MULTIPOLARITY AND U.S. NUCLEAR STRATEGY

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Multipolarity and U.S. Nuclear Strategy

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Key Questions:

• What are the main features of the emerging multipolar security environment?
• What new problems does multipolarity present for deterrence, assurance, and strategic stability?
• Do these factors compel a fundamental re-making of U.S. nuclear strategy and posture, or something less?

Panel Topics:

1. Getting the China Factor Right
2. Re-Thinking the Russia Factor
4. Thinking Through the Two-Peer Problem: Allied Perspectives
5. Thinking Through the Two-Peer Problem: U.S. Perspectives
6. (Re)-Setting the Nuclear Hedge
7. Calibrating Tripolar Arms Race Risks
8. Closing roundtable discussion: Lessons Learned and Implications

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Panel 1: Getting the China Factor Right

- How has China prepared for modern strategic conflict, nuclear and otherwise?
- What are its metrics for a “lean and effective” nuclear deterrent? Does it seek to be a nuclear peer to the US?
- What implications follow for U.S. nuclear strategy (broadly, not just nuclear deterrence)?


The recent discovery of over 200 new intercontinental ballistic missile silos raises new questions about Beijing’s nuclear capabilities and intentions. Some argue that the silos indicate a significant change in Beijing’s nuclear posture, setting the stage for a more hawkish U.S. approach to China. Others believe that China is reinforcing the credibility of its established assured-retaliatory capability, meaning there is more room for engagement with Beijing on managing the nuclear competition. Cameron argues that such analytical divisions run the risk of fueling partisan polarization on U.S. policy toward Beijing. To mitigate this, analysts should be transparent regarding the gaps in their knowledge on China’s nuclear posture, the types of evidence that would make them revise their assessments, and the first-order assumptions that underpin their views.


The authors argue China is skeptical of the possibility of controlling escalation after the nuclear threshold has been crossed, yet China is relatively confident in the possibility of controlling escalation in a conventional conflict. The authors also find that this directly contrasts with U.S. perceptions, which they describe as more pessimistic than the Chinese views below the nuclear threshold but less pessimistic above the nuclear threshold. In the words of the authors, this difference in views could create pressure for a U.S.-China conflict to escalate rapidly into an unlimited nuclear war. Chinese thinking is unlikely to shift on these core questions, unless important changes happen. The authors list factors that could lead to a revision of these views, such as an increase in the PLA Rocket Force’s influence on nuclear strategy.


This report outlines current thinking in the Chinese People’s Liberation Army regarding system-of-systems and systems warfare, as well as current methods of warfighting. The key findings include: 1) Systems confrontation is recognized by the PLA to be the mode of warfare in the 21st century, as the PLA perceives militarized conflict to be a contest between opposing operational systems. 2) System destruction warfare constitutes the
PLA’s theory of victory. And 3) the PLA sees system-of-systems as the foundation by which to achieve integrated joint operations and “win informationized local wars.” This implies that system-of-systems thinking pervades virtually every aspect of the PLA's approach to training, organizing, and equipping for modern warfare, and systems thinking appears to be a guiding logic behind recent organizational changes.


China’s nuclear buildup led U.S. government officials to conclude that China is no longer a “lesser case” of the nuclear threat posed by Russia. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, the United States, once again, faces a potential nuclear peer with uncertain ambitions. Radzinsky argues that the available evidence of China’s nuclear expansion is consistent with both continuity and change in Chinese nuclear thought, complicating U.S. efforts to assess the continued adequacy of its own forces. This ambiguity also complicates efforts to reengage China in nuclear dialogue. As a result, the Biden administration should think through the implications of multiple futures for the U.S.-Chinese nuclear relationship. In this regard, two scenarios are worth examining: continuity in the Sino-American nuclear relationship, and significant deterioration.


In his testimony, Roberts focused on how U.S. nuclear policy and posture might have to adapt to the accelerating growth of China’s nuclear arsenal. He argued that in terms of diplomacy, repeating standard U.S. calls for Chinese transparency and restraint will do little to advance meaningful diplomacy. China is likely to be an obstruction to the Biden administration’s effort to further reduce the role of U.S. nuclear weapons. As a factor in U.S. deterrence planning, China is changing as it becomes more capable, and it puts new demands on U.S. deterrence strategy. The U.S. has long maintained a “second to none” approach to sizing its nuclear force. The Biden administration will have to think through whether and how “second to none” fits a world in which both Russia and China are growing their nuclear forces and deepening their strategic cooperation.


