

On Theories of Victory, Red and Blue

BRAD ROBERTS

Livermore Papers on Global Security No. 7

Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory

Center for Global Security Research

June 2020

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- # 1 Lewis Dunn *Redefining the U.S. Agenda for Nuclear Disarmament* (2016)
- # 2 Yukio Satoh *U.S. Extended Deterrence and Japan's Security* (2017)
- # 3 Dave Johnson *Russia's Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities, Regional Crises, and Nuclear Thresholds* (2018)
- # 4 John K. Warden *Limited Nuclear War: The 21st Century Challenge for the United States* (2018)
- # 5 Michael Nacht
Sarah Laderman
Julie Beeston *Strategic Competition in China-US Relations* (2018)
- # 6 Newell L. Highsmith *On the Legality of Nuclear Deterrence* (2019)

Table of Contents

About the Author	iv
Preface	v
Introduction	1
Defining the New Strategic Problem	7
Defining a Theory of Victory	26
The Red Theory of Victory	42
Toward a Blue Theory of Victory	59
Red and Blue and the Gray Zone	82
Conclusions	91
Next Steps	95

About the Author

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From 1995 to 2009, he was a member of the research staff at the Institute for Defense Analyses in Alexandria, Virginia. From 1983 to 1995, he was a research fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, where he also served as editor of the *Washington Quarterly* from 1986 to 1995. He holds a B.A. from Stanford University, an M.Sc. from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and a Ph.D. from Erasmus University, Rotterdam.

Preface

The Center for Global Security Research (CGSR) created the Livermore Paper series in 2017 to inform and encourage new strategic thought about emerging challenges of deterrence, assurance, and strategic stability, and about strategies to reduce nuclear and other strategic dangers. The series is a response to the widespread perception that the United States has passed through a period of “strategic atrophy,” in which strategic issues were neglected while attention shifted to other urgent problems, such as counter-insurgency. Those issues include the renewal of major power rivalry, the emergence of new regional challengers and challenges, the need to think in an integrated way about the means and ends of deterrence, long-term cooperative strategies to reduce nuclear and other significant dangers, and long-term competitive strategies. By strategic thought, CGSR is referring to thought that is exploratory, systematic, and long-term and that aims to develop new insights into the means and ends of national security and international stability.

Strategic atrophy and neglect are nowhere more evident than in the under-development of new strategic thought about the kinds of conflicts brought to the United States by a security environment defined by major power rivalry and the revisionist agendas of America’s major power rivals. The focus of U.S. defense policymakers began to shift onto these problems with the disappointing returns on the 2009 “re-set” with Russia and the 2011 “pivot to Asia,” intensified with Secretary of Defense Ash Carter’s call for “a new playbook” on Russia in 2014, and was consolidated with the Trump administration’s *National Security Strategy* of 2017.* But the shift of focus has been slow to generate a shift in thinking. As the 2018 report of the bipartisan National Defense Strategy Commission makes clear, the United States has done very little of the needed thinking about the new strategic circumstance. The result is a dangerous over-reliance on strategies of conflict

* Citations for these and other items referenced in this preface will appear later in the body of the essay.

that are likely to prove unsuccessful and costly in various ways.

This small volume is intended to serve as a catalyst to new strategic thought on this problem. It draws on five years of effort at CGSR to understand Russian and Chinese strategic thought, their approaches to conflict with the United States and its allies, and the requirements of integrated strategic deterrence. It also builds on some arguments I first made in my 2015 book, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century* and constructive feedback from readers.

I am grateful to all who have sparred with me on these topics over the last few years. I am grateful also for the research support of many able assistants over the years as we have plied these waters. I am especially grateful to readers of earlier drafts of this essay, who offered many constructive reactions: Ivanka Barzashka, Lewis Dunn, Dave Johnson, and Tom Mahnken.

The views expressed here are my personal views and should not be attributed to Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, its sponsors, or any other institution with which I have been affiliated.

Introduction

In its November 2018 report, the National Defense Strategy Commission rang an alarm bell—loudly:

The country’s margin for strategic error has become distressingly small. Doubts about America’s ability to deter and, if necessary, defeat opponents and honor its global commitments have proliferated. Previous congressionally mandated reports . . . warned that this crisis was coming. The crisis has now arrived . . . a crisis of American power. . . . Should war occur, America will face harder fights and greater losses than at any time in decades. Americans could face a decisive military defeat. . . . Put bluntly, the U.S. military could lose.¹

What accounts for this crisis of American power? In the judgment of the commission, it has been at least three decades in the making. The commission points to many factors: important competing demands in Afghanistan and Iraq, a prolonged budget crisis, unexpected changes in the security environment, and a lack of top-level political focus on the potential for war with Russia or China. But their analysis of the National Defense Strategy (NDS) points in another direction as well, as the following citations from their report attest.²

Although the NDS states that deterring adversaries is a key objective, there was little consensus among DOD leaders with whom we interacted on what deterrence means in practice, how escalation dynamics might play out, and what it will cost to deter effectively.

1 National Defense Strategy Commission, *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission* (November 2018), p1-2. The commission is cochaired by Eric Edelman and Gary Roughhead, respectively former undersecretary of defense for policy and former chief of naval operations.

2 All citations from *ibid.*

Deterring and, if necessary, defeating Russia's potential reliance on nuclear escalation to end a conflict on its own terms is both a particularly difficult and an extremely important operational problem. . .DOD leaders had difficulty articulating how the military would defeat major-power adversaries should deterrence fail.

Potential adversaries are increasingly blurring lines between conventional, unconventional, and nuclear approaches; the United States needs concepts that account for an adversary's early reliance on nuclear means and the blending of nuclear, space, cyber, conventional, and unconventional means in its warfighting doctrine. Due to the increased complexity of evolving domains such as cyber and space, the challenges of dealing with multiple rivals, and the reliance of countries such as Russia on highly escalatory approaches, which may include use or threatened use of nuclear weapons, the requirements for deterrence are significantly different today than during the Cold War or the early post-Cold War era. . . .The commission recommends. . .a serious study of escalation dynamics.

"How" is as important as "how much" in setting U.S. defense strategy. . .developing innovative operational approaches that can overcome difficult operational challenges. . .is an imperative. . .detailed, rigorous operational concepts for solving these problems and defending U.S. interests are badly needed, but do not appear to exist.

The United States must develop new operational concepts to achieve strategic advantage, including by addressing the ability of aggressive regimes to achieve a fait accompli against states on their periphery, or to use nuclear or other strategic weapons in ways that would fall short of justifying a large-scale U.S. nuclear response.

The Department does not appear to have a plan for succeeding in Gray Zone competitions. . .the NDS asserts

that DOD will “expand the competitive space” but offers little evidence of how it will do so.

The absence of well-crafted analytical products supporting the Department’s force sizing and shaping plans was equally notable. . . . This deficit in analytical capability, expertise, and processes must be addressed.

The gaps here are not in capabilities. They’re in concepts. The crisis of American power flows from the fact that our intellectual house is not in order. In the judgment of this commission, U.S. strategic thought about the main military problems in the new security environment is not fit for purpose.

Inside the Washington beltway, commissions come and go frequently. Their impact on public policy is typically short-lived as stakeholders move on and new issues emerge. But this report deserves a bigger impact and warrants a significant response. The NDS Commission speaks with some authority on this topic. A bipartisan group of former senior officials, military leaders, and defense policy experts, it was chartered 25 years ago by the U.S. Congress to provide an independent evaluation of the Pentagon’s strategy to the president, secretary of defense, and Congress.

Lest anyone think that the criticism emanates from only one cranky commission, consider the judgment of General Joseph Dunford, who as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 2016 declared that “we’re already behind in adapting to the changed character of war today in so many ways.”³ Or consider the views of the director of military sciences at the Royal United Services Institute in London, Peter Roberts, who wrote in 2017 that “potential adversaries. . . have reconceptualized warfare and reimagined conflict without the boundaries the Western mind imposes upon it. . . . A belief in Western conceptual or intellectual superiority remains deeply entrenched in the Western orthodoxy; such hubris has distinct dangers.”⁴

The strategic atrophy evident in the United States over the last three decades is not evident in Russia or China. On the contrary, their development of new strategic thought has been robust, sustained, and

3 Remarks at the National Defense University Graduation Ceremony, Ft. McNair, Washington D.C. (June 10, 2016).

4 Peter Roberts, “Designing Conceptual Failure in Warfare,” *RUSI Journal* 162, no. 1 (2017), p14, 23.

distressing. Russian and Chinese planners have done their intellectual homework. They have “reconceptualized warfare and reimagined conflict” (to re-cite Peter Roberts) with the United States in ways we have been slow to grasp. They studied the American way of war in Kuwait, Iraq, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, among others. They closely followed periodic U.S. reviews of defense policy, strategy, and capabilities for what they signaled about U.S. military ambitions and the future American way of war. They then revised their own military strategies, developed new concepts of operations, realigned military organizational structures, developed and tested new doctrine, and designed, acquired, and fielded new capabilities aligned with those concepts and doctrine. Then, they mustered the political will and sustained focus to overcome significant bureaucratic, technical, and financial obstacles.

Their intellectual homework has focused on a realm most American military experts consider ours to dominate—the realm of escalatory action beyond the engagements of general-purpose military forces. But where we perceive strength, experts in Russia and China perceive opportunity. This mismatch is at the core of the NDS Commission’s concern. U.S. adversaries have created and put together ideas about how to prevail in those conflicts by shaping the decisions of their adversaries in a manner conducive to their national objectives by imposing cost and risk through escalation and the threat of more to come.

As I argued in my 2015 book on U.S. nuclear policy, these ideas combine into something we can usefully label as a theory of victory.⁵ A standard dictionary definition of *victory* is “overcoming an enemy or antagonist.” A standard dictionary definition of *theory* would thus be “a plausible principle or set of principles offered to explain a phenomenon.” Thus, a theory of victory can be defined as a plausible set of principles for overcoming an enemy. As a shorthand, I adopted from the wargaming community the labels Red and Blue to characterize the opposing teams and concepts.

In 2015, I also reviewed the then-existing approach of U.S. and allied experts about how to defend their interests if challenged militarily by a nuclear-armed adversary—the so-called Blue theory of victory. But I then described the rather piecemeal and incomplete character of that

5 Brad Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

theory. The NDS commission findings suggest that there has been little meaningful progress in the intervening period in putting our intellectual house in order on this problem.

The United States and its allies need a more coherent and robust set of ideas of their own—that is, they need a Blue theory of victory. Such a theory is necessary for multiple reasons. Without such a theory, the United States and its allies, though armed with many powerful tools, military and otherwise, have no coherent set of ideas about how to marshal them to achieve policy objectives. They “could lose,” in the words of the NDS. Or they could win—but in a manner that only sows the seeds of resentment and further conflict. Without the needed strategies and capabilities, the United States and its allies would likely be compelled to either concede important interests or escalate in a manner that in retrospect might be deemed excessive, heavy-handed, and unnecessarily injurious. America’s reputation would be at stake: wimp, bully, or steward of collective interests.⁶

The failure to develop a robust Blue theory of victory could have other negative implications. One is the danger that leaders in Moscow and Beijing will precipitate military crises in what they might perceive to a moment of advantage and opportunity. The case can be made that they wouldn’t dare—that the risks of war against the United States must be unacceptably high and obviously so to leaders in Moscow and Beijing. The case can also be made that the leaders in those capitals are not men who would leave to their successors the work of definitively remaking the regional and global orders. Putin and Xi (and Kim) are bold men who have played weak hands well. A critical variable must be whether they assess that they are making sufficient progress in unraveling the orders they oppose with Gray Zone means.

Another danger is that U.S. allies will choose independence over continued dependence on the United States as a guarantor of their security. Doubts about U.S. credibility are an enduring feature of alliances but they have spiked in recent years. Both Right and Left in America talk today about the supposed burdens allies impose on the United States. Allies seeking strategic autonomy from neighboring major powers face sharper than ever choices about how to secure that autonomy

⁶ For more on the reputational dilemmas associated with escalation and war termination in contemporary conflict, see Brad Roberts, “How Wars Must End,” in Victor Utgoff, ed., *The Coming Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

and/or how much deference to show to those neighbors. If they give up on the vision of victory the United States still claims to defend, there will be little to no purpose in U.S. efforts to put its intellectual house in order for this particular problem of modern strategic conflict.

