deterrence may not apply, and to reduce the probability of deterrence failure that follows from failing to understand, to the extent possible, how to deter those enemies whose decision-making is susceptible to deterrence.

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[14] As discussed in, Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*, op. cit., pp. 107, 109-110.

[15] Ibid., p. 101.

Previous Approaches to Deterrence

The value of tailoring becomes more compelling when compared to the previous U.S. approach to strategic deterrence. That approach, in broad terms, presumes that there exists a universal mode of thinking that makes a single form of deterrence predictably reliable; as a consequence, all rational opponents will adhere to similar interpretations of, and responses to, U.S. deterrence strategies.

An example of this past presumption regarding deterrence can be seen in the unmitigated confidence that U.S. officials and academic commentators had that holding opponents' societal assets (e.g., population and industry) at risk would effectively deter any "sane" opponent—as if all opponents would reason similarly and be deterred by a similar threat.[16] On the basis of such an expectation, the U.S. strategic force arsenal could be reduced to those forces required to threaten retaliation against an opponent's society—typically considered a modest level of capability given the extreme vulnerability of societal assets to nuclear weapons. And, indeed, Secretary of Defense McNamara employed such a declared measure of force adequacy, which he referred to as "Assured Destruction," to constrain and limit U.S. spending on strategic forces.[17]

Similarly, some contemporary critics of tailoring deterrence tend to seek a reduced definition of U.S. force adequacy. Consequently, they find fault with tailoring as a requirement and harken back to the expectation that a less demanding standard of adequacy will provide effective

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[16] See for example, McGeorge Bundy, "To Cap the Volcano," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (October 1969), p. 9. See also, Robert Jervis, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 94, No. 4 (Winter 1979-1980), p. 618.

[17] As discussed in, 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.

deterrence reliably against and "sane" opponent. The inherent risk of such an approach, of course, is that some opponents are likely to be deterred most effectively by threats to values other than highly-vulnerable societal assets and, consequently, the more demanding measure of adequacy associated with tailoring is required for U.S. deterrence capabilities.

For example, the need for a more expansive definition of nuclear force adequacy can be seen in the Carter Administration's conclusion that to deter Moscow most effectively required that the United States hold at risk what Moscow's leaders valued most: their political control and military assets.[18] This conclusion regarding the necessary type of threat to deter Moscow appears to have been carried through in U.S. policy application and has been reaffirmed repeatedly since.[19]

The fundamental question now is not whether tailoring is the preferred policy guideline. That much has been decided. The questions posed by a requirement to tailor deterrence are: 1) how broadly should the adequacy standard be for U.S. forces to be deemed adequate to tailor deterrence per the range of opponents and threats?; and 2) how do we operationalize the needed deterrence threats, i.e., create and communicate the threats deemed most effective for deterrence? The answers to those questions

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[18] See, testimony by Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and the "Administration's Responses to Questions Submitted Before the Hearing," in, U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Nuclear War Strategy*, Hearings, 96th Congress, 2nd Session (Top Secret hearing held on September 16, 1980; sanitized and printed on February 18, 1981). (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1981), pp. 10, 16, 25, 29-30.

[19] 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, 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.

will shape the breadth and scope of the U.S. force posture mandated by the requirement to tailor deterrence.

The Need for Tailoring: A Long History

It should be recognized that "tailoring" deterrence is not a new or even recent idea. The need to "tailor" by name generally was not seen until the 1990s and its adoption as operational guidance can be found in unclassified U.S. Strategic Command documents a decade thereafter.[20] Beginning in the early 1980s, this author advanced the rationale for deterrence strategies to be predicated on an understanding of opponents' unique characteristics, i.e. tailoring, and, in 1989, used historical illustrations in an unclassified article to help explain the need to do so.[21] However, the policy direction to adapt strategic deterrence to the particular goals and perceptions of the Soviet leadership can be seen earlier, including in the (now declassified) 1974 "Schlesinger Doctrine" and related nuclear employment policy,[22] and in the Carter Administration's Presidential Directive-59 and Countervailing Strategy.[23]

The intellectual roots of the need to adjust U.S. policies to an understanding of the unique decision-making factors underlying enemy behavior can be seen decades earlier. In 1964, the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry's study entitled, *Psychiatric Aspects of the Prevention of Nuclear War*,

[20] Department of Defense, *Deterrence Operations: Joint Operating Concept* (DO JOC), Version 2.0 (August 2006), pp. 3, 25, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joc_deterrence.pdf.

[21] See Keith B. Payne and Lawrence Fink, "Deterrence Without Defense: Gambling on Perfection," *Strategic Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Winter 1989), pp. 25-40.

[22] See the discussion in, 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.

[23] See, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown in, *Nuclear War Strategy*, op. cit., pp. 10, 16.

concluded that deterrence strategies predicated on the presumption of universal behavioral patterns and rationality rest on "dubious psychological assumptions."[24] And, as early as 1951, an incomparable scholar at RAND, Nathan Leites, authored a ground-breaking study assessing the unique factors underlying the Soviet leadership's decision-making and the importance of understanding them for U.S. policy. [25]

In short, the use of the term "tailoring" goes back several decades; U.S. operationalization of the concept appears decades earlier, and the intellectual roots for doing so go back to the early years of the Cold War. The full history of this profound evolution in the conceptualization of deterrence and in U.S. policy is yet to be written, although several partial endeavors to do so have been published recently and are now ongoing.[26]

Does Deterrence Tailoring "Work"?

Has tailoring made the difference in U.S. deterrence working or failing? We do not know the answer to that question because effective deterrence often provides little evidence to enable a conclusion about causation. When deterrence "works," nothing much may appear to happen, and the explanations for a provocation that did not occur can be varied and undisciplined by evidence.

That said, we know that strategic deterrence has not failed catastrophically since the U.S. adopted tailoring as a

[24] Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, Committee on Social Issues, *Psychiatric Aspects of the Prevention of Nuclear War*, Report No. 57 (September 1964), p. 268.

[25] See Nathan Leites' RAND study from 1951 in, Nathan Constantin Leites, *The Operational Code of the Politburo* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2007).