Trachtenberg argues that the construction of new missile silos is a blatant Chinese move to flex its military muscle, close the gap with U.S. nuclear forces, and signal a more aggressive nuclear posture by abandoning its oft-stated support for a “minimum deterrence” nuclear force. China’s massive expansion of its nuclear forces provides the backdrop for Beijing’s more assertive conventional force posture in the South China Sea, around Taiwan, and elsewhere. Such assertiveness gives China’s leaders greater

In the past, China’s strategic forces have played a relatively muted role in the country’s security policy, particularly relative to the United States and the Soviet Union/Russia. But China’s rise is likely to bring important changes to strategic nuclear affairs since Beijing now commands a much more capable set of forces and is starting to probe new areas of strategic thinking. Fundamentally, China's nuclear policy serves its broader security policy objectives: first and foremost, to eventually reunify Taiwan into the People’s Republic of China. Changes in Chinese thinking on the role and posture of their nuclear forces are likely to evolve. Such changes will both exacerbate emerging Sino-U.S. security dilemmas and greatly complicate the strategic environment in East Asia. China is facing strategic imperatives and internal politics that will almost certainly impel a further evolution in China’s approach.

Panel 2: Re-Thinking the Russia Factor

- What factors are likely to guide the further development of Russian nuclear strategy and forces in the decade ahead?
- What are Russia’s metrics for nuclear sufficiency?
- Does U.S. nuclear strategy properly account for these factors? If not, what should change?


Johnson argues that the 2020 Russian ‘State Policy on Nuclear Deterrence’ does not reveal anything new on how Russia uses nuclear weapons for deterrence, or how it would use them for escalation control and operational effect in crises and military conflicts. The author emphasizes that this document provides a selective and distorted picture for external messaging purposes. The best indicators of Russian nuclear policy and strategy are the nuclear capabilities that are financed and fielded. Russia’s array of theater-range, dual-capable delivery systems fielded in the last decade undercuts recent Russian assertions of a posture centred on strategic nuclear forces in a strictly retaliatory or launch-on-warning posture. Instead, those systems support flexible options, including limited use of nuclear weapons in escalating regional conflicts.

Bruusgard argues that understanding how nuclear capabilities and strategy interact with conventional capabilities is fundamental to understanding Russian nuclear strategy. Her paper shows how post-Cold War Russian nuclear strategy decisions have been affected by perceived conventional vulnerabilities. Conventional inferiority can produce increased reliance on nuclear threats, but Russia seeks to improve conventional capabilities to overcome this dependency, and its preferred escalation management option is not, by default, nuclear weapons. The broad range of non-strategic nuclear capabilities indicates that Russian leaders believe such weapons could influence the course of conflict or help terminate it, but this does not reflect an interest in using nuclear weapons as a coercive tool to hold an adversary hostage to Russian revisionist goals.


Moscow views the future as an emerging multipolar world order, against a backdrop of rapid technological change where the United States seeks to maintain global preeminence by, inter alia, constraining Russia. Looking ahead to 2030, nuclear deterrence is likely to remain central to Russia’s assessment of the strategic balance. But leaders in Moscow are also signaling a new emphasis on the development of asymmetric responses to future threats by investing in military-technological innovation. Moscow does not anticipate any improvements in U.S.-Russian relations. In fact, it postures for a further deterioration. According to Fink, a persistent trend over the 2020s will be Russia’s development of a suite of capabilities broadly aimed at disorganizing an opponent’s C4ISR, particularly in the critical initial period of war.


