



Winning Conventional Regional Wars Against Nuclear-Armed Adversaries

6th Annual Deterrence Workshop Summary

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Center for Global Security Research
LAWRENCE LIVERMORE NATIONAL LABORATORY

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On November 20-21, the Center for Global Security Research (CGSR) at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) hosted its 6th Annual Deterrence Workshop titled “Winning Conventional Regional Wars Against Nuclear-Armed Adversaries.” This session brought together participants drawn across the policy, military, and technical communities from the United States and allied countries in Europe and Asia-Pacific.

Discussion was guided by the following key questions:

1. What are the particular challenges of winning a conventional regional war against a nuclear-armed adversary?
2. How are those challenges best met?
3. Do we have the right concepts? How can the necessary concepts best be integrated into a “Blue theory of victory?”

Key take-aways:

1. Russia and China have been focused for at least 25 years on the strategic problems brought to them by an American way of war. As a result, they have developed strategies for conflict in “peacetime,” crisis, and war and set about assembling the right capabilities. Although their ideas reflect a good deal of careful strategic thought, they also build on some wishful thinking.
2. Central to “Red theories of victory” are the following:
 - a. That a *fait accompli* can be achieved at a reasonable cost and held by projecting an image of a terrible price to be paid for trying to un-do it.
 - b. That allies can be separated from the United States and each other so that the United States will be left with no choice than to fight alone or not at all.
 - c. That power projection by the United States can be made costly to it.
 - d. That escalatory use of force by Red can be calibrated so as “to sober but not enrage”—that is, to generate fear and restraint rather than anger and counter-escalation.

¹ *The views and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect those of the United States government, Lawrence Livermore National Security, LLC. or any other organization.*

- e. That Red threats to escalate will be credible to the US and its allies, given an asymmetry of stake favoring Red (because conflicts on their peripheries will touch on their core interests but will not, in their assessment, touch on core US interests).
 - f. That the strategic choices of the US and its allies in crisis and war can be shaped ahead of time by psychological preparations (by setting expectations of a terrible price to be paid), by preparations to create public panic (by attacking infrastructure), and by manipulating political debate (by penetrating the democratic system through manipulation of its access to information).
3. The United States, in contrast, has been focused elsewhere for most of the last 25 years. It only in 2014 recognized the new problem posed by the changing strategic intentions and ways of war of Russia and China. As a result, there appears to be no Blue theory of victory in a regional war with nuclear-armed adversary. In the judgment of the National Defense Strategy Commission, the US could well lose such a war if it were fought today.
4. A Blue theory of victory *in a regional conventional war against a nuclear-armed adversary* could be built on the following key concepts. These concepts must, however, be further refined as they may be based on false assumptions:
- a. At the conventional level of war, the US and its allies (Green) can deny Red's attempted *fait accompli* even in a contested environment. With sufficient preparation, it can blunt the effort to attain a decisive result quickly, surge despite harassment, and then engage in combat for decisive effects on Red, while also protecting Green. Those effects can be won with (1) a superior understanding of the limited, perhaps fleeting opportunities in that contested environment, and (2) a superior ability to seize those opportunities with effective execution.
 - b. Red's threats to escalate can be rendered moot by demonstrations of political cohesion and risk acceptance by the US and its allies and by credible displays of the ability to integrate multi-domain operations for transregional effects.
 - c. If Red crosses the nuclear threshold in theater, in a limited way, a proportionate US retaliatory strike would awaken it to its miscalculation of US and allied resolve.
 - d. If Red crosses the transregional threshold and conducts lethal but non-nuclear attacks on the US, countering US escalation would awaken it to its miscalculation.
 - e. Broader nuclear/strategic war is strongly disincentivized by the ability of the US to utilize its strategic forces even if under attack.
 - f. Blue and Green can negate Red's efforts to use nuclear threats to coerce in the Gray Zone by negating Red confidence in its strategy for escalation in crisis and war.
5. In pursuit of longer-term improvements to the Blue/Green theory of victory, more strategic thought is needed. This is a responsibility of many stakeholder institutions—military and non-military, US and allied. The atrophy of the last 3 decades has been thorough. Blue stakeholders must do better at understanding Red (its strategy, strengths, and vulnerabilities) and at thinking the supposedly unthinkable possibility of limited regional nuclear war. They must come to terms with the new Red-Blue-Green triangles in the new strategic landscape. They must also come to terms with the need to define the political requirements of winning and then of linking operational concepts to those requirements. But there is some good news. New communities of interest are forming. Institutions are beginning to reinvest in the needed human capital. The US Allies are engaged.