[26] See for example, Sarah Faris, *Tailoring Deterrence: What and Why?*, National Institute for Public Policy, *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 5, No. 11 (November 2025); and, Balzer, "'Knowing Your Enemy': James R. Schlesinger and the Rise of Tailored Deterrence," op. cit., pp. 39-54.

stated or unstated deterrence requirement, including through some stressful periods. Any recommendations to move now in a different policy direction should, somehow, offer a convincing rationale as to why it would provide a more effective basis for deterrence. There are contemporary recommendations for change that essentially ignore or dismiss the need to tailor deterrence. Instead, they appear intended to reduce the adequacy standard for U.S. force posture requirements as the route to lower U.S. nuclear force numbers.[27] None of these offers a plausible explanation of why/how the recommended change would serve the priority task of strengthening deterrence in a challenging time—indeed, that does not appear to be the goal.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the history of the evolution of U.S. deterrence policy to include tailoring has not yet been written, but its origins run far earlier than most commentaries recognize—as does U.S. operationalization of the concept. Tailoring has limitations and unavoidable challenges, as do all approaches to deterrence; it is not a "silver bullet." In addition, to the consternation of some, tailoring deterrence suggests the need for more diverse nuclear capabilities than under past concepts, such as "Assured Destruction." That acknowledged, tailoring is an innovation in U.S. policy, accepted on a bipartisan basis, that has the potential to help

[27] See for example, William J. Perry and Tom Z. Collina, *The Button* (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2020). See also, Stephen Walt, "The Quest for Nuclear Superiority Makes No Sense," *Foreign Policy*, June 25, 2026, https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/06/25/nuclear-arsenal-modernization-weapons-no-sense/; and, Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "US Strategy and Force Posture for an Era of Nuclear Tripolarity," *Issue Brief*, Atlantic Council, April 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/us-strategy-and-force-posture-for-an-era-of-nuclear-tripolarity/.

Washington avoid making mistakes in its efforts to deter, including in discerning when deterrence may not be the optimal strategy. Given the zero tolerance for strategic deterrence failure, helping to avoid mistakes via tailoring U.S. deterrence strategies is a high priority. A separate, related priority is to integrate tailored deterrence with measures that hedge against its possible failure.

DETERRENCE VIA CIVILIAN TARGETING: WHY NOT?

Deterrence Via Mutual Vulnerability? Why Not Now*

Introduction

During the 1960s, American academics, officials, and policy commentators developed the general outlines of a particular approach to nuclear deterrence that came to be known commonly as Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). While often discussed in esoteric jargon, the basic ideas behind this MAD approach to deterrence are strikingly simple and were keyed to the particular conditions of the Cold War.[1] U.S. policy deemed American and Soviet cities to be mutually and unalterably vulnerable to long-range (strategic) nuclear capabilities. This condition of mutual vulnerability was thought to be "stable" because its advocates presumed that, with both sides' cities vulnerable, the United States and the Soviet Union had comparable, overwhelming disincentives against nuclear war—regardless of which side might initiate an attack. This condition of mutual societal vulnerability was famously likened to "two scorpions in a bottle." Neither side, it was said, could provoke the other to serious conflict without suffering immeasurably itself. Mutual vulnerability thus supposedly created a reliably "stable" deterrence relationship.

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* Original publication: Keith B. Payne, "Deterrence Via Mutual Vulnerability? Why Not Now"," *Information Series*, No. 536 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 19, 2022).

[1] The conceptual parameters and policy application of MAD are elaborated in detail in Keith B. Payne, *The Great American Gamble: Deterrence Theory and Practice* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2008), chapters 2-5.

Mutual Vulnerability As Policy

This condition of mutual societal vulnerability came to be seen as synonymous with deterrence stability and essentially was adopted as a basis for U.S. policy. Counterintuitively, U.S. officials began to describe the vulnerability of U.S. cities to nuclear attack not just as inevitable, but as useful for deterrence stability—a condition expected to be locked into place intentionally via the 1972 U.S.-Soviet Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. The Treaty essentially ensured mutual vulnerability by prohibiting the development and deployment of significant capabilities to defend against strategic missile attack; that was its goal. As a result of this mutual vulnerability policy orientation and the ABM Treaty, the United States cancelled its fledgling Safeguard strategic missile defense system then in deployment.

For decades, academics, government officials, and policy commentators contended that, given the impossibility of defending cities comprehensively against nuclear attack, a condition of mutual vulnerability was the inevitable reality, not a policy choice. Thus, this condition was deemed the only plausible option for stable deterrence. The great expected benefit of mutual vulnerability was that it virtually ensured the absence of major war in U.S.-Soviet relations with the relatively modest level of nuclear armament needed to threaten cities. Deterrence stability via mutual vulnerability was widely considered to be reliable and "easy."[2]

Mutual vulnerability supposedly not only precluded nuclear war between the superpowers, it essentially precluded any large-scale provocation. Only an irrational opponent, it was loudly and repeatedly proclaimed, could

[2] "The healthy fear of devastation…makes deterrence relatively easy." Robert Jervis, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 94, No. 4 (Winter 1979-1980), pp. 617-618.

consider the use of nuclear weapons in the context of mutual vulnerability to nuclear attack.

Throughout much of the Cold War, confidence in this mutual vulnerability deterrence narrative was high among most academics and commentators. For example, "The probability of major war among states having nuclear weapons approaches zero."[3] And, "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…the deliberate resort to major nonnuclear warfare between such powers is also ruled out. And the resort to even such limited warfare as border skirmishes between them is notably inhibited by the danger that it would escalate out of control, ending in nuclear war."[4]

The mutual vulnerability deterrence narrative had an enormous effect on U.S. policy. However, the United States began to step away from it in the latter part of the Cold War by rejecting intentional threats to Soviet cities as the basis for U.S. deterrence policy. And, in a further half-step away, Washington withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2002 in order to deploy rudimentary missile defense capabilities against "rogue states" such as North Korea. However, the continuing dominance of the mutual vulnerability narrative is apparent in the contemporary U.S. policy of consciously accepting American societal vulnerability to Russian nuclear attack for deterrence "stability" purposes.

Mutual Vulnerability and China

There now is a considerable push by some academics and commentators to extend the same mutual vulnerability

[3] Kenneth N. Waltz, "Nuclear Myths and Political Realities," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 84, No. 3 (September 1990), p. 740.

[4] Louis Halle, "Does War Have a Future?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (October 1973), p. 23.

deterrence policy position to U.S. relations with China, including claiming the purported stability benefits of U.S. societal vulnerability to Chinese nuclear attack: "The constructs of strategic stability and mutual vulnerability can help significantly if both governments embrace them and interpret them similarly…to demonstrate goodwill, the United States should acknowledge mutual vulnerability as a fact and necessary policy."[5]

This is the same familiar line of deterrence thinking, now applied to China, that dominated U.S. policy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and continues to be applied to Russia: mutual societal vulnerability to nuclear attack is inevitable and the "necessary" basis for "stable" deterrence—presuming the overriding caution of all rational leaders in a condition of mutual vulnerability. Advocates of this aged deterrence narrative now present it as a reasonable basis for U.S.-Chinese relations.[6] They also use it, as they did during the Cold War, to argue against U.S. initiatives to protect American society with strategic missile defense.