Kroenig focuses on how the United States and its NATO allies can deter Russian nuclear de-escalatory strikes. First, The United States must demonstrate that its stake in a conflict is at least as great as Russia’s. Second, NATO must also communicate that it is sufficiently resolved to engage in a competition in risk taking with Russia through limited nuclear use to defend its interests in Europe. Third, NATO must enhance its capabilities to make these threats credible by strengthening its conventional military force posture in Eastern Europe, deploying a limited regional missile defense in Europe, and increasing the flexibility of its nuclear forces to deter limited nuclear strikes. Altogether, in order to successfully deter Russia, NATO must make it clear that any nuclear strike will not lead to de-escalation but will only result in unacceptable costs for Russia.

The article looks at the changes in Russian military posture since the release of the 2014 military doctrine. Massicot speculates that a new military doctrine is unlikely to change Russia’s declared nuclear policy (i.e., “launch on attack” policy) but could lay out a “strategy of limited action” to include the limited use of nuclear weapons to achieve well-scoped objectives. The doctrine will likely emphasize the role of non-military methods in the achievement of political and strategic objectives. Massicot concludes that the United States and its allies should closely follow changes in Russian military doctrine, because even small modifications in its language and structure reflect shifts in Russian threat perceptions and provide indicators of Moscow’s future activities.

Panel 3: Keeping an Eye on the Evolving “Rogue State” Threat

- How is the DPRK nuclear force likely to further develop over the decade ahead?
- What new challenges will a more robust DPRK nuclear force pose to extended deterrence and assurance?
- Would U.S. nuclear strategy have to further evolve if Iran crosses the nuclear threshold?


In his book chapter, Giles investigates implications for U.S. extended deterrence commitments in the Middle East after Iran crosses the nuclear threshold. Past Iranian behavior and religious extremism, especially within Iranian security organizations, both indicate that extended deterrence will be more challenging. The U.S. would face several decisions in the face of a nuclear Iran: 1) The U.S. will need to further commit to the defense of allies in the Middle East; 2) The U.S. will need to specify if acquiring a bomb indeed requires destruction of the Iranian regime; 3) The U.S. will face additional Iranian missile threats on forward-deployed U.S. forces; 4) The U.S. will need to address more destabilizing Iranian behavior in the gray zone; and 5) There will be potentially reoccurring crises with Iran.


The authors argue that South Korea’s conventional military capabilities actually strengthen stability by reducing North Korea’s expectations regarding the utility of its
nuclear weapons. Chief among these stabilizing conventional capabilities in South Korea are: the Korea Air and Missile Defense system, the “Kill Chain” system, and the Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation system. Looking ahead, North Korea will most likely apply gray-zone tactics and challenge U.S. extended deterrence commitments to South Korea. If Seoul and Washington work together to reinforce South Korea’s conventional posture, South Korea’s credible conventional threat would raise the expected costs of North Korea’s nuclear provocations and reduce the possibility of using nuclear weapons as a means to achieve its political or military goals.


Manzo and Warden explore options for restoring extended deterrence in light of nuclear use. They claim that in addition to U.S. objectives, this goal depends on the motivation, purpose and consequence of the nuclear attack. They examine two scenarios of potential use for both North Korea and Russia. The North Korean cases explored instances where 1) a nuclear weapon was detonated as a “peaceful nuclear test” after seizing South Korean territory in a fait accompli; or 2) North Korea launches a nuclear attack on U.S. allies after a conventional military action near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). In these and other cases, the United States has many options to respond to nuclear use, such as diplomacy or conventional military action. Nuclear weapons, however, could be most useful for re-establishing deterrence; limiting further damage; and protecting allies if conventional means are insufficient.


North Korean nuclear forces are now, or will soon be of, sufficient scale to present a credible threat to the existence of South Korea and Japan. As a response, the author recommends dual-track efforts through re-accelerating and re-integrating efforts to improve the deterrence architecture, while also adjusting diplomatic strategies. Specifically, the United States, South Korea, and Japan should collaborate by discussing ways to diversify the strategic deterrence toolkit and ways to further understand how Pyongyang plans to leverage the threat of nuclear use to achieve strategic victories. The author also recommends the U.S. nuclear umbrella be modified to enable improved signaling of collective resolve. Lastly, a more NATO-like approach could serve both the U.S.-South Korea and U.S.-Japan alliances, but such an arrangement would entail changes in the organization and practice of consultations.