Against this backdrop, this monograph is intended to serve a number of purposes:

- to help restore and sustain focus on the conceptual gaps identified by the 2018 National Defense Strategy Commission Report
- to deepen understanding of the nature of major power conflict
- to illuminate what's at stake
- to help advance thinking about the needed developments in U.S. strategic thought, with particular focus on a Blue theory of victory
- to encourage further analysis

Toward these ends, it proceeds as follows. It begins with a simple question: What is the new problem? More precisely, what is the nature of the conflict for which a Blue theory of victory is needed? The answer follows from an assessment of the perceptions, policies, and strategies of key decisionmakers in Moscow and Beijing. The essay then turns to two further short questions: What is a theory of victory? And why do we need one? The answers follow from an exploration of the distinctions between a strategy of conflict and a theory of victory connecting means to ends. Next, I elaborate the so-called Red theory of victory. This analysis develops first a generic theory and then explores the particular variants developed by Russia in the European context and China in the Northeast Asian context. The monograph then elaborates a Blue theory of victory. To do so, it addresses first the imperatives flowing from the Red theory of victory and then explores regional variants. Next, I turn to the Gray Zone, defined here as that part of the spectrum of conflict not involving armed hostilities. This analysis considers both Red and Blue. The essay closes with a review of conclusions and a discussion of next steps in developing the needed strategic thought.

Defining the New Strategic Problem

What is the problem for which a solution is needed? More precisely, what is the nature of the conflict for which a Blue theory of victory is needed?

In the Cold War, the source of conflict and its likely character were quite clear. The source was an ideological and geopolitical contest between two main blocs. The character was determined by the division of Europe and the military standoff there, shaped by Soviet preservation of huge standing armies after World War II and then the integration by both sides of thousands of nuclear weapons to support combat operations. Its strategic aspects were directly and uniquely equated with the nuclear dimension of conflict and the potential for escalation to Armageddon-like global nuclear war. Of course, these factors were not quite clear at the start of the Cold War; they became clear over time, with experience and analysis.

To understand the new problem, it is necessary to begin at the beginning—with changes in the international system since the Cold War.

Beyond Bipolarity and Unipolarity

From a system-level perspective, the ideological and geopolitical bipolar competition of the past has given way to something much murkier. Bipolarity gave way first to unipolarity, in the sense that the United States was the world's dominant military, economic, and political actor through the first decade or two after the Cold War. The challenges of the unipolar moment came into focus for Russia, China, and North Korea in the 1990s. The Persian Gulf War of 1990–91 was a wake-up call for any leader fearful of the exercise of American military power, for the stunning defeat handed a large ground force and for the manner in which it was done, with many signs that the United States was mastering the so-called revolution in military affairs (RMA) to strategic benefit. For Russian military planners, the Kosovo War late in the decade reinforced the sense of urgency, as U.S. bombers and NATO forces prevailed against a former Soviet ally without putting boots on the ground.⁷ For Chinese

7 Eugene Rumer, *The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action* (Washington, DC: Carnegie

military planners, the 1995 Taiwan Strait missile crisis was the catalyst, as the United States dispatched two aircraft carriers in a signal of its willingness and ability to go to war over Taiwan.⁸

“Today we are witnessing an almost uncontained hyper use of force—military force—in international relations, force that is plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts. . . .the United States has overstepped its borders in nearly every way.”

—President Putin, Munich, 2007

Political leaders in both Russia and China generally came to share the assessments of military leaders of the potential for war with America as they experienced frustration with various developments in U.S. foreign and defense policy. For Putin, the shift came with the failure of the George W. Bush administration to deliver on some expected quid pro quos after his 9/11 show of support to the United States (for example, no further expansion of NATO). For China’s Communist Party, the shift came in 1999 with the U.S. bombing of China’s embassy in Belgrade during the Kosovo War, which it saw as intended to signal a rising China not to contest American supremacy. For North Korean leaders, a key factor was the designation of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) as member of the “the axis of evil” and thus its clear arrival on the Bush administration’s list of potential targets for preventive war.⁹

Unipolarity is now giving way to multipolarity, indicated by the reassertion by Moscow of Russian power and influence, China’s rise, the slow emergence of other power centers globally and regionally, American strategic retreat from the Middle East, and—under President Trump—retreat from many of its traditional roles. Some Russian leaders and experts prefer the term “polycentric” to “multipolar” to

Endowment for International Peace, 2019); Keir Giles *et al.*, *The Russian Challenge* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2014); and Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations Since the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

8 Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China’s Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), p202–225.

9 Jonathan D. Pollack, *No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons, and International Security* (London: Routledge for International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011). For a more detailed discussion of the changing worldviews of leaders in these capitals, see the relevant chapters in Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

capture the more complex character of power relations in the 21st century relative to the 19th (when the term multipolar was coined) and the different influences exerted by states, non-state actors like the European Union, powerful states lacking significant militaries, and weak states made strong by nuclear weapons alone (North Korea).¹⁰

In this new environment, leaders in Moscow and Beijing stand out as both resentful and revisionist.¹¹ They are aggrieved by the dominant position and influence of the United States and by the perceived slights it has done to their interests. They fear an American effort to gain Absolute Security—that is, the freedom from attack and the freedom to attack—and thereby to escape the so-called nuclear revolution in world politics whereby the long nuclear shadow makes war among nuclear-armed states inconceivable. They see U.S. power as a source of danger because of the persistence of U.S. alliances on their peripheries. And they fear American aspirations to bring political change to them through popular uprisings (so-called color revolutions).

These sentiments are well reflected in the evolution of Russian foreign policy. In 2008, Prime Minister Medvedev argued that Atlanticism “has already had its day.”¹² In 2009 he presented a draft European Security Treaty aimed in part at limiting the North Atlantic Treaty’s commitment to collective defense. Later that year he issued a National Security Strategy that described “the inadequacy of the current global and regional architecture, oriented (particularly in the Euro-Atlantic region) towards NATO, and likewise the imperfect nature of legal instruments and mechanisms, create an ever-increasing threat to international security.” In 2013 the official Russian foreign policy concept described a remaking of world order as Russia’s first priority. In 2015 the official Russian foreign policy concept deemed NATO a major threat.

President Putin’s own statements turned sharply anti-Western in his second term. In 2007, he argued at the Munich Security Conference that “we have reached that decisive moment when we must seriously think about the architecture of global security”¹³ with sharp

10 Andrey Kortunov, *Between Polycentrism and Bipolarity* (Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council, 2019).

11 See also Angela Stent, *Putin’s World: Russia Against the West and With the Rest* (New York: Twelve, 2019).

12 Remarks to German Political, Parliamentary, and Civic Leaders, Berlin (June 5, 2008).

13 Remarks by President Putin to the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy (February 12, 2007).

attacks on a European security order he saw as designed to contain Russia (see boxed text). He also foreshadowed strong action to remake that order. For example, in his 2012 annual address to the Federal Assembly, he argued as follows: “I would like all of us to understand clearly that the coming years will be decisive and perhaps even groundbreaking, not only for us but for the entire world as it enters a period of transition and possibly even shocks.”

“The policy of containment was not invented yesterday. It has been carried out against our country for many years, always, for decades if not centuries. In short, whenever someone thinks Russia has become too strong or independent, these tools are quickly put to use.”

—President Putin, 2014 annual address
to the Federal Assembly

“Our Western partners, led by the United States, prefer not to be guided by international law in their practical policies but by the rule of the gun. . . . They have lied to us many times. . . . The infamous policy of containment, led in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, continues today. They are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner If you compress the spring all the way to its limit, it will snap back hard.”

—President Putin, remarks to the Duma, March 18, 2014

In March 2014, he made clear his commitment to “snap back hard” against a European security order he deemed dangerous and unacceptable.¹⁴ Echoing these sentiments, later in 2014 Evgeny Lukyanov, deputy secretary of Russia’s Security Council, argued that “we need to sit down [with the United States] and renegotiate the entire post-Cold War settlement.”¹⁵ In 2015 President Putin argued further:

As we analyze today’s situation, we should not forget history’s lessons. First of all, changes in the world order—

¹⁴ Remarks to the Duma announcing the annexation of Crimea (March 18, 2014).

¹⁵ Cited in Y. Weber, “Why the U.S. Does Nothing in Ukraine,” *Washington Post* (March 18, 2015).

and what we are seeing today are events on this scale—have usually been accompanied by, if not global war and conflict, then by chains of intensive local-level conflicts.¹⁶

By 2015, the European Union had concluded that Russia has “challenged the European security order at its core.”¹⁷

“It is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia, and uphold the security of Asia.”

—President Xi Jinping, *New Asian Security Concept*, 2014

As these various citations attest, the leaders of Russia and China are revisionist in their orientation both to regional orders and to the global order. They see the latter as constructed and maintained in service of U.S. hegemony. They prefer instead a global order based on sovereignty and spheres of influence for a few major powers and limited sovereignty for the rest. As they perceive them, their conflicts with the United States and its allies over these questions are essentially zero-sum in nature. They don’t seek to join, accommodate, or revise existing regional orders; they seek to break them and replace them with an alternative of their making. They don’t seek to strengthen the existing world order; they seek to replace it with “new norms.” President Putin speaks of “new rules or no rules.” China’s Defense White Paper of 2015 makes reference to “growing strategic interests” and to “the continuous expansion of China’s national interests” (the latter primarily in reference to the maritime environment).¹⁸

“New rules or no rules.” —*Putin Valdai Club banner*, 2014

While they fear American strength and ambition, these leaders also appear to perceive weakness in its democratic ways. Given Russian interference in domestic political processes in both the United States and Europe, it is easy to draw the conclusion that they see opportunities to

16 Remarks to the Valdai International Discussion Club (October 24, 2015).

17 *Shared Vision, Common Action*, European Union (June 2016), p33.

18 People’s Republic of China, *White Paper on National Defense*, Beijing (2015).

strengthen their positions in the open and divided political processes of the West and in a war-weary and war-averse U.S. public.

In line with these worldviews, Russia and China have put the focus of their military planning squarely on the United States. In one way or another, their military expert communities have written about the problem of deterring and defeating a conventionally-superior nuclear-armed major power and its allies. They have apparently tackled this problem with a sense of keen urgency.

“Russia and China note with alarm the extremely dangerous actions of individual states. . .to destroy the existing architecture. . . .In the pursuit of strategic advantage in the military sphere, with the intention to ensure ‘absolute security,’ and in order to gain unlimited opportunities for military-political pressure on opponents of such states, mechanisms for stability are unceremoniously destroyed.”

—*Putin-Xi 2019 joint statement*

Leaders in Pyongyang and Tehran are also resentful and revisionist.¹⁹ Kim Jong Un has placed a huge bet on nuclear deterrence to safeguard his regime against America’s “hostile ways” and to advance his revisionist agenda involving reunification of the peninsula, the demise of the “rump state” imposed on the peninsula by an outside power (the United States), and the ejection of that power. Iranian leadership ambitions in the Middle East are a source of instability and broad international concern. But Iran has not emerged in quite the same way as North Korea in the U.S. security environment because of its tempered pursuit of nuclear weapons and its caution in testing missiles capable of reaching the United States. Of course, Iran could suddenly emerge as a major preoccupation and threat.

The Reluctant U.S. Re-Focus

The United States has been reluctant to embrace the vision of major

19 “Kim Jong Un’s 2018 New Year’s Address,” posted online by the National Committee of North Korea; Shane Smith, “North Korea’s Strategic Culture and its Evolving Nuclear Strategy,” in J.L. Johnson, *et al.* (eds.), *Crossing Nuclear Thresholds* (Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), p227–250; and Michael Eisenstadt, *The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Marine Corps University, 2011).

power rivalry that has shaped thinking in Russia and China since at least the 1990s. In fact, the U.S. response to these new factors in the security environment was on a fairly steady course for about 25 years. This course had the following main features: The United States sustained its Cold War alliances and transformed them into instruments for regional stability, democracy, and economic liberalism. It sought cooperation with neighboring powers and major power concert in managing new threats to international peace (largely those emanating from Iraq, Iran, and North Korea). It significantly drew down its military footprint in Europe (while it built up the footprints in Iraq and Afghanistan). In its strategic military relations with Russia and China, it sought to make strategic stability rather than deterrence the foundation.