In short, in the simplistic terms of the U.S. public debate about deterrence: American societal vulnerability vis-à-vis China is stabilizing and good; defensive protection for society is impossible, destabilizing, and bad.

Why Not a Mutual Vulnerability Policy Now

This mutual vulnerability approach to deterrence was problematic during the Cold War; it essentially abandoned preparation for societal protection in the event deterrence

[5] George Perkovich, *Engaging China on Strategic Stability and Mutual Vulnerability, The U.S. and Chinese governments, for the foreseeable future, will have the resources to keep each other's society vulnerable to nuclear mass destruction*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 12, 2022, available at https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/10/12/engaging-china-on-strategic-stability-and-mutual-vulnerability-pub-88142.

[6] Ibid.

failed. The conditions of the emerging threat environment, particularly including China's rapidly expanding nuclear capabilities, render it increasingly imprudent and dangerous. How so?

Russia and China now employ nuclear first-use threats in their respective efforts to achieve their revanchist and expansionist regional goals—goals they define as of existential importance. Again, esoteric jargon often disguises the relatively simple outline of their strategies, which is as follows: If the United States intervenes against Russian or Chinese determined efforts to advance their expansionist goals, they will threaten to escalate to limited nuclear war, thus expecting the United States will back down for fear of the potential for continued nuclear escalation that would destroy American forces and, potentially, cities.

The fundamental presumptions of this apparent coercive strategy are that: 1) a limited nuclear escalation threat (or strike if necessary) against the United States will serve to paralyze U.S. decision making rather than invite a large-scale U.S. nuclear reply because the U.S. would have far more to lose if nuclear escalation were to continue; and, 2) Russia and China are willing to risk limited nuclear escalation threats and employment to advance their existential, expansionist goals, while the United States ultimately will not risk putting American cities at risk of nuclear attack to oppose Russian or Chinese regional expansionism.[7]

Such coercive limited nuclear threats and strategies were not part of the Cold War deterrence dynamic, but are

[7] See, for example, the statements by the former Russian President and current Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, in, Daniel Stewart, "Medvedev says 'NATO would not intervene directly' if Russia used nuclear weapons against Ukraine," *MSN News*, September 27, 2022, available at https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/medvedev-says-%C2%ABnato-would-not-intervene-directly%C2%BB-if-russia-used-nuclear-weapons-against-ukraine/ar-AA12hZnv?li=BBnb7Kz.

now part of Moscow's and Beijing's expansionist playbook—most obvious in Russia's war on Ukraine, where Russian nuclear threats seem to be having at least some of the intended effect of limiting Western support for Ukraine.[8] This strategy also is apparent in China's nuclear threats to the United States, Australia, and Japan regarding their prospective responses to a Chinese attack on Taiwan.[9] Both Russia and China appear to believe that limited nuclear first-use threats are a useful avenue for defeating U.S. extended deterrence strategies. In short, when regional stakes are at risk, Washington is expected to fear Russian and Chinese limited nuclear threats more than Moscow and Beijing fear making and possibly executing those threats.[10]

Defeating Russian and Chinese Strategy

As described above, unmitigated U.S. vulnerability to nuclear attack continues to be touted by some as the key to deterrence stability, and now is advertised as the preferred basis for deterrence relations with China. Yet, continuing American societal vulnerability to Russian and Chinese nuclear attack is the key condition that underlies their coercive strategies to use limited nuclear escalation threats to advance their respective expansionist goals.

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[8] See Lt. Gen. Henry Obering III (ret.) and Robert Joseph, "Putin's nuclear threats worked against Biden — we must act before China gets the same idea," *New York Post Online*, June 21, 2022, available at https://nypost.com/2022/06/21/putins-nuclear-threats-worked-against-biden-us-must-act-against china/; see also, Joseph Bosco, "China and Russia escalate to intimidate; America de-escalates to accommodate," *The Hill Online*, August 23, 2022, available at https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3611282-china-and-russia-escalate-to-intimidate-america-de-escalates-to-accommodate/.

[9] See the discussion in Keith B. Payne, David Trachtenberg, Matthew Costlow, and Christopher Ford, *Special Issue: Deterring China in the Taiwan Strait, Journal of Policy & Strategy*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2022, pp. 22-24.

[10] As Colin Gray often observed, all leaders may fear nuclear war, but not all leaders fear nuclear war equally. This observation captures the implicit presumption underlying Russian and Chinese strategies of nuclear coercion.

Given intentional, unmitigated U.S. societal vulnerability to Russian and Chinese nuclear attack, Moscow and Beijing appear now to calculate that their respective threats to escalate to limited nuclear war will be sufficient to paralyze direct U.S. opposition to their regional expansionism, *but not so extreme as to invite an unlimited U.S. nuclear response*. Russia and China appear to have this common strategy to defeat U.S. strategic deterrence—based on the expectation that their limited nuclear escalation threats will enable their regional expansionism given America's vulnerability to their nuclear escalation.

All U.S. allies and partners within the expansionist visions of Moscow and Beijing are at risk of Russian and Chinese confidence that they have found this coercive key to defeating U.S. extended deterrence commitments to allies. It is predicated on the U.S. vulnerability to nuclear attack that is now being presented as a reasonable basis for U.S. strategic relations with China.

Following the long-familiar mutual vulnerability policy narrative, as now applied to both Russia and China, its advocates contend that because mutual vulnerability is an unalterable reality there is no point in pursuing a defensive-oriented alternative to mutual vulnerability.[11] The fallacies of this position now should be obvious, but apparently are not.

First, mutual vulnerability is not, and has never been, an either/or proposition. There are differing levels of vulnerability, and those differences are key to this discussion. The importance of the possible range of levels of vulnerability has been obvious in U.S. policy for six decades.

For example, the mutual vulnerability policy narrative itself presumes that U.S. strategic forces are largely protected against attack; they must be sufficiently defended and survivable to pose a retaliatory deterrent threat, i.e.,

[11] Perkovich, op. cit.

they must be able to withstand a nuclear attack. This is a limited but necessary measure of U.S. defense that must be in place for strategic deterrence, and the United States historically has pursued that protection—most notably by placing U.S. ICBMs in hardened silos, bombers on an alert status, and U.S. ballistic missile carrying submarines under the sea, and by protecting their associated command and control systems.