This article provides a commentary on the weak, trialteral relationship between the United States, South Korea, and Japan and argues that strengthening this relationship should be a pillar of, not a supplement to, U.S. strategy toward North Korea. As North Korea’s nuclear arsenal continues to significantly increase, Shane and Glosserman pose the overarching argument that a weakened regional alliance is prone to North Korean nuclear attacks. In response, the Biden administration should focus on helping Japan and South Korea amend historically troubled relations, by making it clear that an effective defense relies on the two countries working together through: 1) an early trilateral summit; 2) a trilateral deterrence policy dialogue; 3) a nuclear consultation mechanism; 4) enhanced trilateral planning for conventional operations; 5) strengthened allied contributions to U.S. deterrence operations; and 6) anticipating a China factor.

Panel 4: Thinking Through the Two-Peer Problem: Allied Perspectives

- Which scenarios are most concerning?
- What new burdens do adversary strategies place on extended deterrence?
- To what extent can U.S. allies do more for deterrence beyond trying to ensure a favorable balance of conventional forces?


Addressing present and future challenges to NATO’s collective security, Kulesa organizes the argument around three dimensions of deterrence: who, what, and how. The “who” section recognizes that Russia is not the sole threat facing NATO; thus the Alliance needs to develop a tailored strategy to meet its needs. The “what” refers to the need to specify concrete actions that can be taken to enhance deterrence. He highlights cyberattacks as a point of ambiguity that needs to be more rigorously addressed in NATO’s deterrence framework. The “how” section offers various recommendations, emphasizing that NATO does not need to mirror the activities of its adversaries to deter effectively.


Today, the main military purpose of NATO is to deter and defend against renewed aggression by a revisionist Russia. Although Russia has shown no sign of abandoning its revisionist agenda, managing the Russia threat may not constitute NATO’s main purpose in the future. Given the technological and commercial aspects of China’s rise as well as its ideological, strategic and military dimensions, it will affect a broader range of issues than the Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union did. As the consequences for U.S. and European interests could be very different, and sometimes even opposing, it will be no mean feat to keep U.S. and European decisions relating to China in close enough
coordination to prevent a collapse of the transatlantic defence relationship. Today’s NATO, with its quasi-exclusive focus on the Russian threat, is not equipped to deal with that task. But it could develop the necessary tools.


As China continues its rapid rise to power, the East Asian region can expect to see instability remain a fact of life for some time to come. As a result, Japan cannot avoid a discussion on the topic of deterrence. As Japan prepares for possible crisis scenarios, there are two types of offensive strike capability it needs to consider. The first is antiship cruise missiles. The second type of strike capability to consider is ballistic missiles or hypersonic glide vehicles that can for a time neutralize some of China’s airbases located in its coastal areas. Japanese defense is something achieved via deterrence representing the total assets of both Japan and the United States. As U.S.-Japanese defense linkages deepen at the early operational planning stages, it will lead to a reduced burden on U.S. forces, and this will also keep China from miscalculating the possibility of decoupling Japan and the United States.


In this report, its authors articulate needed course corrections on the incipient Biden strategy in the Pacific. The Biden administration should look to gain advantage as opposed to reinstating the status quo, compete for influence in regional institutions, and focus on near-term goals in addition to the long-term competition. This should be accomplished by: not forcing allies in the Pacific to choose based on ideology, for example, not framing as “a struggle between democracy and autocracy”; developing a trade agenda in addition to the existing infrastructure investments; and supplying the necessary technology, including military technology, for allies in the region. These approaches are necessary to maintain a policy of deterrence by denial for China.


The author examines how recent developments in the Chinese conventional and nuclear arsenal could affect strategic stability in the Pacific. Chief among the problems is China’s precision strike conventional weapons. Chinese precision strike conventional weapons could degrade U.S. bases in the Pacific and interfere with U.S. ability to aid allies. The U.S. lacks options for degrading Chinese bases for a similar, significant period of time, because of their proximity to resources on mainland China. Furthermore, China is
expanding its number of MIRVed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), which could hold increasing numbers of U.S. ICBMs at risk. This author is in favor of the United States deploying tactical nuclear weapons in the Pacific theatre to deter the Chinese from attacking U.S. bases, because nuclear weapons pose a larger destructive threat to Chinese bases.