Panel 1: The NDS, NPR, MDR, NDS Commission, and Subsequent Progress

- In the ideas reflected in the policy and posture reviews of 2017 and 2018, is there a coherent theory of US/allied success in regional conventional wars against nuclear-armed adversaries? If so, what is it? If not, where are the gaps?
- What were the key concerns of the NDS commission?
- What progress has been made in 2019 in addressing those concerns?

In the current security environment and for the foreseeable future, the most consequential wars the United States might have to fight are conventional regional wars against nuclear-armed challengers. Such wars, if they occur, will be unlike any war the United States and its allies have so far fought.

The prospect of this type of war has also not been at the center of US attention for most of the last 25 years as the nation was focused on other types of conflict. After the Soviet collapse, the US prioritized denying WMDs to smaller states that posed a threat, such as Iraq, Iran, or North Korea. After 9/11, US strategy focused on counterterrorism to the detriment of fighting near-peer adversaries. Only in 2014, the United States began to recognize the new problem posed by the changing strategic intentions and new ways of war which its adversaries had developed; namely China and Russia.

DoD leadership has focused in on the new problem and is well-engaged in addressing the new challenges. This includes adapting plans, operations, and force design/development. The 2018 National Defense Strategy is a threat-based document. It sees the threat of a conventional fight conducted by nuclear-armed adversaries as the most pressing threat to the US and its allies. The implementation of the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review is also underway. It considers how best to integrate conventional deterrence and defense with nuclear deterrence. The Joint Staff continues to pursue an idea of global integration to coordinate planning and activities of different regional combatant commands to address transregional problems that previously were seen as geographically localized. New commands were created such as CYBERCOM to both directly address pressing problems and allow greater concentration in other commands.

Despite all progress made so far, the harsh criticism by the National Defense Strategy Commission remains valid—and rightly so. As per the judgment of the Commission, the US remains dangerously unprepared for a regional war with great powers such as Russia and China and could lose such a war if it were fought today. This is the logical consequence, the Commission argues, of deteriorating regional conventional balances and a lack of thinking about “what deterrence means in practice, how escalation dynamics might play out...and how to defeat major-power adversaries should deterrence fail.” The Commission thus highlighted a number of “key unmet operational challenges”—among them deterring and defeating the use of nuclear or other strategic weapons in ways that fall short of justifying a large-scale nuclear response.

Put differently, there appears to be no Blue theory of victory. Attempts to create one – centered on the goal of prevailing in conventional war while preventing escalation to a higher level – led to a result which is incoherent and full of gaps. The Services, Combatant Commands, Joint Staff,

and the defense analytic community seem to be more comfortable exploring the requirements of deterring than winning. There has been little consideration of what to do if a war goes nuclear, including of possible war-termination scenarios. Many in these communities continue to believe that adversaries “wouldn’t dare” to cross the nuclear threshold for fear of being “turned into a glass parking lot.” That said, military planners have had to develop operational plans and alternative courses of action that offer some promise of achieving objectives set out in top-level guidance—a project that must involve thinking about means and ends. Instead of working within domains, more needs to be done to work across them.

US allies feel pressured in this new environment and have developed ideas about the requirements of deterrence, assurance, and strategic stability. As part of this thinking, NATO has set out a comprehensive agenda for updating its “playbook for Russia.” Yet, to the extent there is a Green (allied) theory of victory, at its simplest the theory is that Blue has a viable theory first. US allies have placed bets that the US has answers to the strategic challenges they face. Recent developments in their political and economic relationships have generally intensified anxieties about those bets. US experts seem divided over whether to increase or discount the role of allies in Blue strategy; Allies can constrain how the US exercises its power just as much as they can enable it.

Panel 2: Russia’s Theory of Victory in Crisis and Regional War

- Having ‘gone to school’ on the American way of war, what did Russia learn?
- What new military thought has it generated to deal with the particular challenges of a regional war against a US-led coalition with significant escalation potential?
- Does it envision winning such a war, including one that crosses the nuclear threshold? How so? What would “winning” mean to Russia?

Russia has been focused for at least 25 years on the strategic problems brought upon it by the US “unipolar moment.” The Russian military has put its intellectual house in order by “going to school” on the American way of war and thinking through the challenges of “deterring and defeating a conventionally superior, nuclear-armed major power and its allies.” It then developed strategies for competing in “peacetime,” crisis, and all levels of war. It then set about assembling the right capabilities, which are now exercised for all to see.

The Russian theory of victory in war is based on the idea of punishment: threatening rivals with unacceptable damage, including nuclear use. Its success relies on escalation management through inflicting prescribed doses of damage that are calibrated “to sober but not enrage”—that is, to generate fear and restraint rather than anger and counter-escalation. The doses of damage are tailored to individual countries and to the particular conditions and phases of specific conflicts.