Through the Clinton, Bush, and for much of the first term of the Obama administrations, U.S. leaders were cautiously optimistic about the trajectory of political developments with Russia and China. Few believed there to be plausible pathways to war with Russia in the foreseeable future; with China, the plausible pathway to war over Taiwan also looked extremely unlikely in the near to medium term. The United States hedged against an uncertain future, while seeking to strengthen cooperation on shared interest to reduce the risks of downturns in these strategic relationships.

In addition, U.S. deterrence strategy and posture were tailored to a new and different problem—the problem posed by rogue states armed with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and long-range missiles. The United States developed a homeland missile defense tailored to negate any coercive advantage such states might seek. It sought (but did not field) improved non-nuclear long-range strike capabilities to bolster the threat of preemptive strike on rogue state WMD/missile assets. It did this understanding that leaders in Russia and China might see it as necessary to adjust their postures to maintain the credibility of their nuclear deterrents in their eyes—and adopted an essentially *laissez-faire* attitude toward those changes. U.S. deployments of missile defenses of the American homeland were limited to the number necessary to defend against rogue state threats and non-nuclear strategic strike capabilities were pursued as a “niche” capability. Together with its allies, the United States worked to adapt and strengthen regional deterrence architectures in Europe and East Asia to new regional challenges, while trying to protect strategic stability with Russia and China.

But this U.S. approach began to shift during the Obama administration. In its first term, it had to come to terms with the disappointing results of the attempt to “re-set” political relations with Russia and with the rising military challenge posed by China, leading to the 2011 decision to “rebalance to Asia” (also known as the “pivot to Asia”). Obama’s second term brought Russia’s forced annexation of Crimea and President Putin’s stated commitment to “snap back hard” against the European security order. Pathways to conflict with both Russia and China, which looked remote and implausible in 2009, began to generate high-level concern. U.S. anxieties were reinforced by deepening cooperation between Russia and China in opposition to the United States and to the U.S.-backed Eurasian security order. U.S. policymakers became increasingly uncomfortable with the laissez-faire approach to developments in Russian and Chinese strategic forces, given their diversification of their strategic nuclear forces, commitments to seek to dominate the United States in cyber space and outer space, and well-advanced preparations for regional wars with the United States.

“NATO needs a new playbook for Russia.”

—*Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, 2015*²⁰

In short, among U.S. policymakers, hope gave way to deeper caution. Major power rivalry was accepted, albeit belatedly, as a central factor in the new strategic environment. This shift in thinking began in the Obama period but was fully consolidated early in the Trump era. The sense that a major shift was underway was accentuated by the election of a president who is resentful and revisionist in his own way. The new administration’s review of national security strategy (NSS) conveyed the recognition of major power rivalry and embraced major departures from traditional U.S. leadership roles, including a commitment to strategic dominance. In contrast, the administration’s review of national defense strategy (NDS) conveyed a great deal of continuity with the traditions of U.S. defense and foreign policy. From the perspective of U.S. deterrence strategy, the central question about U.S. strategy today is about the credibility of the U.S. promise to defend its allies. The NDS states a strong commitment, but President Trump has

20 From remarks on Russia and NATO to the Atlantic Council, Washington, DC (August 24, 2015).

made many statements casting doubt on the relevance of alliances and his willingness to defend those allies who have not lived up to his expectations. Although the evidence strongly suggests that the American public does not support these aspects of the President's policies,²¹ his re-election, if it occurs, would likely take the nation further down the NSS path. After all, essentially all of the authors of the NDS departed the administration before the end of its term.

Military Planning in Russia and China

Although military planners in Washington essentially stopped worrying about Russia and China when the Cold War ended, military planners in Moscow and Beijing never stopped worrying about the United States. The speed with which the United States and its coalition partners dismantled the Iraqi military, along with U.S. effectiveness in assembling and leading a diverse international coalition, rang alarm bells loudly in both capitals. The rising interest in American mastery of the so-called revolution in military affairs was accentuated by the Kosovo War and NATO's success in compelling political outcomes without putting boots on the ground. The dispatch of two carrier battle groups to the Taiwan Strait in 1995 and the subsequent bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade provided additional motivation for Chinese military planners, as they seemed to signal to Beijing that the United States was willing and ready for war with China.

"If this [NATO expansion] happens, the need would arise for a fundamental reappraisal of all defense concepts on our side." —*Russian FSB head Yevgeny Primakov, 1993*²²

"The (forces of) Yugoslavia were always in the position of having to take a beating passively and completely lacked the power to fight back. . . whatever the enemy fears most, that is what we should develop."
—*Vice Chair of China's Central Military Commission, 1999*²³

21 Chicago Council on Global Affairs, *Rejecting Retreat: Americans Support US Engagement in Global Affairs* (2019).

22 Cited in Steven Erlanger, "Russia Warns NATO on Expanding East," *New York Times* (November 26, 1993).

23 Cited in Timothy Heath and Andrew Erickson, "Is China Pursuing Counter-Intervention?"

But the 1990s were a difficult time for these countries economically and politically, and neither had the resources for near-term military solutions to unipolarity. The Russian economy was in collapse and the Chinese boom was just starting. So rather than throw money, technology, or force structure at the problem, they threw people. Each country invested in the human capital and institutional infrastructure to develop the needed military and strategic thought for the new era.²⁴

What did they do? U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work explained in 2016:

While the United States and our closest allies fought two lengthy wars over the past 13 years, the rest of the world and our potential adversaries were seeing how we operated. They looked at our advantages. . . they looked for our weaknesses. And then they set about devising ways to counter our technological over-match.²⁵

Apparently, they explored in a wide-ranging way the potential pathways to conflict with the United States and its allies, the American way of war (especially its strengths and weaknesses), U.S. plans and ambitions to realize the full potential of advanced conventional warfare (and of the new domains), and the structure and character of regional/local wars. Having “gone to school” on the American way of war, what did they learn? We cannot know with certainty, though there are some useful indicators.²⁶ We can readily see what they might have learned.

- The conventional superiority of the U.S. military is available to it only in a long war or in a war with a long lead up. It is, in any case, eroding.

Washington Quarterly 38, no. 3 (2015).

24 James Mulvenon and David Finkelstein, eds., *China's Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs: Emerging Trends in the Operational Art of the Chinese People's Liberation Army* (Alexandria, VA: CNA Corporation, 2005).

25 Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work, “The Third U.S. Offset Strategy and Its Implications for Partners and Allies,” Washington, DC (January 28, 2015).

26 This characterization summary draws on Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century*. See also Timothy L. Thomas, *Russian Military Strategy: Impacting 21st Century Reform and Geopolitics* (Ft. Leavenworth, TX: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2015) and Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: PLA, 2015).

- To prevail in conventional conflict, the United States must project military power over great distances and operate to and from bases, ports, and airfields that are vulnerable to attack and disruption.
- To project power, the United States is heavily dependent on allies—operationally and politically. It can act alone but may choose not to do so.
- The United States has the ambition to seize and hold dominant positions in cyber space and outer space and thus to reap the full benefits of the revolution in military affairs. But in these domains, it is also vulnerable.
- It also has the ambition to fully draw on its strong private sector capability for innovation to exploit new technologies, such as hypersonics and artificial intelligence, for potential strategic benefits.
- Its strategic nuclear force remains credible and effective but the forces associated with extended deterrence were radically drawn down as the Cold War ended. What remains has been aging out.
- The American public is wary of war, deeply casualty averse, and wants quick, decisive, and bloodless victories. It pressures its political class accordingly.

Having studied the American way of war, military experts in Russia and China then developed new strategies and operational concepts along with new weapon concepts aligned with both. Then a few years later, having put their intellectual houses in order, they began the necessary reform of institutions and processes. These changes were set in motion in 1993 by national military strategy updates by both countries, which shifted the focus onto regional wars on their peripheries against a high-tech adversary. Since then, Russia has issued major updates to its military strategy in 2000, 2010, and 2014, while China has emphasized annual defense white papers. And presumably in a bid to impress outside experts with their progress—that is, as a form of deterrence signaling—they made much of this new thinking available to outsiders, whether in professional publications (Russia) or teaching materials (China).

“International strategic competition and contradictions are intensifying, global challenges are becoming prominent, and security threats are becoming increasingly integrated, complex, and volatile.”

—*China Defense White Paper, 2010*

To be sure, the military problem presented to China and Russia by the United States was not, and is not, the only problem they face. China is also concerned with unsettled border disputes with India and maritime power projection. Russia is also concerned with the problem of local wars (e.g., Chechnya) and power projection beyond its immediate periphery (e.g., into the Middle East). Oscar Jonsson cautions against attributing to Russia a monolithic view of modern war. Writing in 2019, he argued that:

There is no such thing as a single understanding of war, either in Russia or elsewhere. It is an aggregate of different views that can be more or less conforming. Nonetheless, analyzing the understands of war in these. . .different areas allows for the approximation of an understanding of war and how it has developed.²⁷

Key Parameters of the New Strategic Problem

The perceptions, policies, and strategies of key decision-makers in Moscow and Beijing have brought into being a new strategic problem for the United States—that is, a problem requiring a comprehensive and long-term political-military response, informed by a theory of victory. This new problem has the following main parameters.

From the Russian and Chinese perspectives, the conflict in which they are now engaged is ongoing and enduring. In the current period, and perhaps on an enduring basis as a matter of strategic culture, they do not share the tidy American distinction between war and peace. Leaders in Moscow and Beijing perceive themselves to be at war with the United States already—a war being fought today with soft power means, on a hard power foundation. Moscow and Beijing

²⁷ Oscar Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines Between War and Peace* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019), p17.

compete in circumstances short of war to shift the balance of power and influence and to assemble the capabilities and create the conditions for fulfillment of their leadership ambitions. They utilize military means in operations short of war to stake and defend new geopolitical claims and to slowly erode regional orders and U.S. credibility.

“Today it is obvious that the line between peace and war is blurring.”

—General Valery Gerasimov, chief of the general staff of the Russian military²⁸

This has an important implication for the Blue theory of victory. It must encompass both armed hostilities (and the political-military crises that precede them) and conflict in the Gray Zone (and the periodic crises that populate it).

Second, Russia and China have prepared for regional wars resulting from the conflicts they perceive between their interests and U.S.-backed regional orders and from what they perceive to be America’s temptation to inflict color revolutions on regimes to which it purportedly objects for ideological reasons. Regional wars are not total wars. This new problem is not the problem of total war as it was conceived in the first half of the 20th century, or of nuclear war as it was conceived in the Cold War, or of “unrestricted warfare” as some Chinese and other experts speculated about in the early years after the Cold War.²⁹ China’s primary military focus is on “local wars under high-tech and informationized conditions.”³⁰ Russia’s primary military focus is on regional war in Europe but involving the United States and on the use of force to contain and localize regional war. Both have prepared to defend themselves against U.S. threats to interests around their periphery and also to challenge the regional security orders in which they sit.

28 Valery Gerasimov, “World on the Brink of War,” *Military-Industrial Courier* (March 15, 2017). Accessed April 24, 2020. <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/35591>.

29 Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: PLA, 1999).

30 People’s Republic of China, *White Paper on National Defense*, Beijing (2015).

“Great progress has been made in the revolution in military affairs (RMA) with Chinese characteristics.”

—*China’s State Council, 2019*³¹

This too has important implications for the Blue theory of victory. It must account for both the specific regional context in which major power rivalry is playing out and for the critical distinctions between restrained and unrestrained major power war.

In such regional wars, the main target would be U.S. allies and the main prize would be their political alignment. The United States would be neither the main target nor the main prize. As the primary ambition of Moscow, Beijing, or Pyongyang in such wars would be to re-make the regional orders, their goal must be to break the links between the United States and its allies. They would likely seek to do so by reminding the allies of their vulnerabilities, of the practical difficulties for the United States in protecting them, and of doubts about American credibility.