**Panel 5: Thinking Through the Two-Peer Problem: U.S. Perspectives**

- Which scenarios are most concerning?
- What are U.S. options for managing the associated risks?
- How should allied interests inform U.S. choice?


In this article, Brands and Montgomery criticize the 2018 National Defense Strategy’s (NDS) shift to a strategy of fighting one war against a great power instead of preparing for two wars against lesser adversaries. While there are clear strategic, resource, bureaucratic, and historical reasons for focusing on fighting one war instead of two, the 2018 NDS did not appropriately address the risks of such a strategy, especially in the face of U.S. commitments to its allies. The authors argue that the 2018 NDS strategy has many risks: 1) greater reliance on U.S. allies in Asia and the Persian Gulf to confront military threats without the same degree of American assistance; 2) greater reliance on nuclear weapons to deter opportunistic aggression; and 3) lacking capacity for mobilizing against two wars. These risks could lead to a less assertive U.S. force posture against great and lesser powers alike.


The author asserts that defending U.S. allies against a fait accompli by a nuclear-armed great power adversary is the most challenging and existential threat facing the United States. Examples of fait accompli include: 1) Russia seizing land in the Baltics and Poland; or 2) China seizing Taiwan in the Pacific. The United States should use its conventional forces on U.S. and allied territories to make any escalation there seem unnecessarily risky or aggressive to repel fait accompli. Furthermore, the U.S. nuclear deterrent should be used to prevent more escalatory moves. To avoid the risk of nuclear war, the U.S. nuclear strategy should be protracted and not directed against a second strike capability.

Geist argues that U.S. strategy and planning must consider defeat in order to prepare for alternative conflicts and operational concepts. The United States may not prevail in high-level conflicts with near-peer adversaries, even in the absence of mistakes. The author attributes this problem to the U.S. tendency to measure how its forces might win, not lose, through narrow operational terms. This leads to the undermining of both the deterrence of potential aggression and allies’ confidence in U.S. security assurances, while increasing risks of defeat due to self-induced overconfidence or unrealistic expectations. With respect to prevailing in near-peer conflicts, the national security establishment may need to contemplate non-ideal scenarios if it seeks to minimize the chances of defeat.


The author discusses the historical context and recent shift in U.S. force planning construct in the 2018 NDS from a two-war to one-war strategy. Notably, this shift is one from where the U.S. assumed enough dominance over multiple lesser adversaries in a regional conflict that is simply not present in the current competition with great powers. The strategy relies on four points: 1) prioritize a war against a great power rival above other military missions; 2) use conventional forces to defeat aggression from great powers; 3) further secure the U.S. homeland, which may not be safe from conflict in future wars; and 4) increase hedging on the uncertainty around a war with a great power.


This speech emphasizes the salience of broadening the definition of integrated deterrence to extend beyond nuclear and include cyber, information operations, allies, and missile defense. In this context, the term “strategic breakout,” was coined as a reference to China’s rapid improvement in strategic nuclear, missile defense, and hypersonic weapons capabilities. Similarly, Russia is also expanding its influence by undermining U.S. relationships and increasing its nuclear and hypersonic capabilities. In addition to these threats, the United States must also address the cyber resiliency of its nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3). “For the first time, the nation is facing two potential strategic peer, nuclear-capable adversaries at the same time, who must be deterred differently.” To combat this, the United States needs to rebuild intellectual capacity to address the strategic environment and operational deterrence theory.

In a war against a great power, the United States may face attacks on its homeland. Nuclear weapons deter against existential attack on the U.S. homeland, either from nuclear or large-scale conventional forces, but a gap exists for conventional strikes below the nuclear threshold. For example, an adversary may choose to target military infrastructure within the homeland with long-range conventional strike capabilities. These limited conventional strikes could be seen as a way out of the nuclear stalemate and a way to use brinkmanship to produce coercive leverage. Two cases where an adversary might consider this approach include either a military stalemate in a regional conflict or to avoid a protracted war. Further understanding of nuclear thresholds is needed, as these are not uniform across great powers.