Long-range precision weapons are Russia’s primary tools for inflicting prescribed doses of damage. With its “try and see” approach, Russia is likely to first use conventional strikes. A single demonstrative nuclear detonation in an early phase of a regional war, followed by a return to conventional operations, cannot be precluded. At any stage of a conflict, nuclear weapons have

an important psychological effect. The specter of nuclear war can put political and social pressure on the leadership of an adversary forcing them to acquiesce in the conflict.

Moscow's theory of victory in war depends to a lesser extent on traditional defense by denial. This is due to Russia's historic experience and vast geography. Denial is also understood by them in preemptive terms: Russia will not sit idly allowing the United States to build-up in the theater of conflict. This could result in a prolonged war of attrition which Russia could lose. If the Russian strategy of dosed escalation does not convince the adversary to back down, Moscow is likely to switch to the theater-destruction of an adversary's forces and on actions that prevent reinforcement. This corresponds to Russia's emphasis on the importance of the initial period of war and the imperative of having the strategic initiative.

In Russia's theory of victory, the defeat of the aerospace adversary requires the preparation of the whole nation for war. Combat actions have not only military but also civilian components. As Russia has full spectrum approach to deterrence, it also has full spectrum approach to warfare. This means military force in a conflict is used in conjunction with political, diplomatic, economic, and other non-military means. Instruments, such as information confrontation and reflexive control are used to prepare the ground for success in a regional war before the conflict even begins.

A further significant feature of the Russian way of thinking about conflict is that regional war is conceptualized as a war against a coalition of states. This means that any conflict between NATO and Russia is unlikely to be confined to geographic sub-regions such as the Baltic Sea region but will encompass a front from Norway to Turkey. In such a conflict, all capabilities will be at play to end the conflict on favorable terms. In the context of nuclear escalation, however, Russia delineates between regional war - that may include single or grouped use of non-strategic nuclear weapons - and large-scale war/global nuclear war that also include the use of strategic systems.

Although Russia's ideas reflect a good deal of careful strategic thought, they also contain wishful thinking. Particularly dangerous is the notion that attacks can be used to "sober but not enrage" the United States—or any democracy. Such attacks might well induce the desired restraint on one hand, but they might unleash a reply far beyond what the attacker contemplated on the other. In Russia, there does not seem to be a lot of concern about provoking escalation and the costs of miscalculation. Herman Kahn once warned Soviet experts of the need to reckon with the fact that Americans tend to see the world in terms of good and evil and, once roused to action, are willing to use "extravagant force to expunge an evil enemy."

Decent theory of victory is important. Adhering to this theory once "punched in the face" during an ongoing conflict is different, however. It also remains unclear whether Russia has sufficient capabilities to implement its theory of victory, in particular conventional capabilities.

Panel 3: China's Theory of Victory in Crisis and Regional War

- Having 'gone to school' on the American way of war, what did China learn?
- What new military thought has it generated to deal with the particular challenges of a regional war against a US-led coalition with significant escalation potential?
- Does it envision winning such a war, including one that crosses the nuclear threshold? How so? What would "winning" mean to China?

The Chinese government and the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) view war as a science. They have been observing the American way of war since the 1990s and have studied this and other aspects of US strategy diligently. The lessons learned are reflected in their broad defense modernization plans, their deep thinking about escalation control, and their four potential theories of victory.

In order to inform their defense modernization plans, the PLA has made several observations of the United States. Some of what they have observed they seek to emulate; some they seek to counter. The PLA is seeking to emulate US capabilities in ISR, as well as the space and cyber domains. It has observed the distinct advantage the United States has with drawing global support and building or wielding political influence. This they seek to counter. It is paramount in their strategy going forward.

The PLA has also thought in a detailed and thoughtful manner about how to control escalation in a potential conflict. As such, there is a noted concern whether they would be able to control a crisis in the way they wish. Further adding to the ambiguity here is the fact that the majority of PLA writing on escalation concerns the nuclear domain. There is little consideration provided to the dynamics of a conventional conflict.

With consideration of PLA modernization, thinking, and present actions, four potential Chinese theories of victory can be identified. These are presented in decreasing level of preference: first, in line with the thinking of Sun Tzu, China would seek to win without fighting. Second, it would seek to keep the United States out of a regional war entirely. Third, it would seek to limit the ability of the United States to intervene. Fourth, and the least attractive theory, would be to "do the best you can," salvage a conflict it might be losing, and keep the exchange from crossing the nuclear threshold.