This too has an important implication for the Blue theory of victory. It must account for the interests and equities of its allies. It must also account for their potential contributions to common defense, their own thinking about theories of victory, and their capacity for courses of action not preferred by Washington.

Despite their regional and restrained characters, such wars would have significant escalation potential. Such escalation could occur in a variety of ways. Ongoing hostilities in cyber space and/or outer space could spill over into a clash between general purpose forces. General purpose forces already engaged in armed combat could receive new and more lethal rules of engagement and/or could attack a broader range of targets in a more destructive manner. Low lethality attacks could become higher lethality. Military activities could be expanded to additional fronts and/or additional partners of the United States.

31 China State Council Information Office, *China’s National Defense in the New Era* (July 2019).

“The world revolution in military affairs (RMA) is proceeding to a new stage. Long-range, precise, smart, stealthy, and unmanned weapons are becoming increasingly sophisticated. Outer space and cyber space have become the new commanding heights in strategic competition among all parties. The form of war is accelerating its evolution to informatization.”

—China’s Military Strategy, May 2015

Attacks on the territories and homeland of the United States could also be conducted, both kinetically and non-kinetically, with varying degrees of lethality. Notionally, these might occur late in a conflict in a bid to persuade the United States to come to terms before taking on major new costs. Or they might occur early in a conflict in a bid to disruptive the projection of U.S. conventional forces and perhaps also to try to break American political will.

Escalation could also occur by nuclear means. Notionally, nuclear weapons could be employed against U.S. and allied military assets, against allied capitals and other targets, and/or against the American homeland. Any such employment appears highly unlikely. But this does not make it impossible or implausible, as discussed further in a later chapter. Nor does it account for other uses of nuclear weapons than employment—displays of force and/or threats to employ them intended to worry U.S. allies, pressure them to pressure the United States in useful ways, and to encourage escalate restraint by Washington. This implies that their nuclear forces have a central role to play in the regional conflicts of concern here, and their strategic forces have a central role: to discourage any possible escalation by the United States or its allies to attacks on them calling into question the sovereignty and integrity of the state and/or regime.

“Although a large-scale war, including nuclear war, between major powers remains unlikely, they face increased risks of being drawn into regional conflicts and escalating crises.”

—Russia Foreign Policy Concept, 2016

This too has important implications for the Blue theory of victory. It must account for the escalation potential and strategies of Russia and China. It must also account for the particular roles of nuclear weapons in their strategies to deny, coerce, deter, and defeat their adversaries.

From the U.S. perspective there is a significant additional parameter: the multi-theater aspect. Any regional war pitting the United States against a rival major power would require military assets drawn in globally. The resulting drawn-down of forces in other theaters where it offers security guarantees may be seen as an opportunity for mischief by the other rival power, whether through intensified Gray Zone activities or a more direct military challenge to the regional order. Russia and China need not be allies to collude in this manner to U.S. disadvantage.

This too has an important implication for the Blue theory of victory. It must account for deterrence in the neglected theater.

Chairman Dunford captured the essence of the new problem in 2017, when he argued that there is a “high likelihood. . .that any conflict that we have will be transregional, multi-domain, and multifunctional.”³² The transregional aspect derives from the likelihood that major power rivals will not limit war to a single flashpoint and may well attempt strikes on overseas bases supporting U.S. power projection and on critical U.S. infrastructure and command and control facilities. The multi-domain aspect derives from the competition for military advantage now under way in cyber space, outer space, and the maritime (and sub-maritime) environments, for example. The multifunctional aspect derives from the range of military skills and tasks that would be called upon in a major power confrontation. Conflicts of the kind Dunford anticipates have a significant potential for escalation. They also put new stress on the ability of the United States and its allies to integrate all of the tools of deterrence and warfighting in planning and operations, and to orchestrate the effects in a manner that would produce the desired strategic effects.

The Role of the Nuclear Shadow

Writing about nuclear deterrence in 1956, Paul Nitze described nuclear weapons as being like the queen on a chessboard, casting a long

³² Paula Thornhill and Mara Karlin, “The Chairman the Pentagon Needs,” *War on the Rocks* (January 5, 2018).

shadow over the board and game play:

Whether or not atomic weapons are ever used in warfare, the very fact of their existence, the possibility that they could be used, will affect all future wars. . . .The situation is analogous to the game of chess. The atomic queens may never be brought into play; they may never actually take one of their opponent's pieces. But the position of the atomic queens may still have a decisive bearing on which side can safely advance a limited-war bishop or even a cold war pawn.³³

Despite the aspirations to eliminate nuclear weapons, it has so far proven impossible to create the conditions whereby nuclear-armed states would feel safer in relinquishing those arms.³⁴ So the shadow remains in any conflict with a nuclear-armed adversary. Although the risk of wars of Armageddon lingers somewhere deep in background, in the foreground it has been replaced by the risk of regional wars under the nuclear shadow. President Putin has embraced nuclear weapons as an instrument of Russian recovery and great power status, even giving them holy status and as central to his "snap-back-hard" strategy.³⁵ The Russian military has built the doctrine and force structure to employ nuclear weapons in regional conflicts with the aim of prevailing through escalation control. China too, having explicitly acquired nuclear weapons "to smash nuclear bullying," hardly seems likely to relinquish such weapons at a time of heightened concern about bullying by the United States. North Korea's refusal to abandon its weapons is well established.

Accordingly, and as argued above, the United States must expect that nuclear weapons would play a role in regional wars against Russia or China. This is not to argue that they would necessarily be employed. U.S. adversaries are likely to use them as instruments of coercion, blackmail, and brinksmanship; their use in war-fighting seems unlikely, though limited uses may be deemed acceptably risky if such attacks are seen as likely to be decisive in signaling political resolve and thereby

33 Paul Nitze, "Atoms, Strategy, and Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 35, no. 1 (January 1956).

34 Brad Roberts, "On Creating the Conditions for Nuclear Disarmament: Past Lessons, Future Prospects," *Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (2019), p7-30.

35 Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

persuading the United States and/or its allies to back down.

In this circumstance, the United States too can be expected to utilize its nuclear forces to assure its allies that there will be no material threats to their vital interests and to signal its resolve, while refraining from actual employment in all but the most extreme circumstances when its vital interests, or those of an ally, are in jeopardy. How it might do so is discussed in a later chapter.

But, as noted above, the shadow of escalation is not cast just by nuclear weapons. New technologies have created new means to project potentially decisive influence over an enemy at great distances and with potentially sudden effects. Both cyber space and outer space are now military domains. Competition proceeds in both, as each of the competitors seeks some version of dominance or superiority. The effects potentially generated in, from, or through these domains could have a major impact on political resolve and operational effectiveness. Alternatively, at a reduced scale, those effects could have a valuable role in signaling who is better prepared to seize the initiative if a war suddenly starts. The application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to these purposes seems likely to magnify both the perceived benefits of competition and operations in these domains as well as to disrupt existing ways of thinking about and practicing strategic stability. The potential interactions of these new technologies with the nuclear factor are potentially very troublesome.

These new domains add to the complexity of the new strategic problem for the United States because actions in these domains could have a decisive impact on the decisions of enemy leaders about whether and how to continue conflict. A potentially unique value of such actions in cyber space and outer space is that they can have a coercive effect in a manner that is visible only to the enemy leadership and not the general public, making it possible to be coerced without being seen to be, thus reducing the public political price of appeasement.

In considering the complexity of the new strategic problem for the United States, two further factors stand out. Russia and China have both defined their conflicts with the United States in essentially zero-sum terms. As revisionist powers, they seek to un-make the U.S.-backed regional security orders in which they set and to make a new order aligned with their preferences. Their success in doing so would have far-reaching consequences beyond the local balance of power.

It would entail a significant loss of sovereignty for their neighbors, constant deference to their perceived interests; a likely weakening of democratic institutions, practices, and norms; a remaking of global economic patterns disadvantageous to the United States; and an isolated, vulnerable, and even more deeply divided United States. In other words, the stake of the United States and its allies in this conflict also demands a commensurate response.

Moreover, war between the United States and Russia or China would have far-reaching implications for many other actors in the international system and perhaps for the functioning of that system as such. Such wars would invoke basic questions about the nature of the regional orders in Europe and Asia and potentially about the values of nuclear weapons. They would also teach powerful lessons about the will and ability of the United States to fulfill its obligations as a security guarantor to others and to uphold the international order it helped construct after World War II and sustained through the Cold War, and beyond.

Conclusions

While the United States was focused on other strategic problems in Afghanistan and Iraq, a new problem took shape. It is the problem brought to us by Russia and China, who have made extensive preparations for possible regional war with the United States and its allies. It is a result of a broad multi-dimensional conflict they are pursuing with the United States, one with military, political, economic, and ideological aspects, aimed at remaking the regional orders in which they sit and the global order as well.

Defining a Theory of Victory

For this new strategic problem, what is required to put our intellectual house in order? Having been encouraged by the National Defense Strategy to “out-think” our adversaries, what should we be thinking about? My answer in 2015: We should understand the theories of victory of our adversaries and develop theories of our own. In making that case, I drew on the standard dictionary definition cited above: a plausible set of principles for overcoming an enemy.

I then provided two models of a theory of victory by drawing on the ideas of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu. Clausewitz envisioned “victories of different types and different degrees.”³⁶ But his general concept of victory followed from his concept of war. If war is a continuation of politics by other means, then victory must be political in character. It arrives, he argued, as that “culminating point” in a conflict when a leader chooses to no longer run the costs and risks of continued war and to accept war termination on terms dictated by (or at least acceptable to) the adversary. His theory of how to do so involved the use of military and political means to impose cost and risk and create decision points.

Sun Tzu emphasized the enduring nature of conflict. He defined victory as subduing the enemy without fighting. His theory of how to do so encompassed “the art of the stratagem” to defeat the enemy’s strategy. A stratagem defined as “an artifice or trick for deceiving and outwitting an enemy.”³⁷

In my view, we are compelled to think in these terms by the circumstances we face: two major power rivals who have thought long and hard about war with the United States and its allies. Both have accordingly developed their own theories of victory. Without a credible counter to their strategies, we have good reason to doubt their restraint. In addition, we face a complex set of challenges in a multipolar security environment marked by multi-domain strategic competition. Without a simplifying concept that can mobilize action of many kinds in a holistic

36 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

37 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, translated by Ralph D. Sawyer (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

manner, we also have good reason to doubt our efficiency in innovating.

Since 2015, the theory-of-victory concept has come into somewhat broader usage among civilian and military defense planners and in the U.S. war colleges.³⁸ But it has also encountered resistance, some of it stiff. This resistance has two sources. Some see the idea as encompassed in strategy and thus redundant. Others question the value of victory as a goal and organizing concept and thus prefer terms like “theory of the case” or “theory of success.” Our debates on these matters have reinforced my sense that there is something distinct and unique in the theory-of-victory concept. The preferred terms just noted have their place in the strategic discourse—but it is not here. Accordingly, this chapter reviews these debates with an eye to moving beyond the standard dictionary definition of the concept to a more precise formulation that adds fidelity to the requirements of theory development for the new strategic problem.³⁹

The Relationship Between Theory and Strategy

In Thomas Schelling’s foundational formulation, a strategy of conflict is a “rational, conscious, artful kind of behavior aimed at trying to ‘win’ a contest.”⁴⁰ A strategy should tell someone what to do and how to do it. A successful strategy should plausibly link actions and outcomes. In the more formal catechism of the war colleges, strategy is an approach that aligns ends, ways, and means. Ends are defined as the strategic outcomes or desired end states, ways are defined as courses of action, and means are defined as the tools utilized to implement the course of action.