As this example shows, vulnerability levels can differ depending on the assets to be protected. Vulnerability also can differ depending on the size and scope of the attack against which defenses are intended to function. It may not now be feasible to defend U.S. cities comprehensively against a large-scale nuclear attack designed to destroy them. But that does not mean that all levels of useful homeland defense are infeasible. [12]

In the contemporary threat context, it is critical to recognize that defeating Russian and Chinese coercive, limited nuclear escalation strategies does not necessarily require the full protection of American society against a large-scale nuclear attack. Rather, the measure of protection needed to defeat Russian and Chinese coercive, limited escalation strategies may be much more modest because the defensive goal in this regard is limited. It is to preclude Moscow and Beijing from any confidence that their limited nuclear threats against the United States will have the desired coercive effect on U.S. decision making—compelling the United States to abandon long-standing security commitments to allies and partners. Providing protection against limited nuclear missile attack has long been acknowledged as feasible, including by critics of

[12] For a recent helpful discussion of the potential value of homeland defense see, Matthew R. Costlow, *Vulnerability is No Virtue and Defense is No Vice: The Strategic Benefits of Expanded U.S. Homeland Missile Defense, Occasional Pape*r, Vol. 2, No. 9 (September 2022).

missile defense,[13] and the potential for "exotic" laser technology to defend against a variety of missile threats may finally be promising even greater effectiveness at lower cost.[14]

Of course, defenses adequate to protect against limited coercive threats would not preclude a possible Russian or Chinese large-scale strike against the U.S. homeland. But such a strike would likely ensure a devastating U.S. strategic nuclear response and understandably appears not to be part of Moscow's or Beijing's coercive playbook to support their respective expansionist, regional goals. Neither appears to seek martyrdom as have some past leaders.

In short, in the context of mutual strategic deterrence continuing to prevent opponents' large-scale nuclear strikes for their fear of large-scale nuclear retaliation, U.S. defenses intended to protect against limited escalation threats may be a key to defeating Russian and Chinese coercive nuclear escalation strategies.

In contrast to the long-familiar assertions that mutual vulnerability is a reality, not a policy, and that no meaningful measure of homeland defense is possible, U.S. homeland defenses may now provide two extremely useful functions: 1) help defeat great power opponents' coercive strategies of limited nuclear escalation; and, 2) provide

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[13] See for example, *Remarks by Secretary of Defense William Perry at the Regional Commerce and Growth Association of St. Louis, Missouri*, September 28, 1995, Federal News Service, 11-12; and, Arms Control Association, *Background Paper, New Star Wars Plan: Unnecessary Destruction of the ABM Treaty*, February 1991, p. 1. See also the statement by William Graham, Science Advisor to Presidents Reagan and Bush in, "Former Science Advisor Sees Bright Future for Missile Defense," *Defense Daily* (Special Supplement), October 31, 1991, p. S-1.

[14] See for example, Ilan Berman, "The Logic of Israel's Laser Wall," National Institute, *Information Series*, No. 526 (June 23, 2022). See also, Loren Thompson, Lockheed Martin Laser Breakthroughs Could Signal A Turning Point For Missile Defense," *Forbes,* October 13, 2022, available at https://www.forbes.com/sites/lorenthompson/2022/10/13/lockheed-martin-laser-breakthroughs-could-signal-a-turning-point-for-missile-defense/?sh=e7d07332cf0b.

protection for U.S. society against limited, accidental, or unauthorized nuclear attacks.

Second, another long-familiar assertion of those now advocating the extension of a mutual vulnerability policy to China is that U.S. defensive efforts would likely only compel China to expand its nuclear arsenal to overcome U.S. defenses, and thereby nullify any possible value of U.S. defensive efforts. This argument, based on the "action-reaction" explanation of arms racing, again harkens back to the 1960s.[15]

Russia and China could indeed respond to U.S. defensive efforts by adding to their arsenals so as to overwhelm U.S. defenses. But that possibility is not germane to the potential value of defending the U.S. homeland against limited Russian and Chinese nuclear escalation threats. The goal of U.S. defenses in this case is not to protect U.S. society comprehensively against an unlimited nuclear attack. That will remain the job of strategic deterrence until defensive technologies are available to enable that defensive goal. The defensive goal discussed here is to help deny Moscow and Beijing confidence in the coercive effects of their limited nuclear escalation threats—to degrade those threats and thereby help to defeat their expansionist strategy. This goal does not necessitate the comprehensive protection of U.S. society against unlimited nuclear attacks. Were Moscow and Beijing to respond by expanding their nuclear arsenals to defeat those defenses, doing so would not restore the credibility of their limited nuclear escalation strategies; it simply would add to the prospective size of the large-scale attack necessary to overcome U.S. defenses—a Russian and

[15] George Rathjens, "The Dynamics of the Arms Race," *Scientific American* (April 1969). Reprinted in, *Arms Control: Readings From Scientific American* (San Francisco, CA: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1973), pp. 177-187. Most recently see, Perkovich, op. cit.

Chinese attack option that U.S. strategic deterrent forces should continue to deny, as is presumed in a mutual vulnerability policy.

In short, the familiar "action-reaction" critique of U.S. homeland defense is well-worn, but that critique has no bearing on the potential value of defending the homeland against limited escalation threats to defeat the Russian and Chinese expansionist strategy.

Conclusion

The aged mutual vulnerability policy narrative is a legacy of the Cold War. The most fundamental propositions of this policy narrative remain evident in contemporary U.S. policy vis-à-vis Russia, i.e., mutual vulnerability is treated as an either/or proposition and is considered the basis for nuclear deterrence stability with Russia. Some commentators now advocate the extension of this mutual vulnerability policy to U.S. relations with China, based on precisely the same policy narrative inherited from the Cold War.

Yet, vulnerability is not an either/or proposition, and contemporary threat conditions now argue strongly for U.S. defensive measures sufficient to mitigate homeland vulnerability against the limited, coercive nuclear threats that appear to be key to Russian and Chinese coercive strategies for regional expansion. Such U.S. defensive measures are not a silver bullet to restore credible extended deterrence for allies and partners, but they may be critical.

For decades, mutual vulnerability advocates have argued against U.S. homeland defenses by claiming that there is no meaningful alternative to societal vulnerability, and that the value of any U.S. defensive efforts will be negated as Russia, and now China, simply add to their arsenals to overwhelm U.S. defenses. Yet, given the different prospective levels of vulnerability, and the

defensive goal suggested here, those aged arguments have no logical traction in this discussion. In the emerging threat environment, the measure of defense needed to protect against limited nuclear escalation threats may help preserve international stability and peace by denying Russia and China their preferred strategy for expansion, while also providing a level of protection against rogue state missile threats and the prospect of accidental or unauthorized launches. Those are not small advantages.