These four theories are underwritten by how the PLA would seek to win a war. In a crisis, they would try to win quickly and present the US with a *fait accompli*. Keeping the war geographically limited and finishing it before the US can mobilize its forces would serve China's interests. This could be achieved by threats to escalate the conflict to a higher level. They see higher intrinsic stakes in any conflict. This is both for party ideological reasons and the simple fact that they would be the "home team." The PLA views the United States as too risk averse, while it sees the PRC as having a stronger will, and a stronger willingness to tolerate costs. The Chinese would try to exploit this difference in any crisis scenario, or regional war.

How would China conduct this exploitation? They would seek to undermine, fracture, and dissolve US alliances in the region. This would be done through both military and political

means. This is the fundamental pretext to all of their potential theories of victory. The United States relies on these alliances for freedom of movement and action. If this freedom is removed, China could achieve an easy *fait accompli* without a shot being fired - their most desired potential theory of victory.

As such, the United States must seek to maintain and strengthen its alliances in the region. If this is not done, as the NDS Commission notes, the US “could lose.”

What is the role of nuclear weapons in Chinese strategy? China does not integrate its nuclear weapons with conventional forces in a way comparable to Russia. Chinese strategists have been thinking about it in their own distinct way. This is reflected in dual-capable Chinese systems and co-location of conventional and nuclear capabilities. In contrast to Russia, China is not thinking in terms of prescribed dosages of damage but more generally about taking advantage of asymmetries of stake in any conflict with the United States. Without the modernization of U.S. nuclear options, including the reintroduction of SLCMs, China may come to think that it can achieve not only conventional but also nuclear regional advantage vis-à-vis the United States. Even though, apart from a Taiwan scenario, the likelihood of Chinese regional nuclear first use seems unlikely, one must consider that any war could have its own dynamic. Similarly, while China does not seem prone to expanding a conflict to US territory – seeing US nuclear threats as not credible so long as the continental United States (CONUS) is vulnerable – strategic imperatives of any conflict with the United States may change such thinking.

Panel 4: Gray Zone Strategies to Gain Wartime Advantages

- How do Russia and China utilize confrontation in the Gray Zone to try to set some of the conditions for success in regional war?
- Do they see long-term competition in the Gray Zone as shifting the balance of power and influence to their advantage? Why? Why not?

There are multiple understandings of what Gray Zone (GZ) means. One useful definition is that GZ strategies are those of competition below the threshold of war, which take advantage of ambiguities in action and attribution, ambiguities in laws and international agreements, or because the impact of the activities may not justify a confrontational military response.

The increased confidence of leaders in Moscow and Beijing in their capability to stand up militarily to the US has led to their assertiveness in the GZ. Here they compete not for relative power advantage but for the future regional order. They are also laying foundations for success in war, if it becomes necessary, by shaping the operational, political, ideological, and normative environments within which their enemies would choose courses of action.

With regard to Russia, one of the main strategies used to compete in the GZ is information confrontation/warfare (IW). IW is part of traditional Russian military thinking. It is used in peacetime and all phases of conflict; thus, it is a permanent feature of confrontation with the West. It is also instrumental in efforts to prepare for a ground of victory in a regional war by achieving surprise, seizing the initiative, and gaining psychological and military advantages. The focus on IW originates from Moscow’s own perceived weakness, as expressed by President

Putin's 2006 statement that the response to the West would be asymmetric and Russia would use its "intellectual superiority".

Russia uses IW in two ways to set conditions for success. First, it uses IW to undermine the West's will and its readiness to defend itself. Moscow exploits existing vulnerabilities and political turmoil in the West, in order to undermine the cohesion of the Western policy and reinforce doubts as to the strength of Article 5 obligations. On top of opportunistically exploiting weaknesses, Russia seeks to undermine Western will to confront Russia's aggressive policies by playing on Western fears of escalation into a conflict, including nuclear war.

Second, Russia uses IW to shape the balance of power in a way that is favorable to Russia. This is not a short-term approach, but a long-term, planned one: Russia's military leaders are projecting how the balance of power should look in 20 years, and then working proactively to achieve this vision. An example is the way in which Russia creates and frames strategic narratives to desensitize the West to Russia's military investments. One of these narratives is that of Russia "being under siege," encircled by the U.S. and aggressive West. Other narratives include playing on fears in some Western countries of a new arms race and crisis instability, and turning arms control and non-proliferation efforts against the West (e.g. denials and obfuscations of the INF Treaty violation, the proposal of a moratorium on the INF deployments to preserve unilateral advantage, using the NPT to gradually undermine NATO nuclear sharing arrangements).

Like Russia, China utilizes confrontation in the GZ to try to set conditions for success in regional war. Relative to Russia, China relies more on economic tools, and, in general, operates at a lower intensity in the GZ. China's activities in the GZ encompass a wide variety: economic influence, economic coercion, information and political warfare tactics, cyber operations, paramilitary operations, displays of new military capabilities, and *salami slicing* (e.g., building of artificial islands in the South China Sea).