It seems logical that a strategy for “trying to win a contest” would encompass a theory of how to do so—that is, of victory. But strategy is not necessarily explicit about the logic behind the links between ac-

38 To be clear: I do not claim credit for these developments, as my advocacy for the concept has been part of a broader discussion. See Colin S. Gray, *Defining and Achieving Decisive Victory* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1981); J. Boone Bartholomees, “Theory of Victory,” *Parameters* (Summer 2008), p25-36; William C. Martel, *Victory in War: Foundations of Modern Strategy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Michael J. Mooney, “A Military Assessment of the Islamic State’s Evolving Theory of Victory,” *War on the Rocks* (June 26, 2017); Jamis Jasik, “Beyond the Third Offset: Matching Plans for Innovation to a Theory of Victory,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 91 (4th Quarter 2018), p14-21; and Frank G. Hoffman, “The Missing Element in Crafting National Strategy: a Theory of Success,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 97 (2nd Quarter 2020), p55-64.

39 This section draws in part from Ivanka Barzashka and Brad Roberts, “Victory and Success in Strategic Theory,” forthcoming.

40 Thomas Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard College, 1960), p3.

tions and outcomes. In the ends-ways-means construct, the theory is unexpressed even if the ends, ways, and means are lined up. It is implicit, not explicit. As Frank Hoffman has argued:

Critical to the selection of the most appropriate way in a strategy is a hypothesis as to its causal logic. This important concept is rarely discussed in strategic theory. It is largely absent in the writings of today's most prominent thinkers. . . . A good strategy must have an internal logic that ties policy to both ways and means to create desired strategic effects. That logic is the continuous thread of thinking that provides strategic intent and informs ways and creates linkages in strategic design that drive the applications of means via military operations.⁴¹

If left implicit, this “continuous thread” is untestable. It may simply not exist. Upon examination, it might prove little more than general principles (“peace through strength”) or wishful thinking about the behaviors of the adversary. Recall the central point of the 2018 National Defense Strategy: there is a strategy but it lacks an “interior logic” that links actions to outcomes.

In sum, a theory of victory is distinct from, but integral to, strategy. A strategy without a theory of victory is nothing more than a loose collection of initiatives and misplaced hope. In the development of strategy, the theory of victory cannot be left implicit. To meet the challenges of the new strategic problem, that interior logic and causal linkages of strategy must be developed in a systematic and rigorous way and tested by appropriate means, including wargames, exercises, and red-teaming, including scrutiny by non-military experts.

On Victory and the Alternatives

In the long study of military affairs, an abiding interest in the meaning(s) of victory is evident. But the topic has not sparked a high level of sustained interest in the current period. There is almost no scholarship aimed at defining victory in the context of the new strategic problem. Indeed, there is some reluctance to embrace victory as a goal. Even

41 Hoffman, “The Missing Element in Crafting National Strategy,” p56-57.

in the U.S. military community, there is a noticeable reluctance to talk about victory. As one small indicator, the word “victory” does not appear in the *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*. This may also have something to do with the fact that war termination remains underdeveloped as a field of war studies.⁴²

Three primary objections have been raised to the use of victory as a goal:

- Victory is a meaningless concept because war, especially nuclear war, has no winners.
- Victory is a meaningful concept but is a poor guide to peacemaking.
- Victory is a meaningful and useful concept in the abstract but in practice is unworkable as a guide to action.

Each is discussed in turn.

“Victory is Meaningless”

In *City of God*, Augustine’s famous medieval tract on just war theory, he described wars in which “calamities were so great that the victor was more like the vanquished.”⁴³ In war, goes the argument, there can be no victor. Whatever may be achieved by one side or another in war will necessarily come at cost to both sides, human and otherwise, and perhaps also to the larger community within which they sit.

This way of thinking has become deeply engrained in the nuclear era. There is a near taboo on associating concepts of victory with nuclear concepts. The resistance to doing so has its roots in the debate of the late 1970s and early 1980s, stimulated by Colin Gray and Keith Payne, who argued that the United States and its allies needed a theory of victory for strategic nuclear war. In the words of Colin Gray:

Our real problem...is that the United States (and NATO-Europe) lacks a theory of victory in war (or satisfactory war termination). If, basically, one has no war aims (one has no image of enforced and favorable war termination, or of

42 Joachim Krause, “How Do Wars End? A Strategic Perspective,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 7 (2019), p920-945.

43 Augustine, *City of God*, translated by Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1938), p125.

how the balance of power may be structured in a post-war world), on what grounds does one select a strategic nuclear employment policy, and how does one know how to choose an appropriate strategic posture?⁴⁴

Their arguments brushed up against President John F. Kennedy's statement at the height of the Cuban missile crisis that "the fruits of victory [in worldwide nuclear war] would be ashes in our mouth."⁴⁵ Any suggestion that nuclear war might be winnable is a taboo, even limited nuclear wars.⁴⁶

Concern about this taboo has led some policymakers to suggest that "theory of victory" should be replaced by "theory of the case" or "theory of success." But these miss the mark.

A "theory of the case" is suitable for a proof of concept—that phase of product development preceding a prototype. It might make sense for single hypothesis. But a "theory of victory" suitable to the new strategic problem must be more comprehensive. A proof of concept cannot substitute for "a continuous thread of thinking" as a guide to the alignment of ends, ways, and means.

A "theory of success" is also suitable for certain aspects of strategy. As Eliot Cohen has argued, the term is well suited to grand strategy, which they conceive as a theory of success in its own right, linking hard and soft power tools to high-level national goals.⁴⁷ Frank Hoffman argues further about national strategies: "given that their purpose is rarely to defeat an adversary but instead is to develop institutional muscle and apply statecraft to desired strategic ends, this is more compelling than victory (and defeat) per se."⁴⁸

But for the new strategic problem being examined here, the term victory is the better fit. To be sure, for the new strategic problem, in-

44 Colin S. Gray, "Nuclear Strategy: The Case for a Theory of Victory," *International Security* 4, no. 1 (Summer 1979), p62. See also Gray and Keith Payne, "Victory is Possible," *Foreign Policy* 39 (1980), p.14-27 and Michael E. Howard, "On Fighting a Nuclear War," *International Security* 5, no. 4 (1981), p2-17.

45 "JFK Tells the Nation: Nuclear War Possible," White House Press release (October 22, 1962).

46 Jeffrey A. Larsen and Kerry M. Kartchner, eds., *On Limited Nuclear War in the 21st Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), p6.

47 Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press 2002), p33, 177.

48 Hoffman, "The Missing Element in Crafting National Strategy," p58.

stitutional muscle must be developed and statecraft must be applied. But the problem isn't one for statecraft alone. And it does require the defeat of an adversary—or, more precisely, defeating the concepts that underpin the confidence of adversarial leaders to challenge the United States and its allies by military means. Moreover, leaders in Moscow and Beijing are pursuing conflicts that they have framed in zero-sum terms by defining victory as the end of the existing regional orders and fundamental changes to world order. In service of these objectives, they have developed strategies and means that could put at risk the vital interests of the United States and its allies.

Moreover, the objections noted above don't address the particular meanings of victory vis-à-vis the new strategic problem. U.S. adversaries appear to believe that they can fight limited regional wars that damage the U.S.-led regional order without great risk to themselves because they can keep them localized and contained by the threat of escalation. This reinforces the urgency of preventing and deterring such wars. Toward that end, effective counters to their theories of victory are necessary. The United States needs that "continuous thread of thinking" to align ways and means with a clearly defined concept of victory in a conflict defined as zero sum by our adversaries. And to the extent U.S. adversaries have nuclear theories of victory, the United States needs a theory of victory that negates their potential confidence in crossing the nuclear threshold. U.S. strategy since World War II has been to prevent and deter nuclear war. The taboo against nuclear employment is a norm of high value for all but the taboo against nuclear thinking to strengthen deterrence is a source of danger.

"Victory is Meaningful but Unhelpful"

Augustine again provides a starting point for this second critique with his analysis of wars that result in an unjust peace by reproducing the victor's power over the vanquished.⁴⁹ Where the peace is contested and the balance of power is unstable, the post-war peace is likely to prove to be a wasting asset, as after World War I. Thus, goes the argument, we need a theory of peace as opposed to a theory of victory.

Just war theorist Cian O'Driscoll has made a related point: "to

49 Cian O'Driscoll, *Victory: The Triumph and Tragedy of Just War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p16.

Speak about war in terms of victory is to court an escalatory logic that undercuts the spirit of moderation that the just war tradition champions. . . .Playing to win, the argument goes, means playing hard.”⁵⁰

In my assessment, these objections tell us more about the requirements of the concept of victory than about the need for a replacement. A theory of victory in war must encompass a set of hypotheses about how war termination can best shape the peace to follow. It must also encompass a “continuous thread of thinking” about how the war is prosecuted can best shape the peace. Especially in wars with significant escalatory potential, “playing too hard” is dangerous and could create catastrophic outcomes in which there are indeed no winners. In the current strategic environment, the causes of peace and moderation requires that adversarial leaders judge that any direct armed conflict with the United States and/or its allies is simply unacceptably risky.

“Victory is Meaningful, Helpful, but Impractical as a Guide”

The third critique of victory is that it is a meaningful concept in the abstract but in practice is a nearly impractical guide to action. Here there are many supporting arguments:

- Political leaders often fail to provide a definition of victory that is clear and actionable.
- Victory is easier to define at the operational level of war but more challenging at the strategic level, where it matters most.
- It’s possible to win the war but lose the peace and thus victory must encompass both.
- It’s possible to lose in the Gray Zone before the war commences and thus victory must encompass both.
- The requirements of victory are easier to define in a zero-sum, winner-take-all conflict than in a conflict between adversaries with some shared interests.
- Victory, like the best made plans, cannot survive the realities of war and the inevitable bargaining among coalitions, both external and internal.

50 *Ibid.*, 18.

Each is discussed briefly below.

Political leaders are vague: This argument has been set out clearly by military historian William Martel: “Victory is a universal and highly generalizable word that scholars and policymakers use imprecisely and vaguely.”⁵¹ As O’Driscoll sharply puts it:

Victory is integral to how we understand war. . . .But what is it? Victory is one of those concepts that, like time, appears simple to grasp until you actually start to examine it. The issue is that victory is simultaneously a rhetorically powerful concept but also a hopelessly vague one. . . .Although we know it stands for winning, what this means in practice is often anyone’s guess.⁵²

Vagueness about the meaning of victory has something to do with the fact that political leaders are often unwilling or unable to provide clear and feasible political objectives to military planners. “A prerequisite for war. . .is the belief of a nation that if it goes to war it will either win or, at worst, avoid defeat,” argued Geoffrey Blainey in his study, *The Causes of War*.⁵³ He goes on to argue that “the processes by which nations evade reality [in making war] are complicated. Patriotism, national languages, and a sense of a nation’s history are all dark glasses. Leadership itself is provided with a hazy telescope that does not always focus on reality.”⁵⁴ History is rich in examples of “dreams and delusions of coming war. . .[and] quick, decisive victory.”⁵⁵

Victory at the operational level does not equate with victory at the strategic level. Victory is often equated with a “decisive battle” that vanquishes the enemy. Military historian John Keegan has described such battles as two armies fighting to the point of “moral and physical disintegration of one or the other of them,” such that its remaining

51 Martel, *Victory in War*, p25.

52 O’Driscoll, *Victory*, p4-5.

53 Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 3rd edition, p256.

54 *Ibid.*, 109.

55 *Ibid.*, 39.

soldiers are dissuaded “from wanting to fight any more.”⁵⁶ But wars are prosecuted at multiple levels—tactical, operational, and strategic—and it is possible to think of the different requirements of “overcoming the enemy” at each.⁵⁷ Moreover, it may be that victory at the highest level—strategic—does not require complete success at the other levels. As military historian J.C. Wylie has argued,

It may well be necessary to defeat the enemy. It may even be necessary to defeat it to the last remnant. But if we always saddle ourselves with the self-imposed restriction that we must, no matter what, defeat the army in combat, then we have indeed denied to ourselves consideration of a vast span of action that might more readily and easily achieve the needed measure of control [over an adversary].⁵⁸

Victory in war does not necessarily equate with victory in peace.