Deterrence via Intentional Civilian Targeting: A Dangerous Cold War Anachronism*

Introduction

Moscow and Beijing have been expanding their respective nuclear arsenals for years, in Russia's case, for well over a decade,[1] and issuing numerous explicit or implicit nuclear threats against the United States, allies and partners. Importantly, these threats have not been for the defensive purpose typically associated with deterrence strategies. They have signaled to Washington that Moscow and Beijing would use nuclear weapons first in a regional war to prevent or deter the United States from intervening against their military expansionism. Moscow has said explicitly that it could escalate a regional war via nuclear first use to "de-escalate" the conflict, i.e., paralyze the United States into inaction when Russia attacks a U.S. ally. This is Moscow's wholly self-serving definition of how to "de-escalate" a war of aggression against an American ally. These are unprecedented, coercive nuclear threats.

The expansion of Russian and Chinese nuclear capabilities and coercive nuclear threats has occurred in parallel with two relatively new threat developments: 1) Moscow's and Beijing's manifest goal of changing the global order to suit their authoritarian goals and values;

* Original publication: Keith B. Payne, "Deterrence via Intentional Civilian Targeting: A Dangerous Cold War Anachronism," *Information Series*, No. 569 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, December 6, 2023).

[1] See the discussion in, Mark B. Schneider, *How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Russia Have? Occasional Paper*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2023), available at https://nipp.org/papers/how-many-nuclear-weapons-does-russia-have-the-size-and-characteristics-of-the-russian-nuclear-stockpile/.

and, 2) their growing cooperation to achieve their common goal of advancing a new world order. Unfortunately, Moscow's and Beijing's expansionist plans include extending hegemony over U.S. allies and partners. These allies and partners recognize the danger, which is why many are calling for Washington to establish a more credible extended nuclear deterrent to help protect them.

In this stark threat context, there have been numerous calls for comprehensive improvements to, and increases in, U.S. nuclear capabilities to sustain the U.S. nuclear deterrent, most recently by the bipartisan, Congressionally-mandated Strategic Posture Commission.[2] And, given Moscow's incessant treaty violations and Beijing's disdain for arms control agreements, these bipartisan calls often express deep skepticism regarding the potential for arms control to address the unprecedented nuclear threats facing the United States.

In response, some commentators clearly upset by this bipartisan policy direction advocate intentionally threatening opponents' populations and civilian targets as a basis for U.S. deterrence policy: "…the best, simplest, and least destabilizing way to deter massive counter-city strikes on the US homeland by a leading nuclear power is to threaten retaliation in kind," and suggest that 100 warheads able to retaliate against "enemy cities" would be adequate for such a threat.[3] This force measure supposedly would

[2] Madelyn Creedon and Jon Kyl, et al., *America's Strategic Posture* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2023).

[3] 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 suggests 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, available at https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/us-nuclear-arsenal-can-deter-both-china-andrussia#:~:text=Even%20if%20Russia%20and%20China,the%20United%20States'%20only%20adversary.

limit or reduce U.S. deterrence requirements and thereby facilitate arms control as a solution to new threats. This clearly is an attempt to move Washington away from strengthening U.S. deterrence capabilities to help meet the mounting threats confronting the United States.[4] How so?

Intentionally threatening an opponent's population and civilian targets would limit the deterrence requirement for numbers and types of U.S. nuclear weapons given the relative ease of destroying undefended civilian targets with nuclear weapons. So, moving to intentional civilian targeting would create a rationale for opposing ongoing and/or new U.S. nuclear programs. Washington, it is said, could limit its force numbers, and with the usual suggestion that opponents will follow the U.S. lead in this regard,[5] a deterrence equilibrium could follow very conveniently, i.e., without new U.S. forces. Problem solved.

In short, the unprecedented nuclear threat condition facing the United States has led to a bipartisan call for Washington to add nuclear capabilities suited for deterring unprecedented, new threats. But, some commentators seek to derail this by advocating instead a deterrence strategy that essentially reduces U.S. deterrence targeting and force requirements by adopting intentional civilian targeting as a part of U.S. deterrence strategy.

This push to intentionally threaten an opponent's population and civilian targets, or, to use a euphemism, targeting an opponent's "society,"[6] as a basic element of U.S. deterrence policy, is the worst of the old Strangelovian

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[4] Lieber and Press, op. cit., p. 9. See also, Andreas Kluth, "US, China and Russia's Three-Body Nuclear Problem," *Bloomberg Opinion*, November 9, 2023, available at https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2023-11-09/the-us-china-and-russia-have-a-three-body-nuclear-problem#xj4y7vzkg.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Lieber and Press suggest a capability to "inflict massive punishment on Russian society." Lieber and Press, op. cit., p. 10; Glaser, Acton, and Fetter similarly suggest "threatening to damage or totally destroy an adversary's society and infrastructure" and that "90 warheads" have the capacity to "inflict the level of damage that is required for *assured destruction*." op. cit. (Emphasis added).

Cold War world—long since discarded by Washington on a fully bipartisan basis. Yet, advocates of intentional population and civilian targeting now present it as if it were a new idea for a new era.[7] In fact, it dates back to the earliest years of the Cold War and, at this point, has been rejected as insufficiently effective for deterrence and immoral by Democratic and Republican administrations for decades.

What's Old Is New Again

Fifty years ago, the United States expressly rejected the earlier declared intentional population and civilian targeting deterrence measure established in the 1960s by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. This was a declared metric for U.S. deterrence capabilities that included the threat to intentionally kill a large percentage of the Soviet population and destroy a large portion of Soviet industry.[8] Since the mid-1970s, every Democratic and Republican administration has measured the adequacy of America's deterrent forces by different standards.

Secretary McNamara defined the U.S. requirement for deterrence to include a specific measure of population and industry destruction, i.e., "assured destruction." He explicitly said this measure of adequacy "to deter a calculated deliberate Soviet attack" was the U.S. retaliatory capability to "destroy… the Soviet government and military controls, plus a large percentage of their population and economy (e.g., 30% of their population, 50% of their

[7] Lieber and Press, op. cit., pp. 3, 9-12.