Erosion of a US-led alliance's cohesion is perhaps the most central way in which China's GZ activities could erode the balance of power and US ability to operate. Even though China still lacks magnetic "soft power" appeal and isn't able to "outpartner" the United States, China is doing substantial work to "unhinge" US partnerships, either by reducing the US credibility among its regional partners or by reducing the US certainty on the reliance of its partners, thus impacting on the US ability to prosecute key campaigns. Although such activities are not new, China now feels strong enough to employ GZ tactics that signal it realizes the balance of power has changed, forcing regional states to appreciate China's interests and grapple with the implications.

China is also setting conditions for success in regional war through non-kinetic activities in the cyber and maritime domains. The aim is to make power projection difficult for the United States. China also seeks to take advantage of perceived asymmetries of stake in any regional conflict with the US and seeks to erode the will of the populace to prosecute a conventional campaign, either via physical actions (e.g. holding the electrical grid at risk) or psychological (e.g. disinformation campaigns).

Are Russia and China's GZ operations paying off? Do they shift the balance of power and influence?

In the case of Russia, there are two main contrasting views among US-based experts: either it is a total victory or a failure. Those who see Russia's IW as successful point out that internal challenges to Western cohesion increased with intensification of Russia's information operations since 2014. Those who see Russia's IW as a total failure point out that the West is giving Russia too much credit. In their view, current challenges to cohesion are not new and are not caused by Russian actions. Indeed, awareness of Russia's GZ activities (or hybrid warfare in NATO's nomenclature) has increased significantly and led to countermeasures.

The truth may however be in the middle: Russia has achieved limited successes. There also can be a cumulative effect of continuous Russia's actions even though specific examples may appear trivial. Russia will keep on trying to take advantage of any and all opportunities to weaken the West with an expectation that sooner or later it will bear fruit.

China sees competition in the GZ as shifting the balance of power in its own favor. Yet that shift is not without backlash. For example, burdens from Belt and Road Initiative loans have become an electoral debate topic in some states and created negative perceptions of China among many populaces. Chinese GZ maritime activities are also hard to consolidate and expose China to prolonged tensions that they won't be able to resolve.

While the West is not indifferent to GZ actions from Russia and China, it struggles to find an adequate response because it tends to focus on particular means and particular messages coming from Russia and China, but misses the overall strategy behind them. Whether assertiveness in the Gray Zone might soon also translate into a direct military challenge to the United States or an ally is a matter of intense debate within the expert community. Some see a low risk, while others a high risk, given their perceptions of weak resolve from Washington to defend US allies.

Panel 5: A Blue Theory of Victory in Regional War under Red's Nuclear Shadow

- What concepts should guide US and allied actions?
- What can and should the US and its allies do to affect Red's deterrence calculus and confidence in managing escalation risks so that he refrains from horizontal and vertical escalation?
- What are the particular challenges of integrating conventional and nuclear deterrence?
- What would winning mean?

Adversaries of the United States have studied how the wars of the 1990s and 2000s were fought and adjusted their own strategies accordingly. They have engaged in broad modernization programs and, more recently, begun aggressive actions to counter US regional interests. These actions are likely to continue. This has changed the nature of regional wars, especially those potentially conducted against a revisionist adversary which possesses nuclear weapons. The goal of the United States should be to prevent any adversarial state from gaining hegemony over any

region of interest (in particular in the Asia-Pacific and European). Three actions will be critical in order to achieve this goal.

First and foremost, any new theory of victory for the United States must not be just “Blue,” but “Blue-Green.” The new challenges posed by Russia and China necessitate this linkage. Fundamental to both of their theories of victory is the ambition to fracture alliance structures, and the United States should respond accordingly. Any “Blue” victory where the territory of US allies is destroyed in the crossfire is not a true victory. Besides, the implementation of the NDS is increasingly dependent on allies as the United States alone does not possess the resources to meet all of its commitments and match these growing threats from Russia and China. Preserving and strengthening alliance structures would allow the United States to maintain regional balances of power favorable to its interests. As there is a strong interconnectedness between the European and Asian alliance systems, what the US does in one region has a direct effect on the other. Alliances operate through a significant function of credibility, therefore “Blue” needs to demonstrate the seriousness of its security commitments towards “Green.” The most fundamental political goal for the US is to keep allies on its side.

Second, there must be better consideration of how to integrate the Joint Force. US military resources are stretched. Facing two great power rivals has made this even more apparent. Considerable work has already been done in order to strengthen global integration and coordinate the operational plans of different regional combatant commanders, thus balancing the force. More thinking is needed across the whole spectrum of the US capabilities, including cyber and space, about secondary or tertiary effects of actions in these domains.