The third critique arises from the observation that victory has two potential meanings: one on the battlefield alone and the other in the quality and durability of the peace that follows. Military success must both create the conditions for an enemy to concede defeat and shape the peace to follow in ways deemed necessary or desirable by political leadership. Decisive military outcomes may lay the condition for an enduring peace, in part by ensuring a stable balance of power favoring victors committed to a just and durable peace, as after World War II. As Fred Iklé argued in his 1971 study *Every War Must End*:

Governments tend to lose sight of the endings of wars and the nation’s interests that lie beyond it, precisely because fighting a war is an effort of such vast magnitude. Thus it can happen that military men, while skillfully planning their intricate operations and coordinating complicated maneuvers,

56 As cited and discussed in Martel, *Victory in War*, p35.

57 The tactical level of war encompasses discrete battles. The operational level of war encompasses campaigns of activity. The strategic level encompasses “the art and science of applying national power” to accomplish national objectives in war. See Martin Dunn, “Levels of War: Just a Set of Labels?” online at Clausewitz.com. Accessed March 3, 2020. <https://www.clausewitz.com/readings/Dunn.htm>.

58 W.C. Wylie, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1967), p82.

remain curiously blind in failing to perceive that it is the outcome of the war, not the outcome of the campaigns within it, that determines how well their plans serve the nation's interests.⁵⁹

An especially sensitive question about the linkage between military and political outcomes is whether the peace to follow requires the punishment of the state that initiated armed hostilities. In the Korean War, there was a sharp discussion about what punishment of the North was required as part of the war termination effort, with many arguing that leaving the aggressors “unpunished in this instance would encourage others to make similar moves at other times and at other places. To deter aggression in the future, in short, it must be not only repulsed but punished in the present.”⁶⁰ Fred Iklé took a somewhat different view: “The more an enemy’s effort and costs in fighting a war, the more will he become committed to his own conditions for peace.”⁶¹ He argued further that “inflicting ‘punishment’ on an enemy nation is not only an ineffective strategy for ending a war, it may well have side effects that actually hasten the defeat of the side that relies on such a strategy.”⁶²

Political outcomes are not, however, limited to the realm of the terms of settlement and the post-war distribution of power. There may be a broader ideological dimension as well. Paul Nitze illuminated this aspect in his 1950 document framing the fundamental strategic questions of the Cold War:

Resort to war is not only a last resort for a free society but it is also an act which cannot definitively end the fundamental conflict in the realm of ideas. The idea of slavery can only be overcome by the timely and persistent demonstration of the superiority of the idea of freedom. Military victory alone would only partially and perhaps only temporarily affect the fundamental conflict, for although the ability of the Kremlin to threaten our security might for a time be

59 Fred Charles Iklé, *Every War Must End*, 2nd edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p2.

60 *Ibid.*, p94.

61 *Ibid.*, p42.

62 *Ibid.*, p xi.

destroyed, the resurgence of totalitarian forces and the re-establishment of the Soviet system or its equivalent would not be long delayed unless great progress were made in the fundamental conflict.⁶³

Victory in crisis and war does not equate with victory in the Gray Zone.

The fourth argument is that victory is a concept from the realm of war but must also address winning in situations short of war—as, for example, conflict in the Gray Zone. After all, states in conflict are not always at war.⁶⁴ If they are in conflict but not at war, what might victory mean? Both Sun Tzu and Clausewitz tell us that there are not two concepts of victory, one for war and one for non-war. Sun Tzu famously argued that “the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.”⁶⁵ And Clausewitz observed that conquerors are as much lovers of peace as those they seek to conquer—because they want the political conditions they would seek in war termination but without paying the military price to create them.⁶⁶ But because the tools they employ are broad and diverse, and because there is no “decisive battle,” this is another place where it may be preferable to think of theories of success rather than theories of victory.

Victory means different things in zero-sum and non-zero-sum conflicts.

A fifth argument derives from the observation that few conflicts are simple zero-sum in nature (I win, you lose; or you win, I lose). Conflicts are rarely so simple. As Schelling observed in 1960, interdependence is a constraining factor upon most states in conflict, whether economic, or political, or simply in the shared interest of avoiding wars that are more costly than the value that victory might bring, and thus involve more bargaining than decisive battle. They complicate the effort to win.

In international affairs there is mutual dependence as well

63 The White House (otherwise known as NSC 68), *A Report to the National Security Council by the Executive Secretary on United States Objectives and Programs for National Security* (April 14, 1950), p11.

64 James Lacey, *Great Strategic Rivalries: From the Classical World to the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

65 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*.

66 Clausewitz, *On War*, especially Book 7, Chapter 21.

as opposition. Pure conflict, in which two antagonists are completely opposed, is a special case. . .For this reason, “winning” in a conflict does not have a strictly competitive meaning; it is not winning relative to one’s adversary. It means gaining according to one’s own value system.⁶⁷

Concepts of victory cannot account for bargaining about the means and ends of war. A final argument against the practical benefits of victory as an objective is the conviction that, like the best made plans, it cannot survive the realities of war. As Helmuth von Moltke famously argued, “victory or defeat in battle changes the situation to such a degree that no human acumen is able to see beyond the first battle. . .Therefore no plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first contact with the main hostile force.”⁶⁸

One of the realities of war is that it involves bargaining over the terms of the peace. As described by Thomas Schelling in 1960, the outcomes of war are dependent on bargaining between adversaries.

Most conflict situations are essentially bargaining situations. They are situations in which the ability of one participant to gain is dependent to an important degree on the choices or decisions that the other participants will make. The bargaining may be explicit. . .or it may be by tactic maneuver.⁶⁹

Another reality of war is that it involves often intense bargaining among the coalitions, both domestic and international, with which wars are prosecuted. This is especially so as war termination in limited war requires compromises by one or more actors within these coalitions—and these inevitably become a subject of intense debate that can prolong war. Leaders may in the end simply decide, but along the way that have significant political coalitions to manage, both external and internal.

External coalitions can be heavily engaged in debates about war-time objectives and can act to influence prospects for success. U.S. ob-

67 Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict*, p4.

68 Helmuth von Moltke, *On Strategy*.

69 Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict*, p4-5.

jectives during the Persian Gulf War of 1990-91 (to eject invading Iraqi forces from Kuwait but not to proceed to regime removal in Iraq) were dictated by the requirement to ensure political legitimacy for the operation associated with support by a large coalition of nations. During the Korean War, there was nearly constant friction among members of the United Nations Command, and also with the leaders of the Republic of Korea (RoK), about the requirements of victory. For example, in setting as its objective the restoration of the status quo ante (and with it preservation of the North Korean state and leadership), the United States neglected the ambitions of RoK leadership to reunify the peninsula. Hints that it might set such an objective also caused Europeans to become more explicit about their potential withdrawal of support for the United Nations operation.⁷⁰

Internal coalitions can also be heavily engaged and can act to influence the prospects for success. To again cite Iklé:

If the decision to end a war were simply to spring from a rational calculation of gains and losses for the nation as a whole, it should be no harder to get out of a war than to get into one. . . . Nothing is more divisive for a government than having to make peace at the price of a major concession When the fighting comes to an end, the heavy toll the war has taken—like a debt that comes due—may suddenly contribute to dissention at home. Indeed, after prolonged and costly fighting, not only the losing nations but also the victors are often torn by political upheavals. . . . Each faction invariably argues that it wants “peace with honor.” Yet a prolonged war can bring such deep disagreement on national objectives that this phrase has no common meaning. . . . Those with the power to start a war frequently come to discover that they lack the power to stop it.⁷¹

In my assessment, these six arguments are all consequential for a development theory of victory for the new strategic problem. But they do not make them impractical. They illuminate the need for a compre-

70 William Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

71 Iklé, *All Wars Must End*, p16, 59-60, 106.

hensive theory and one that is informed by both the lessons of the past and the distinct attributes of the new strategic problem. To be practical as a guide to the selection of ways and ends, a theory of victory for this new problem must:

- Begin with clear and actionable political guidance
- Address the requirements of success at the strategic level of war
- Encompass both the defeat of the enemy and the conditions for a durable peace
- Encompass the Gray Zone
- Account for and protect interests shared with the enemy
- Account for the interests of coalition partners, both external and internal

Conclusions

To put our intellectual house in order for the new strategic problem, and to out-think our adversaries, we should stick with the pursuit of a Blue theory of victory. The case for doing so follows from the need to negate the theories of victory of our adversaries and to catalyze holistic action with a clear and compelling vision of the task. The objections raised to the theory-of-victory concept don't stand up well in the particular context of the new strategic problem. The argument that a theory of victory is redundant because it is encompassed in the concept of strategy is mistaken. Objections to the concept on the basis of its validity and utility don't add up to a reason to adopt less worthy alternative objectives; rather, they serve as a means to identify the requirements of a robust theory.

Debate on these matters helps to clarify what is distinct and unique about the theory-of-victory concept. It is not synonymous with strategy; it is the "continuous thread of thinking" providing the causal connections between ends, ways, and means. It is distinct from the theory-of-the-case concept because the "internal logic" guiding the integration of ends, ways, and means involves much more than a proof of concept. And it is distinct from a theory of success because it more effectively addresses the militarized, zero-sum character of the new strategic problem.

Let's also recall the rhetorical power in the concept of victory to

which O’Driscoll referred. This power is not without its own value. Leaders taking a nation to war have a moral obligation to explain to those asked to make the sacrifice why the sacrifice of blood and treasure is worth making. This is especially so with wars of significant escalation potential. Those asked to sacrifice must understand that something important is at stake and that their sacrifices will be meaningful in the accomplishment of some vital national purpose. They must understand that the military campaign they are asked to support is both necessary and virtuous. This implies the necessity of specifying a concept of victory that goes well beyond the punitive.

There is a parallel moral obligation to provide a vision of victory that promises an enduring peace. A primary requirement for such a peace is that it rest solidly on a just result and a resolution of the issues in dispute. Put differently, for those asked to sacrifice, the vision of victory must encompass the requirements of both a just war and a just peace.

To put the emphasis on victory rather than success implies the necessity of overcoming the legacy of the 1980s debate about the possibility or futility of winning a major nuclear war. We should instead be willing and able to focus on how to secure our interests in a conflict against an adversary willing and able to employ nuclear threats to try to coerce U.S. allies and the United States, to engage in blackmail and brinksmanship with nuclear weapons, and perhaps to engage in limited nuclear attacks out of a conviction that this will gain it some advantage at acceptable risk. This implies that the Blue theory of victory must include a meaningful concept for the just and judicious employment of nuclear weapons in order to terminate a conflict rather than to prolong it. Without such a theory of victory, the risks of such nuclear-backed aggression seem certain to rise. This is separate and apart from the winnability of all-out nuclear Armageddon—which remains indisputably unwinnable in any meaningful sense.

Debate about the theory-of-victory concept has also helped to clarify its limits. It does not encompass everything in the making of strategy, policy, and operational plans. As Frank Hoffman correctly observes, a theory of victory “is not a panacea to strategic competency, which involves many elements, but it is central to strategic success.”⁷²

72 Hoffman, “The Missing Element in Crafting National Strategy,” p56.

On the Requirements of a Blue Theory of Victory

Chapters 1 and 2 bring into focus the requirements of a robust theory of victory for the new strategic problem. It involves something substantially more than “a plausible set of principles for overcoming an enemy.” A robust theory of victory must be a “continuous thread,” with its own interior logic and causal linkages. In practice, this means that the Blue theory must:

- Account for the specific context in which regional war might occur and the interests, constraints, and vulnerabilities of all of the key stakeholders
- Anticipate the key decision points in a conflict with Red and the ways in which unanticipated courses of action might interact to produce different outcomes at the strategic level of war
- Account for the strengths and weaknesses of Red in a war conducted along its periphery
- Explain how it might be possible to persuade Red not to use all of the resources available to it while also abandoning the ambition that gave rise to crisis and war
- Explain how it might be possible to exploit to good advantage Red’s vulnerabilities without inciting unwanted counter-escalation
- Explain how it might be possible to negate Red nuclear threats and even to respond to limited Red nuclear attacks without generating uncontrollable escalation
- Explain how it might be possible to fulfill the ambition to safeguard international order without going to war
- Explain how crisis and war in a second theater of concern can be avoided while resources are diverted to meet the requirements of a major regional war

The Red Theory of Victory

There is no official document, to the best of my knowledge, in either Russia or China that conveys in a single place all of their thinking on their main strategic problem. Their defense white papers and other high-level policy statements are useful starting points. But it is necessary and possible to get a more substantial impression of the state of their strategic thought on this problem by drawing on published materials and interactions with officials and experts. There is an abundance of both. Russian leaders encourage publication by military and other strategists in the journal *Military Thought*, among others. China makes available the materials used to teach the military about modern warfare. These are indirect but credible sources for gaining insight into current strategic thought. Additional insights flow from exchanges with officials and experts in so-called Track 1.5 dialogues. Such dialogues have been underway between Western and Russian expert communities for many decades; they are a newer factor in the U.S.-China relationship, having gotten a start only after the Cold War.⁷³

The Generic Red Theory

Because Russia and China face the same basic strategic challenge, they have come to a largely common set of ideas about victory and its requirements in crisis and war against the United States and its allies. Thus, it is possible to sketch out a generic Red theory of victory. It is useful to do so before turning to the differences in the approaches of the two countries. Key elements:

1. If war with the United States appears inevitable, it is necessary and possible to go first, to go hard, and to create a *fait accompli*. The possibility of a meaningful military response by the United States and its allies to attempt to reverse the *fait accompli* can be significantly reduced by presenting an image of

⁷³ A summary of these dialogues and key insights arising from them is available in Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century*. See the relevant country chapters.

significant costs in blood and treasure of any effort to restore the status quo ante militarily. Victory would be measured in the territory gained (or “recovered”) but also in the demonstration to the world, and especially to U.S. allies, that the extant regional security order is not viable.