Panel 6: (Re)-Setting the Nuclear Hedge

- Is the nuclear hedge well tailored for the existing and projected security environment?
- If, in response to China’s build up, steps are taken to deploy some reserve warheads from the hedge, what should be done to re-set the hedge? Should the U.S. simply replenish the reserve with additional life-extended weapons or do something different?
- What are the next potential developments in the security environment that might warrant future changes to deployed and/or hedge forces?


This article underlines the importance of keeping the modernization of the U.S. nuclear arsenal on track while simultaneously maintaining an effective deterrent against emerging threats. Strengthening the resilience of the arsenal against both kinetic and non-kinetic threats will require Congress, USSTRATCOM, and NNSA to both improve the existing arsenal as well as expand capabilities to counter emerging cruise and hypersonic missile threats from near-peer competitors. Harvey argues that instead of preparing for the step-by-step escalation pattern that defined the Cold War, the most important aspects of hedging are strengthening command and control and delivery systems to withstand cyber attacks, and possessing the means to respond to strategic surprise, which requires a robust and responsive nuclear R&D and industrial base.


This article explores the additional burdens on the complex that would follow a geopolitical or technical surprise. Hingorani argues that hedge strategies as so far practiced in the past have not yet adequately addressed the risk of strategic surprise. As the United States extends the life of its nuclear stockpile and recapitalizes the scientific
and production infrastructure, it must build resilience into its tools, processes, and people to hedge against an uncertain future. For the stockpile, and hardware systems, attributes like diversification, interoperability, and modularity contribute to resilience. For institutions, greater resilience can be achieved with vibrant research portfolios and changes to standard processes. Strengthening personal resilience requires cognitive diversity on leadership teams and a conducive environment where scientists and engineers have the freedom of thought and action to pursue advanced concepts.

**Panel 7: Calibrating Tripolar Arms Race Risks**

- What action-reaction cycles are evident today? How tightly coupled are they?
- Might they become more tightly coupled in the future? How? Why? Or why not?
- How might it be possible to reduce unwanted risks?


Brooks discusses three facets that are important for the development of U.S. strategic posture: nuclear foundation, non-nuclear elements, and U.S. strategic posture in comparative terms. Regarding the nuclear front, the United States will most likely be “fit for purpose” in its strategic posture but must be more cautious since threats such as the developments in adversary capabilities are present. The U.S. non-nuclear elements remain promising if the United States continues to diversify its toolkit to include supplemental capabilities while strengthening integration. Lastly, between Russia, China and the United States, it is unlikely that any of these countries will be able to shift the net balance of power and influence soundly in their own favor. Nonetheless, there is still significant disagreement of how U.S. leaders in 2030 will assess the strategic balance.


In light of the Biden administration’s ongoing Nuclear Posture Review, the article revisits the three conditions developed under which the Obama administration considered reducing the role of nuclear weapons. These conditions included: 1) changes in the threat environment; 2) improvements in regional missile defenses; and 3) improvements in long-range conventional weapons. Despite these conditions, other nuclear states, such as China, Russia, or North Korea, have continued to modernize and increase their nuclear capabilities. Therefore, the author concludes that the decision to increase nuclear arsenals by U.S. adversaries is not affected by U.S. nuclear policy.

The author disputes the argument that action-reaction cycles drive nuclear force buildup, specifically in the case of adversary responses to U.S. decisions to expand its nuclear arsenal. First, adversaries lack the capability to respond to American nuclear buildups. Second, enemy nuclear expansion is often driven by other factors and not solely American nuclear posture. Furthermore, international politics has shown that winning arms races is necessary, and, in the case of the United States, a useful way to achieve strategic advantage over enemies.


While the action-reaction narrative for arms race dynamics between the U.S. and its nuclear rivals has existed during the Cold War and continues to be used today, the authors find little support for this in either the historical account or the current nuclear force realities. The authors identify and disprove ten instances of the action-reaction narrative in U.S. arms control history and offer a set of facts counter to that explanation. In their view, U.S. adversaries have focused their nuclear force development efforts into fielding capabilities that increase U.S. vulnerabilities, despite U.S. effort to limit its nuclear weapons.

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