Third, more high-level thinking is needed on the nature of deterrence in the current environment, and also on how the United States develops its strategy and its theory of victory. When thinking about deterrence, the idea of “slaying the dragon and the egg” serves to provide context. This means dealing with both the problem and the root of it simultaneously. Improved consideration of adversary perceptions of US actions can allow for this to happen. Thinking about how to better develop strategy and a theory of victory must involve better integration of civilian and military thought. Military thought could be improved by “unleashing the majors” (i.e. allowing for more free thinking among the rising military generation). Achieving both would require a reform of how deterrence thinking is taught in civilian and professional military education.

Taking the above into consideration, what would a Blue-Green theory of victory look like? In a regional war under Red’s nuclear shadow, victory would be to deny Red’s ability to subordinate Green by demonstrating stake in the conflict and changing Red’s risk calculus. As Red’s goal is to fracture US alliance structures and keep us out of any conflict, achieving this is of the upmost importance. While Blue-Green should be careful of not pushing Red to nuclear force generation or nuclear use, Blue-Green should take into account that Red’s theory of victory depends on casting a nuclear shadow and thus they should not allow Red to use their fears of escalation against them. Pre-conflict strategic messaging is of paramount importance in this regard.

The Blue-Green theory of victory should be essentially denial-centric. The theory should neither be based on anything Red does nor on changing Red by turning it into a democracy, but instead

on what Blue does to strengthen its own position and its interconnectedness with Green. Furthermore, the origins of this theory are not military-operational objectives, but political-strategic goals.

Panel 6: And What if the War Remains Neither Conventional nor Regional?

- What are the particular challenges of terminating a war that has gone nuclear in a limited way and/or involves non-nuclear attacks on the US homeland?
- What would “winning” mean to both Red and Blue? To US allies? How might the desire to shape the post-war peace influence US and allied decisions about war termination?
- Are there particular new challenges of conventional/nuclear integration after initial nuclear use?

Some argue that in the nuclear context the only viable theory of victory is not to fight a nuclear war. But in a limited war, with limited use of nuclear weapons, it is essential to have such a theory, or at the bare minimum a theory of how to prevail. The only alternative is to have a theory of death. Even if such a theory is possible, we do not seem to be close to having one.

A Blue theory of victory in a regional war that does not remain conventional could be built on the following premises:

1. If Red crosses the nuclear threshold in theater in a limited way, that would be the result of a gross miscalculation, fueled by an assessment that they have an asymmetry of stake.
2. A proportionate US retaliatory strike should awaken Red to its miscalculation of Blue-Green resolve.
3. Red would choose a new course of action that would involve less cost and risk, and they would be sobered, not enraged.
4. The pathways towards further nuclear escalation by Red would be disincentivized by Blue’s capacity for nuclear retaliation.

However, with a theory of victory built off the above premises, many things could go wrong:

1. Red’s calculation of an asymmetry of stake could be correct. Blue could decide that the stake is not worth the costs and risks and leave the fight to Green.
2. Blue’s limited proportionate response could be expected by Red. There could be numerous targets, which if attacked, would offer political and strategic gains to Red.
3. Red might be enraged rather than sobered. Its leaders might see their regime at risk, thus becoming willing to vertically and horizontally escalate. At this point they might even look at any offers to end the conflict as an insult.
4. Blue’s crisis messaging could malfunction as a result of an abundance of weak leadership and a lack of resolve. Instead of responding quickly, Blue could deliberate a response for too long. Restraint might only reinforce Red’s perception of Blue’s lack of resolve.

What role would the territory of the United States play in a regional conflict that goes nuclear? The prevailing assumption among Blue experts is that Red would not conduct a nuclear strike on US territory for the fear that this would trigger a catastrophic US response. Instead, goes the argument, Red’s preference would be to strike CONUS with non-nuclear means. In such a scenario it can be assumed that:

1. A Red non-nuclear strike on CONUS would also follow the “sober but not enrage” principle—that is, it would not lead to mass casualties.
2. Small attacks aimed at disrupting US power projection capacity cannot be deterred by the threat of retaliation. They, however, can be deterred by denial.
3. The limited use of nuclear weapons by the US in retaliation to a Red nuclear first-use would not necessarily trigger further nuclear escalation by Red. Instead, it would more likely lead to a limited but lethal non-nuclear strike on the US homeland.

Still, these three assumptions might prove to be wrong:

1. Red might be confounded with the perceived asymmetry of stakes, and see significant non-nuclear attacks on the US homeland as an acceptable risk.
2. Deterrence by denial could fail.
3. Once Red is attacked by nuclear weapons, even in retaliation to its nuclear first use, all options might be on the table for Red.