[8] *Draft Memorandum for the President, Secretary of Defense [Robert S. McNamara] to the President [Lyndon B. Johnson], Subj: Recommended FY 1966-FY1970 Programs for Strategic Offensive Forces, Continental Air and Missile Defense Forces, and Civil Defense*, December 3, 1964, p. 4. (Originally classified; sanitized and declassified on January 5, 1983.) See also the discussion in, Alain C. Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, *How Much Is Enough?* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), p. 175.

industrial capability, and 150 of their cities)."[9] In 1964, McNamara further elaborated on this formula for "assured destruction": "…it seems reasonable to assume that the destruction of, say, 25 percent of its population (55 million people) and more than two-thirds of its industrial capacity would mean the destruction of the Soviet Union as a national society."[10]

McNamara said the "assured destruction" threat was the "very essence of the whole deterrence concept."[11] It would be hard to overstate the importance he attributed to "assured destruction" as the standard for guiding the acquisition of U.S. strategic forces. In his 1968 *Draft Presidential Memorandum* he identified *only* the preservation of "assured destruction" as the standard for new U.S. capabilities: "We should develop new systems *only* as options which would restore our Assured Destruction capability…."[12]

Secretary McNamara's intentional population/civilian targeting became synonymous with nuclear deterrence in Washington—so much so that, following McNamara's tenure, many commentators and former officials fiercely resisted moves of U.S. deterrence policy *away from* "assured destruction" targeting, mistakenly criticizing these moves as contrary to deterrence.[13] That mistaken view and criticism have now returned.

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[9] *Draft Memorandum for the President, Secretary of Defense [Robert S. McNamara] to the President [Lyndon B. Johnson], Subj: Recommended FY 1965-FY 1969 Strategic Retaliatory Forces*, December 6, 1963, p. I-5. (Originally classified; sanitized and declassified on January 5, 1983.)

[10] *Draft Memorandum for the President*, 1964, op. cit., p. 4.

[11] Robert S. McNamara, *The Essence of Security: Reflections in Office* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 52-53.

[12] *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. 11. (Originally classified; sanitized and declassified on January 5, 1983). (Emphasis added.)

[13] See, for example, Seymour Melman, "Limits of Military Power," *The New York Times*, October 17, 1980, p. A-31.

It is important to note that while McNamara publicly adopted a population/civilian deterrence metric, less publicly he said that the United States: 1) also targeted Soviet military capabilities;[14] 2) had other limited, but still large-scale, targeting options;[15] and, 3) in the event of war, U.S. nuclear weapons would not necessarily be employed according to his "assured destruction" guidelines.[16]

Nevertheless, throughout the 1960s, McNamara and his colleagues offered five related purposes as the rationale for measuring U.S. nuclear deterrence adequacy in terms of intentional civilian targeting: 1) To help deter Moscow's extreme provocations; 2) To limit U.S. force requirements by limiting targeting requirements; 3) To give McNamara the basis for rejecting military requests for nuclear weapons beyond the "assured destruction" standard of adequacy;[17] 4) To avoid an action-reaction arms race by stopping U.S. nuclear programs, i.e., preventing a U.S.-led action-reaction arms race cycle; and, 5) To establish "stable" deterrence—

[14] Secretary McNamara's then Top Secret 1961 *Draft Presidential Memorandum* to President Kennedy included 200 "urban/industrial" targets and "150 [Soviet] bomber bases" in the list of "high priority" nuclear targets. In 1962, he said that the U.S. deterrence threat included the capability to destroy "Soviet urban society," and to deny Moscow the prospect of "achieving a military victory by attacking our forces." See, respectively, *Draft Memorandum for the President, Secretary of Defense [Robert S. McNamara] to the President [John F. Kennedy], Subj: Recommended Long Range Nuclear Delivery Forces 1963-1967*, Appendix I, September 23, 1961, p. 6. (Sanitized and declassified January 5, 1983); and, *Draft Memorandum for the President, Secretary of Defense [Robert S. McNamara] to the President [John F. Kennedy], Subj: Recommended FY 1964-FY 1968 Strategic Retaliatory Forces*, November 21, 1962, p. 5. (Originally classified; sanitized and declassified on January 5, 1983).

[15] See, Franklin Miller, "Tailoring U.S. Strategic Deterrent Effects on Russia," in Barry Schneider and Patrick Ellis, eds., *Tailored Deterrence* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: USAF Counterproliferation Center, 2011), pp. 41-56.

[16] See, *Draft Memorandum for the President*, 1963, op. cit., p. I-12, and, *Draft Memorandum for the President,* 1968, op. cit., p. 9.

[17] Henry S. Rowen, "Formulating Strategic Doctrine," Commission on the Organization of the Government for the Conduct of Foreign Policy, *Adequacy of Current Organization: Defense and Arms Control* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, June 1975), Volume 4, Appendix K, p. 227. See also, Enthoven and Smith, op. cit., pp. 23-24, 170-171, 179, 194-195.

because U.S. forces would be manifestly limited, opponents supposedly would not feel the need to strike first for fear of a U.S. first strike, creating a stable deterrence equilibrium. Claiming these benefits for intentional civilian targeting, i.e., stable deterrence with minimal force requirements, was a powerful elixir for the U.S. body politic at a time when the war in Vietnam was draining the nation's resources and attention.

Contemporary advocates of intentionally threatening population and civilian targets as a measure of U.S. deterrence capabilities repeat McNamara's 1960s rationale; little has been added, changed, or lost. Yet, as noted, Washington began to reject "assured destruction" as a deterrence measure beginning in the mid-1970s—a rejection subsequently sustained by every Democratic and Republican administration.

The basic reasons for Washington's rejection of McNamara's "assured destruction" metric for deterrence were well-expressed over years by senior U.S. civilian and military leaders, particularly including Secretaries of Defense Schlesinger, Brown and Weinberger. As Weinberger concluded in 1986, the United States did not plan targeting options, "…to maximize Soviet casualties or *to attack deliberately the Soviet population*. Indeed, we believe such a doctrine would be neither moral nor prudent."[18] Their arguments, together, reveal why the rationale for intentional civilian targeting for deterrence is as fatally flawed now as it was decades ago.

Why Fatally Flawed?

First, the enemy gets the vote regarding the targets Washington needs to threaten for optimal deterrence: The United States must be able to threaten what opposing

[18] Caspar W. Weinberger, "U.S. Defense Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (Spring 1986), pp. 680-681. (Emphasis added).

leaderships value most, not what Washington might otherwise prefer. This has rightly been a standard for U.S. deterrence policy for decades on a fully bipartisan basis; a less tailored threat would give opponents room to calculate that some aggressive act could be worth the risk. Such a condition, as Secretary Weinberger said with understatement, would be imprudent. This is the *beginning* of deterrence wisdom.

Understanding that threatening what opposing leaderships value is critical for deterrence is not new. In 1983, the bipartisan President's Commission on Strategic Forces (Scowcroft Commission) elaborated on this deterrence requirement (voiced earlier by the Carter Administration): "Deterrence is the set of beliefs in the minds of the Soviet leaders, given their own values and attitudes…It requires us to determine, as best we can, what would deter them from considering aggression, even in a crisis—not to determine what would deter us."[19]

It is important to understand in this regard that multiple studies over decades have concluded that Moscow values most highly its military capabilities, political power and control, and war-supporting industry. The Scowcroft Commission, for example, concluded:

> In order to deter such Soviet [nuclear] threats we must be able to put at risk those types of Soviet targets—including hardened ones such as military command bunkers and facilities, missile silos, nuclear weapons and other storage, and the rest—which the Soviet leaders have given every indication by their actions they value most, and which constitute their tools of control and power. We cannot afford the delusion that Soviet leaders—human though they are and cautious

[19] President's Commission on Strategic Forces, *Report of the President's Commission on Strategic Forces* (April 1983), p. 3.