2. If the United States nonetheless resolves to try to restore the status quo ante militarily, this can be effectively halted by separating its allies from each other and from the United States. This puts the United States in the difficult position of having to choose between fighting alone or not at all. Victory would be measured as above but also in the demonstration of coercive leverage over U.S. allies.
3. If these efforts fail, U.S. military action can be made sufficiently costly to it by kinetic and non-kinetic attacks on any forces actively engaged in the attempted restoration, on the territories of those allies, and on U.S. forces in theater or en route to the theater (anti-access, area denial strategies). This puts the United States in a difficult position of having to choose between escalating and terminating without achieving its objectives. Victory would be measured as above but also in calling into question globally the credibility of America’s power projection strategy. In certain extreme circumstances, the kinetic means might include non-strategic nuclear weapons.
4. If these efforts fail to bring timely war termination and something significant is newly at risk, such as the bulk of the forces that created the *fait accompli* and/or the survival of the regime, then Red can remind the United States of the vulnerability of its homeland to attack with a limited strike, whether kinetic or non-kinetic, conventional or nuclear. This would put the United States and its allies in a difficult position of having to choose between further escalation after it has once failed to achieve its intended objective and terminating without achieving its objectives while under direct attack. Here victory would not be measured by the metrics noted above but by the domestic benefits, both domestic and international, of having “taught the United States a lesson” while retaining the capability to fight again another day.

In debates with Russian and Chinese experts over many years, I find that this way of thinking rests on a foundation of three key judgments. One is that Red's threat to escalate will be credible to Blue—indeed, more credible in Blue's eyes than Blue's threat to escalate—because of a fundamental asymmetry of stake underpinning the conflict. Russian and Chinese experts acknowledge that the United States would have important interests at risk in an escalating conflict. A senior Chinese interlocutor once catalogued these for me as follows: the U.S. commitment to an ally, its standing in the eyes of other allies, its standing in the eyes of other adversaries, and its own sense that it stands for the right thing and does not appease. But from China's perspective, these interests are reputational and over the horizon. For both China and Russia, war with America right on their borders and involving attacks on their territories would invoke questions about the sovereignty and integrity of the state and the control of the regime. Such a war would immediately invoke issues of deep historical grievance (e.g., China's so-called "century of humiliation"). The United States may be the more powerful actor, in the sense that it has more long-term power potential, but it is seen as relatively less motivated to exploit its full power potential because of an underlying asymmetry of stake.

The second judgment is about asymmetry of geography. Russia and China can attack U.S. forces in the region and U.S. allies directly from their territory. U.S. attacks back onto their territory might look proportionate to us but would look escalatory to them and would, in their assessments, lend credibility to their threats to attack the U.S. homeland despite the nation's many strengths.

The third judgment is about asymmetry in governance structures. Experts from Russia and China tend to see their authoritarian systems as having certain advantages in war—especially the capacity for quick decision, coherent action, and disregard for public opposition. And they tend to see democratic systems as weak, vulnerable, and easily paralyzed. This too lends confidence to their thinking about managing the risks of escalation in a stand-off with the United States and its allies.

The central concept in the generic Red theory of victory is that these asymmetries can be exploited at any level of escalation to persuade the United States and its allies not to further challenge Red interests by threatening costs beyond the tolerance of the United States and its allies. It consists of the notions that (1) decisive military action by the

United States to reverse a fait accompli can be prevented by exploiting divisions within and among its allies and the United States itself and (2) the United States can be persuaded to cede some important regional interest rather than employ its full military potential because its stake is not sufficient to engage in sustained brinksmanship and competitive escalation. Victory need not involve the defeat of U.S. forces. Rather, it equates with breaking the will of U.S. allies to defend the interest at stake and of the United States to defend its allies. Victory also has a broader meaning: by stripping the United States of its credibility as a security guarantor, such a war-time result would also doom a post-war regional order based on U.S. alliances. The main prize, after all, that Russia and China would seek in war with the United States would be relief from regional security orders that their leaders deem intolerable. And this would require a shift of U.S. allies away from allegiance with the United States.

Russia Versus NATO

This generic theory of victory is reflected in Russia's thinking about and preparations for war with NATO.⁷⁴ In exploring a possible regional war with NATO, Russian writings focus on three primary scenarios: a NATO invasion of Russia, a NATO effort to support a color revolution in or near Russia, and a NATO effort to support Ukrainian independence. In each case, Russia is the aggrieved party, responding to U.S.-led aggression.

Russia's defense strategy is built on the concept of "active defense." As described by General Gerasimov, this is a strategy for "acting quickly" to:

. . . preempt the enemy with our preventive measures, promptly identify his vulnerabilities, and create threats of unacceptable damage to him. This ensures the capture and retention of the strategic initiative.⁷⁵

74 This section draws on Dave Johnson, *Russia's Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities, Regional Crises, and Nuclear Thresholds* (Livermore, CA: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, 2018). See also Gudrun Persson, ed., *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective—2016* (Stockholm: FOI, 2016) and the subsequent 2018 edition; Stephen Blank, ed., *The Russian Military in Contemporary Perspective* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2019); Stephen Covington, *The Culture of Strategic Thought Behind Russia's Modern Approaches to Warfare*, (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2016); Timothy Thomas, "The Evolving Nature of Russia's Way of War," *Military Review* (July-August 2017), p34-42. See also *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (December 2014).

75 Valery Gerasimov, "Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov's 2018 Presentation to the General

He further described the strategy as utilizing “integrated means for the preemptive neutralization of threats to the security of the state.”⁷⁶ Think of this as a *fait accompli*. Toward this end, Russian strategy envisions a number of actions. These include the use of remote strike capabilities capable of destroying targets without occupying territory, and locally re-deployable but limited general purpose forces.

At this first stage of crisis and war, Russia’s theory of victory appears to be that it can exploit the asymmetry of geography to its advantage, by decisively employing force before the United States can project power. It also appears to be that Russia has a high prospect of keeping what it has seized, by making Western publics and decision-makers fearful of the high costs of taking it back and by shaping their information environments with tailored messages. Russian experts appear to believe that, in such a contingency, NATO would be divided about how to respond, its publics would be fearful of war, and these factors can be exploited with actions illustrating the potential costs and risks and thereby reduce the probability of a concerted NATO response. As Michael Kofman argues:

The overarching concept is driven by the assumption that the initial period of war will be decisive because deflection, attrition, and disorganization will stop the U.S. military from executing its preferred way of war, and a failure to attain quick victory will decisively affect American political resolve.⁷⁷

Russian strategy envisions multiple actions at this stage of crisis and war. Information confrontation and “reflexive control” are central to its strategy at this stage. The former seeks to shape the information environment to the advantage of Moscow, while the latter seeks to shape the predispositions of the decision-maker (in part by increasing his/her risk aversion).⁷⁸ Stalin famously argued

Staff Academy: Thoughts on Future Military Conflict—March 2018,” *Military Review Online* (January 2019). See also Dave Johnson, “Review: General Gerasimov on the Vectors of the Development of Military Strategy,” Russian Studies Series 4/19, NATO Defense College (March 30, 2019).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Michael Kofman, “It’s Time to Talk about A2/AD: Rethinking the Russian Military Challenge,” *War on the Rocks* (September 5, 2019).

⁷⁸ Timothy Thomas, “Russia’s Reflexive Control Theory and the Military,” *Journal of Slavic Studies* 17, no. 2 (2004), p237-256.

that “ideas are more powerful than guns. We would not let our enemies have guns. Why should we let them have ideas?” Gerasimov has set out the modern theory, linking it to cyber strategy:

The information domain. . .provides the possibility for long-range, hidden action upon not only critically important information infrastructure, but also upon the population of a country, directly influencing the conditions of national security. . .for this very reason work on the questions of preparation and conduct of actions of an informational character is the most important task of military science.⁷⁹

If Russia were successful at this stage, how might it define victory? If the conflict directly affects the sovereignty and integrity of a NATO member, victory could mean something very significant for Russia. If the Russian gain were to be held, victory for Russia would include the deep damage to the credibility of the guarantee embodied in the North Atlantic Treaty. Having demonstrated to NATO members that an attack on one in the 21st century will not be treated as an attack on all as it would have been in the Cold War, Russia could well conclude that the European order to which President Putin strongly objects has been destroyed.

But Russia must also contend with the possibility that NATO might not acquiesce to the *fait accompli*. NATO might make a decision to confront the Russian military in order to restore the status quo ante. Russia appears to accept that NATO forces in Europe would be engaged in limited defensive operations while the United States begins to flow forces into the European theater.

Russia’s strategy again envisions multiple actions at this stage of war. Russian strategy attaches great value to the use of non-nuclear means such as long-range conventional strike, cyber, and space attack, throughout a conflict to exert psychological pressure on its enemies, with the hope that this would lead the enemy to de-escalate. Some Russian leaders have described these as “pre-nuclear” options.⁸⁰

79 Cited in Johnson, “Review,” p42-45.

80 Johnson, *Russia’s Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities, Regional Crises, and Nuclear Thresholds*. See also Andrei Kokoshin, *Ensuring Strategic Stability in the Past and Present: Theoretical and Applied Questions* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2011) and Kokoshin, “Strategic Nuclear and Non-Nuclear Deterrence: Priorities in the Modern Age,” *Science and Society* (journal of the Russian Academy of Sciences) 4, no. 3 (2014), p195-205.

Nuclear options are also much in discussion. Russian military literature describes the role of non-strategic nuclear weapons in regional conflict as being to threaten “unacceptable damage” (in contrast to the role of strategic nuclear weapons in threatening “irreparable damage”).⁸¹

“Russia has a nuclear scalpel for every military problem in Europe.”⁸²

Russia’s theory of victory at this stage of war appears to have two main elements. One is that the European allies can be persuaded to stop short of full support for the U.S. ambition with carefully calibrated kinetic and non-kinetic strikes generating limited casualties but significant economic costs and high fear. The other is that the American public can be persuaded that the costs are too high by imposing significant costs on U.S. power projection forces. Russian military experts describe a “prescribed dosage” of damage that is assessed to be sufficient to motivate de-escalation by NATO but not so onerous as to motivate escalation by NATO.⁸³ Presumably the intended effects of such strikes relates to the calculus of asymmetric stake—that is, the presumed value of such strikes from Russia’s perspective is to awaken Western leaders to the fact that the Western stake in an escalating conflict is less substantial than Russia’s stake and thus they do not have the same motivation as Russia to escalate to secure their interests (and thus choose de-escalation instead).⁸⁴

Russian strategy at this stage of war is sometimes characterized as Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD).⁸⁵ But in the assessment of Michael Kofman, this is a “dangerously mis-leading” concept when applied to Russia and “a vision of a Russian doctrine or strategy for warfighting

81 Johnson, *Russia’s Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities, Regional Crises, and Nuclear Thresholds*. See also Katarzyna Zysk, “Escalation and Nuclear Weapons in Russia’s Military Strategy,” *RUSI Journal* 163, no. 2 (2018), p1-12.