The way to terminate a war after limited nuclear use and a non-nuclear attack on the US homeland will depend on context. Termination would depend on number of variables, including the remaining capabilities of Red and Blue; whether Red has achieved its conventional objectives or not; and considerations of US credibility. Real and perceived asymmetries of stake, which are not fixed and are likely to change after any nuclear use, would also impact war termination options. In a war that goes nuclear or spills over onto the US homeland, there will be debate amongst senior officials about the impact of their decisions: How will history judge their decisions? Will other countries perceive that the US failed at its responsibility as the most powerful country in the world and brought the world to this point, regardless of what Red did?

The next logical question would be, what would winning mean or look like? The answer is complex and there appears to have been little strategic thought as to the political requirements for peace, especially among military planners. For the aggressor, victory might mean seizing and holding some gain, or, as a lesser but still desirable result, permanently dividing the US from its allies as part of a “frozen conflict.” For the victim of aggression, it would mean recovery of some lost prize. However, if Blue victory would be at great cost and without significant cost to the aggressor, it would not look like “winning” to a damaged, fearful, and angry populace. Limited war seems destined to produce limited results for both sides. Also, the outcome to a war that leaves major questions unsettled would not seem like a victory for either side. An outcome that shows nuclear weapons are useful for aggression and/or that the US is an unreliable guarantor in the face of nuclear threats, would be deeply damaging to the “peace” that could follow.

What could the challenges of conventional/nuclear integration after initial nuclear use be? The first challenge is how to conduct conventional operations in a nuclear environment and under threat of further nuclear-use. This would be a new situation that will change the way war is carried out. Effective coordination of conventional and nuclear operations during the conflict, including the allocation of resources to different regional combatant commanders, would be further demanding. Equally problematic would be understanding Red’s motivation for nuclear use. In circumstances in which Red perceives itself as having no choice but to further engage in nuclear-use, a Blue conventional-only response would not alter Red’s nuclear-use calculus and may even incentivize Red to further use.

Discussions about nuclear-use in a conflict focus on what would happen if Red goes nuclear. However, could the US be the one to cross the threshold first? Should no-first-use be part of a declared policy? There are limited circumstances where the US would be the first to employ nuclear weapons in a conflict. That does not mean there are no such scenarios, however. Thus, it is important to maintain calculated ambiguity so that adversaries cannot automatically discard such an option. Making it clear a nuclear response is possible, however small the chance, alters an adversary's risk calculus, and therefore its theory of victory.

Panel 7: Defining the Particular Requirements of Deterrence in the 2nd Theater

- What risk is being accepted in current strategy?
- What is being done to reduce that risk? What more can US allies do to help compensate for the weakened conventional deterrent of the United States?
- What concepts should guide the practice of extended deterrence in this context?

American force-planning constructs define the number and type of missions that US forces should be able to accomplish simultaneously, including wars in geographically distant theatres. During the Cold War, the US had a 2.5 war strategy in the 1960s, a 1.5 war strategy in the 1970s, and a force construct for a global war with the Soviet Union in the 1980s. After the Cold War, the United States changed its focus from preparing for war with major powers to regional powers such as North Korea and Iran. The Clinton administration's Bottom-up Review had a win-hold-win construct for two overlapping contingencies involving rogue states. In the Bush-era, force seizing constructs envisioned a swift defeat of regional adversaries in two overlapping military campaigns while preserving the option to win decisively one of those campaigns by a regime change. In the Obama era, the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance (DSG) scaled back the ambitions with the "defeat/deny" force-planning construct – defeating aggression in one region while denying the objectives of, or imposing unacceptable costs on the opportunistic aggressor, in the second region.

The 2018 NDS changes force planning in two ways: first, breaking with the assumptions of past decades, it returns to the practice of planning for demanding operational and strategic challenges from nuclear-armed major powers. Strategic competitors such as Russia and China have become the pacing threats. Regional powers such as North Korea and Iran are only lesser cases, even "distractions", that can be defeated with the same set of capabilities as great powers. Second, the NDS envisages that in wartime, the fully mobilized Joint Force will be capable of defeating aggression by a major power, while deterring opportunistic aggression elsewhere. Thus, the NDS adopts what is functionally a one-war force sizing construct. The US is not sizing and designing its forces to simultaneously defeat two great powers in different regions.