> though we hope they will be—are going to be deterred by exactly the same concerns that would dissuade us.[20]

In 1986, as noted, Secretary Weinberger stated publicly that Washington did *not* base deterrence on intentionally targeting civilians. Instead, "secure deterrence should be based on the threat to destroy what the Soviet leadership values most highly: Namely, itself, its military power and political control capabilities, and its industrial ability to wage war."[21] He also said that U.S. deterrence strategy "…consciously does not target population and, in fact, has provisions for reducing civilian casualties."[22] This did not suggest a miraculous capacity to preclude prospective civilian casualties in any large-scale targeting plan, but an intentional effort to avoid them and a repudiation of McNamara's earlier declared "assured destruction" deterrence metric.

There is no indication that the contemporary ruling tyranny in Moscow values its general civilian population or "society" most highly—indeed, there is considerable evidence to the contrary (the same appears to be true of Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party).[23] Rather, as noted, the values that Washington likely still must threaten for effective deterrence, as described by the Scowcroft Commission, are their "tools of control and power." Washington simply does not have the luxury to choose to threaten an opponent's civilian targets for deterrence because that target set would conveniently limit U.S. force requirements. Doing so would prioritize limiting the U.S.

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[20] Ibid., p. 6.

[21] Weinberger, "U.S. Defense Strategy," op. cit., p. 682.

[22] Caspar Weinberger, *The Potential Effects of Nuclear War on Climate: A Report to the United States Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985), p. 11.

[23] As suggested in, Robert Gates, "The Dysfunctional Superpower," *Foreign Affairs* (Nov./Dec. 2023), available at https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/robert-gates-america-china-russia-dysfunctional-superpower.

force above the deterrence strategy designed for greatest effectiveness—a dangerous prioritization in an increasingly severe threat environment in which preventing nuclear war must be the Pentagon's highest goal; it could degrade deterrence and thereby increase the probability of war.

Second, the familiar argument that the United States can preclude a new arms competition by *not* acquiring the forces it needs for effective deterrence is fiction at this point, and not slightly ethnocentric. Arguing now, as do population/civilian targeting advocates, that the intentional targeting of civilians or "society" will reduce U.S. force requirements and thus prevent an "action-reaction" arms race, denies reality: Russia and China have been racing to their own nuclear doctrinal tune for years; prior U.S. actions have not driven this and a change in the U.S. measure of deterrence requirements would not stop it.

Thousands of assertions over decades to the contrary, the United States has not led an action-reaction arms race. For example, the most comprehensive Cold War studies concluded that the United States did not lead an action-reaction arms race.[24] Rather, the Soviet Union was "self-stimulated" by its specific nuclear doctrinal requirements to build its arsenal, including the number and types of nuclear weapons.[25] This inconvenient reality was reflected in Harold Brown's famous quip: "Soviet spending … has shown no response to U.S. restraint—when we build, they build, when we cut, they build."[26] Contemporary claims

[24] See, for example, *History of the Strategic Arms Competition: 1945-1972*, Part II, Alfred Goldberg, ed., with contributions by Ernest R. May, John D. Steinbruner, and Thomas W. Wolfe (Washington, D.C.: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, March 1981), pp. 810-811.

[25] Jean-Christian Lambelet, Urs Luterbacher, and Pierre Allan, "Dynamics of Arms Races: Mutual Stimulation vs. Self-Stimulation," *Journal of Peace Science*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1979), p. 64.

[26] Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, Statement on February 27, 1979, in *Outlook and Budget Levels for Fiscal Years 1979 and 1980*, Hearings Before the Committee on the Budget, House of Representatives, 96th Congress, 1st Session (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1979), p. 492.

that the United States can preclude an "action-reaction" arms race cycle by adopting a lower standard of deterrence fail to recognize that Harold Brown's quip captures the past and present reality.

Third, the argument that a population/civilian targeting standard is uniquely "stable," while U.S. threats to opponents' "tools of control and power" will motivate opponents to launch a nuclear first strike against the United States for fear that Washington will strike first, has been popular for decades, but is logically incoherent. Unless the opponent is suicidal, it would *not* consciously launch a pre-emptive strategic nuclear war that will surely result in its own destruction in order to avoid the possibility of its own nuclear destruction. That would be akin to leaping off the ledge—ensuring the worst outcome—for fear of being pushed off the ledge. Leaderships can be reckless and anything may be possible, but there is very little historical experience to support this supposed nuclear "instability" truism, and much contrary to it. The United States has for many decades threatened opponents' military capabilities as the center of, or an element of, its deterrence policy; this has not led to apparent deterrence instability throughout periods of both calm and great stress.

The burden of proof surely is on those who now assert that a return to population/civilian targeting will somehow mitigate an otherwise looming deterrence instability. This long-familiar part of the canon in support of intentional civilian targeting is logically incoherent and ahistorical. Yet, civilian targeting advocates continue to present this dynamic as a truism.[27] More likely "destabilizing" in the current threat environment would be a U.S. return to a civilian targeting metric that prioritizes constraining U.S. force requirements above deterrence effectiveness.

[27] Glaser, Acton, and Fetter, op. cit.; and, Kluth, op. cit.

The Spin Regarding Casualties

Finally, it is important to address a related point that advocates often make regarding the casualty levels associated with their intentional civilian targeting recommendations. In an apparent effort to deflect culpability for pushing an imprudent and morally problematic policy, advocates often suggest that it would likely not meaningfully increase civilian casualties over a "counterforce" targeting policy.[28] The seeming intention of this claim is to suggest that their favored approach to deterrence is no more morally culpable than a "counterforce" deterrence strategy. They typically do this by projecting the casualties likely from the destruction of a comprehensive "counterforce" target set via nuclear strikes that appear *not* to be constrained to limit civilian casualties and destruction. Unsurprisingly, they conclude that the civilian casualties from such a strike would be high—asserting or strongly suggesting casualty levels not meaningfully different from intentional civilian targeting.[29] One such seeming projection, for example, claims likely casualty levels numbering in the "tens" to "hundreds" of millions.[30]

This argument might be true, as postulated. But it also is highly misleading because it fails to recognize that, on the

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[28] Lieber and Press, op. cit., pp. 3, 6. See also, James Acton, "Two Myths about Counterforce," *WarOnTheRocks.com*, November 6, 2023, available at https://warontherocks.com/2023/11/two-myths-about-counterforce/.