The assessment of the NDS Commission notes that a one-war force sizing construct is likely to create severe strategic and operational vulnerabilities for the United States. This is at a time when preparing for opportunistic aggression makes more strategic sense than at any previous point in the post-Cold War era. In the Commission's view: "In the event of large-scale conflict with Russia or China, the United States may not have sufficient remaining resources to deter

other adversaries in one—let alone two—other theaters by denying them the ability to accomplish their objectives...” Thus, the move from a two-war to a one-war force planning construct magnifies the challenges of deterrence for the US and its allies. A region could be vulnerable to aggression or intimidation if US forces are fully committed to war in another. This puts a new burden on the ability to extend deterrence into regions and to rapidly bolster the deterrence posture in crisis scenarios. It also increases the value of allied contributions to regional deterrence architectures (and US dependence on them).

While certain risks seem apparent, more thinking about the implications of a one-war-construct is required. First, it remains unclear what “defeat” means in the era of great power strategic competition.

Second, the requirements for deterrence in a 2nd theater depend on who one plans to deter. This could be one great power while fighting another; one regional power while fighting a major power; or one major power while fighting a regional power. The choices are, however, not binary. Today, the US and its allies are challenged by China, Russia, the DPRK, and Iran, and are addressing instability in the Middle East.

Third, what should not be overlooked is that the ability to deter in one theater seems closely linked to success or defeat in the other. In other words, if you cannot defeat, how can you deter? A loss in one theater alters the balance of power in the other; a loss to regional power can undermine deterrence vis a vis a major power; and a loss to a major power can negatively impact the ability to fight regional challengers.

Fourth, given the inherent credibility problem, greater reliance on nuclear weapons to deter aggression in the 2nd theater does not seem to solve the problem. However, might deterrence of opportunistic aggression depend solely on the threat of conventional rollback (as in the first Gulf War scenario) and/or punishment?

If a war between major powers becomes more transregional in character, the traditional distinction between theaters and the homeland will become opaque. The 2nd theater problem may then become irrelevant. Transregional thinking is already reflected in the US approach, including the push for greater global integration. It, however, remains unclear whether and how such thinking will be adopted by US allies with a regional focus.

Panel 8: On Out-Partnering and Out-Thinking US Adversaries on this Topic

- What can and should be done to accelerate concept development and military thought for this problem?
- What can be done to improve the utility of wargaming and other analytical techniques for these purposes?
- How can substantive collaboration among the United States and its allies be strengthened?

In order to accelerate concept development and military thought Blue stakeholders must do better at understanding Red’s strategy, strengths, and vulnerabilities. Without thinking more

about what Red does, Blue cannot move forward and innovate. The atrophy of thinking power in the last 3 decades has been thorough and resulted in a lack of analytical depth and sophistication when it comes to knowledge of Red.

The US must come to terms with new Red-Blue-Green triangles in the strategic landscape. While Russia and China are thinking about cross border peripheral war, the US is likely to miss these developments. The US can learn more from its allies who have studied these problems for years. The US needs to get better at listening to its allies and understanding their analytical communities and respect what they do.

Innovation comes from problem solving, so beforehand it is necessary for Blue/Green to answer the question of what problem must be solved. Without such an answer, innovation is useless. Innovation can also come from embarrassment, as Russia learnt in Chechnya and Georgia. Embarrassing failures give a sense of urgency to problem solving.

In war-gaming and exercises, failures are also useful as they generate a sense of urgency to innovate. However, it is difficult if organizational culture never allows for failure. For example, many war games at NATO are not run to the point of failure. The reluctance to fail, only leads to complacency and wishful-thinking that if the worst happens, NATO will always succeed by default its own power, on paper. NATO needs “Kobayashi Maru” exercises (a Star Trek reference to an exercise that cannot be won) to re-teach the Alliance the value of exercise failures.

To out-think potential adversaries, more competitive impulse is required. The US, with its allies, must develop the mentality of “winning and defeating”. They need to become capable of thinking the unthinkable, including limited nuclear war. Persistence and resilience must be built into the military ethos: not only to fight the first day, but the next and the following in a continuously contested environment. Changing the mindset in this regard will not be easy. For example, while in war-gaming NATO never fails, in the case of concept development it never wins. Developing concepts to defeat adversaries not politically permissible within the Alliance – it has no official adversaries.

Innovation is also about improving the ability to operate across domains with C2 integrated for this purpose. Integrating new domains in order to combine effects (e.g. kinetic effects with cyber/space/information operations) requires staff and troops able to operate in such an environment. This is more easily said than done. More needs to be done to integrate new, potentially disruptive technologies as adversaries are ahead in this area. This is the result of bureaucratic, legal, and moral restraints present in the US/NATO, but not in China or Russia.

When it comes to out-partnering, more needs to be done to strengthen collaboration between NATO and other partners in Europe such as Sweden and Finland. NATO could also better interact with partners in the Indo-Pacific, including Australia and Japan. This is especially needed given the trans-regional nature of many challenges the US and its allies face.



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