[29] Kluth, op. cit. See also, James Acton, op. cit. Other earlier studies found the potential for *far fewer* fatalities in some potential "counterforce" targeting scenarios than from intentional population targeting. See the briefing on September 11, 1974 by Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, in U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on Arms Control, *Briefing on Counterforce Attacks*, Hearings, 93rd Congress, 2nd Session (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1975), p. 33. See also, William Daugherty, Barbara Levi, and Frank von Hippel, "The Consequences of 'Limited' Nuclear Attacks on the United States," *International Security*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Spring 1986), pp. 3-45.

[30] Acton., op. cit.

U.S. side, nuclear employment, including against opponents' "tools of control and power," would be limited by the legal requirements for distinction and proportionality, which could reduce the casualty level significantly. As James Schlesinger observed in 1974, "…one can reduce those collateral mortalities significantly, if that is one of the attacker's objectives."[31] This point is critical because, unlike intentional civilian targeting advocates and various projections of casualties, Pentagon planners do not have the luxury of ignoring the targeting restrictions of *distinction and proportionality*: Distinction meaning that the *intentional* targeting of civilians is unacceptable, and proportionality meaning that potential *unintentional* civilian destruction may be countenanced *only* if judged proportional to the high military value of the target struck. These legal targeting restrictions are derived from millennia-old Just War moral principles regarding the use of force, and shape how, when and where U.S. leaders can employ force, including nuclear. The intentional targeting of population and civilian assets is inherently irreconcilable with these legal/moral requirements, unlikely to provide optimal deterrent effect in key cases, and an invitation for a similar nuclear reply.

The reality of these targeting limits was reflected in Secretary Weinberger's 1985 statement quoted above that the United States "…consciously does not target population and, in fact, has provisions for reducing civilian casualties," and in his then classified memorandum to the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff regarding "Collateral Damage Restraint": "The general proscription against targeting civilian populations per se, which results in guidance not to target deliberately residential areas, is intended primarily to cause our nuclear war plans to conform with Western

[31] Schlesinger, *Briefing on Counterforce Attacks*, op. cit., p. 26. See also, Donald Rumsfeld, *Annual Department of Defense Report FY78* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, January 17, 1977), p. 73.

morality."[32] In 1986, then Commander in Chief of NATO Forces General Bernard Rogers put distinction and proportionality in plain operational terms with a corresponding comment on nuclear targeting: "I place certain restraints on myself in regard to collateral damage. I will not fire a nuclear weapon into a city. I am concerned about those targets that are militarily significant, that we need to strike because it will have an impact on the battlefield, but which are close to cities. I will not strike those targets if a large percentage of civilians are going to be killed."[33] Gen. Rogers did *not* absolutely exclude "militarily significant" targets near (or presumably in) cities, but would not strike them if doing so would inflict a disproportional number of civilian fatalities.

For many years, Republican and Democratic administrations have publicly confirmed the governing legal principles of distinction and proportionality for U.S. nuclear planning, including the Obama, Trump and Biden Administrations. Advocates of civilian targeting appear to ignore these constraints in their efforts to deflect moral culpability away from *intentionally* threatening population and civilian targets.

In addition, civilian targeting advocates unsurprisingly do *not* highlight the likely casualty levels from their favored *intentional* targeting of cities or "society"—casualty levels which, by virtually any analysis, are likely to be much higher than the targeting strategy that they criticize. For example, in 1979, the Office of Technology Assessment concluded that a comprehensive strike "deliberately targeting population" could entail 90-190 million U.S.

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[32] Caspar Weinberger, *Memorandum for the Joint Chiefs of Staff: Collateral Damage Restraint*, November 12, 1985, (declassified, September 6, 2018), available at https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/MDR_Releases/FY18/FY18_Q2/Collateral_Damage_Restraint_12Nov1985.pdf.

[33] Quoted in, Bob Furlong and Macha Levinson, "SACEUR Calls for Research on a European ABM System," *International Defense Review* (February 1986), p. 151.

fatalities.[34] The glib suggestion that there is no meaningful difference in the potential level of civilian casualties from intentional population and civilian targeting defies analysis, and any moral, legal or military logic.

In short, advocates of population and civilian targeting, apparently eager to deflect moral culpability, ignore the reality that the principles of discrimination and proportionality demand targeting restrictions that could greatly limit casualties from targeting opponents' "tools of control and power." That America's opponents are most likely best deterred not by intentional civilian threats, but by threats to their "tools of control and power," facilitates operationalizing distinction and proportionality. In contrast, intentional targeting for "massive counter-city strikes" to inflict "massive punishment" on an opponent's "society,"[35] is inherently irreconcilable with well-established legal/moral standards and unlikely to provide optimal deterrent effect. This may be why an advocate of intentional "society" targeting, seemingly in a matter of weeks, switched to recommending targeting opponents' conventional military forces instead[36]—an aged notion and longstanding element of "counterforce" targeting.[37]

Conclusion

The return of advocacy for intentional population and civilian targeting was inevitable—it provides a rationale for doing almost nothing beyond changing the definition of deterrence adequacy in response to a dramatically more

[34] The Office of Technology Assessment, *The Effects of Nuclear War* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1979), p. 8.

[35] Lieber and Press, op. cit., pp. 3, 10.

[36] Acton, op. cit.

[37] See Bruce Russett, "Assured Destruction of What? A Countercombatant Alternative to Nuclear MADness," *Public Policy*, Vol. 22 (Spring 1974), pp. 121-138.

dangerous nuclear threat environment. Of course, doing almost nothing is what some in Washington always prefer with regard to nuclear weapons—no matter the harsh realities of the threat and deterrence requirements.

To be sure, deterrence via threatening opponents' "tools of control and power" while seeking to practice discrimination and proportionality puts a premium on discriminate U.S. deterrence planning and capabilities, nuclear and conventional. But, the alternative of intentional population and civilian targeting, as Weinberger said, is "neither moral nor prudent." It might satisfy some peoples' desire for revenge, but revenge against citizens is unlikely to be the most effective deterrent and an illegitimate war aim.

The contemporary arguments to intentionally threaten population and civilian targets for deterrence are neither different nor more coherent than they were when voiced by McNamara 60 years ago. Two generations of Democratic and Republican leaders have moved policy away from this Cold War deterrence metric beginning 50 years ago. A new generation of leaders and scholars needs to understand why they did so and why the value of that move endures.

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