82 Remark attributed to Victor Mikhailov, a senior figure in the Russian nuclear weapons program. See Keith Payne and Mark Schneider, “Russia’s New National Security Strategy,” *Real Clear Defense* (February 11, 2016).

83 *Ibid.*

84 See Anya Fink, Michael Kofman, and Jeffrey Edmonds, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts* (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, April 2020) and Fink and Kofman, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Key Debates and Players in Military Thought* (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, April 2020).

85 Elbridge Colby and Jonathan Solomon, “Facing Russia: Conventional Defence and Deterrence in Europe,” *Survival* 57, no. 6 (December 2015-January 2016), p21-50.

that frankly does not exist.”⁸⁶ He goes on to argue that:

Many of the capabilities have more significant functional roles in Russian plans to defend and attack, rather than interdict. . . Russian strategy flows from a coherent vision about the relationship of technology, operational art, and strategy. It is born out in a strong belief in the decisiveness of strategic operations as force integrating concepts. By organizing the force around scalable operations with strategic objectives, the Russian intent is not to attain tactical advantage with advanced capabilities but instead to overcoming tactical shortcomings through superior operational design and strategic thinking.⁸⁷

The role of nuclear weapons in Russian military strategy for this stage of war has been a matter of significant debate among Western experts. Some analysts believe Russia has a nuclear escalate to de-escalate strategy—that is, they plan to employ non-strategic nuclear weapons to signal their resolve and break NATO’s will to continue to defend its interests. The evidence strongly supports the view that Russian leaders envision a central role for nuclear weapons in regional conflicts, have doctrine for such use, have modernized both weapons and delivery systems, and conduct exercises. The evidence does not provide a basis for knowing in advance (1) whether such weapons would actually be employed and if so (2) how early in a conflict that would occur.⁸⁸

One Russian expert at the Academy of Military Sciences, Sergey Brezkun, set out his thinking in 2015 about the need for de-escalation ladders (as opposed to escalation ladders) in regional conflict and the potential values of limited nuclear strikes early in a war against NATO to signal Moscow’s resolve. His case:

86 Kofman, “It’s Time to Talk about A2/AD.”

87 Ibid.

88 For more on this debate see Bruno Tertrais, “Russia’s Nuclear Policy: Worrying for the Wrong Reasons,” *Survival* 60, no. 3 (2018), p33-44; Olga Oliker, “Russian Nuclear Doctrine: What We Know, What We Don’t Know, and What that Means,” *CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program* (online article) (May 2016); and Katarzyna Zysk, “Escalation and Nuclear Weapons in Russian Military Strategy,” *RUSI Journal* 168, no. 2 (2018), p4-15.

There is in principle a significant amount of time and a real opportunity to de-escalate the aggression and eliminate it in the initial phase (if events develop in a way that is not favorable to Russia) by the limited use of the nuclear factor . . . by way of a demonstration. . . It is important here not so much to achieve a major, purely military success as to demonstrate Russia's resolve to use nuclear weapons on an ever increasing scale in the event that the aggression against it continues. In other words, in the initial phase [of regional war] strikes at the aggressor's potential are needed that could sober them up and not embitter them—that is, precisely strikes without catastrophic consequences.⁸⁹

Russia must also contend with the possibility that this strategy too will fail. Especially if Russian escalation has inflicted significant costs on Western publics and economies, NATO leaders might conclude that restoration of the status quo ante (that is, reversing the *fait accompli*) is not a sufficient outcome to secure the peace to follow, as it would leave Russia in a position to renew battle at a moment of its choosing. They might choose to capture and/or destroy threatening military forces, and not just those implicated in the *fait accompli*. They might see punishment as a necessary part of a war termination strategy.

For this stage of conflict, Russia has, in President Putin's words, "kept its nuclear powder dry."⁹⁰ It has modernized and adapted its strategic nuclear forces to be able to pose a credible threat of destruction to any state that threatens its own sovereignty and integrity. Its leaders see the displays of those forces, backed by clear statements of leadership intent, as credible tools of deterrence. Its experts also speculate about various ways in which limited attacks on the U.S. homeland might be useful in making Americans fearful and thus paralyzing its government from acting.⁹¹ Victory in this phase of war would mean for Russia an escape from a military fiasco with both its sovereignty and its means of self defense intact.

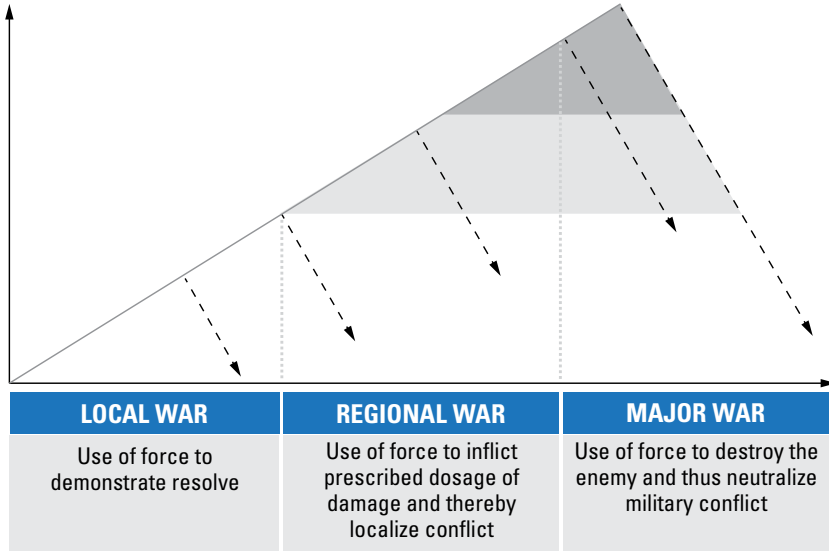
89 Sergey Brezkun, "Russia Needs Not an Escalation but a Deescalation Ladder," *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye* (online article) (November 27, 2015).

90 President Putin, "Strength is the Guarantee of Security for Russia," *Rossikaya Gazeta* (February 20, 2012).

91 A.Y. Sterlin, A.A. Protasov, and S.V. Kreidin, "Current Transformations in the Concepts and Power Instruments of Strategic Deterrence," *Military Thought* 3 (2019).

RUSSIA'S APPROACH TO REGIONAL CONFLICT

- Employ an expanded “strategic weapons set”...
- Through newly revised “strategic operations”...
- To inflict a “prescribed dosage” of damage ... to “sober, not enrage” the enemy
- In order to induce enemy political choices for de-escalation on Russian terms



Strategic Operations

1. Deflection of Aerospace Attack
2. Aerospace Operation
3. Destruction of Critically Important Targets
4. Nuclear Forces Operation
5. In a Continental Theater of Military Operations
6. In an Oceanic Theater of Military Operations

Source: Johnson, *Russia's Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities, Regional Crises, and Nuclear Thresholds*

Figure 1.

This review of Russia’s apparent theory of victory in a war with NATO helps to illuminate key aspects of Russian strategic thought. It takes an integrated view of the instruments of deterrence, encompassing diverse military and non-military means.⁹² It is fundamentally coercive in nature. It sees deterrence effects as flowing from continu-

92 Kristin ven Bruusgaard, “Russian Strategic Deterrence,” *Survival* 58, no. 4 (2016).

RUSSIA'S APPROACH TO STRATEGIC DETERRENCE

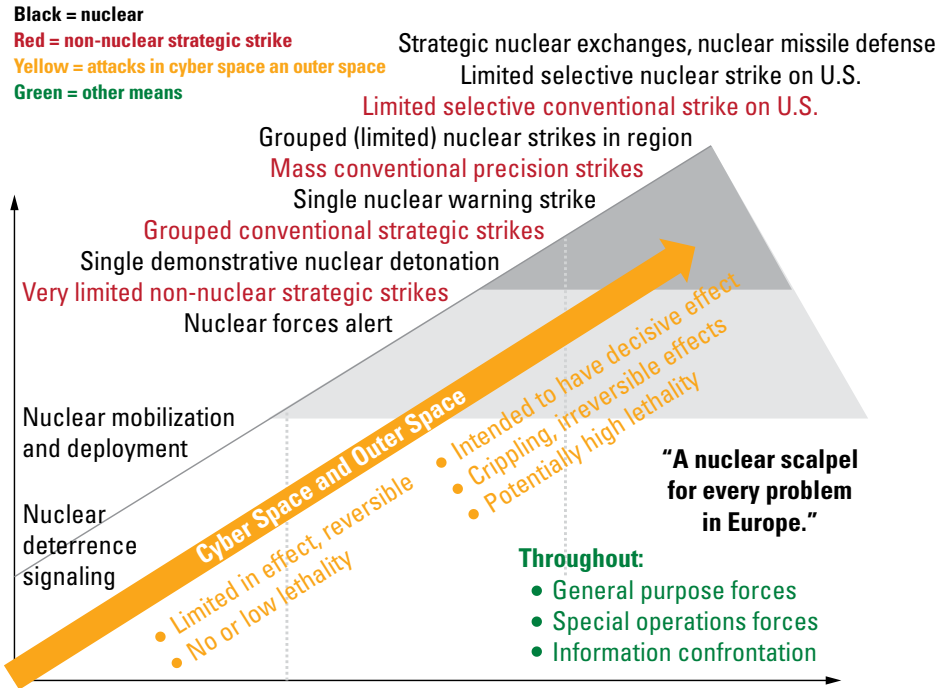


Figure 2.

ous psychological pressure on its adversaries and from an impressive preparedness to fight and win at the operational and strategic levels of war if deterrence fails.⁹³

This review also helps to illuminate the central role that action in the Gray Zone has in enabling success in crisis and war. Russian actions in circumstances short of war can help set the conditions for success in war—by sowing fear and division, by creating an image of a terrible price to be paid in confronting Russia militarily, by creating the expectation that political confrontation would become military confrontation, and by reinforcing the expectation that any military confrontation would be a nuclear confrontation.

Figures 1 and 2 provide brief graphic depictions of Russia’s approach to regional conflict and to strategic deterrence.

93 For more see Dimitry Adamsky, “From Moscow with Coercion: Russian Deterrence Theory and Strategic Culture,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 1 (2017), p33-60.

China Versus the United States and its East Asian Allies

The similarities between Russian and Chinese approaches are striking, but so too are a few key differences.⁹⁴ Like Russia, China considers multiple possible pathways to conflict with the United States. The first and most obvious pathway is war over Taiwan. But maritime confrontations loom increasingly large in threat analysis in both countries. And there remains the unsettled question of what war China might choose to fight in case war was to erupt again on the Korean Peninsula.

Like Russia, China focuses on scenarios involving a potential fait accompli and various actions the United States and its allies might take contrary to Beijing's wishes, including steps to prolong, expand, or escalate a conflict.

"Gaining mastery" is the objective to deny the enemy's invasion or attack intention and subdue the enemy. The strategy holds up the principle of "not firing the first shot." It doesn't mean to give up the "advantageous changes" in campaign or tactical operations, for the "first shot on the plane of politics and strategy must be differentiated from "the first shot" on that of tactics."⁹⁵

Like Russia, its strategy emphasizes "active defense."

We must strike the enemy's nodes to destroy his network and combine annihilation warfare with attrition warfare. . . when we strike the enemy's operational system, we must grasp the operational center of gravity and choose the targets and sequence for strike.⁹⁶

Like Russia, it attaches significant value to information warfare, very broadly defined, as an effective tool for achieving desired political and military outcomes.

94 Drawn heavily from Peng and Yao, *The Science of Military Strategy*. For a general review of the development of China's military strategy, see Fravel, *Active Defense*.

95 Peng and Yao, *Science of Military Strategy*, p426.

96 *Ibid.*, 464.

Seizing the command of information has become a prerequisite for seizing the command of land, sea, and air, as well as the key of seizing and holding battlefield initiative. . . . Modern psychological warfare is not only directed at the enemy troops; it also aims at the whole population of the hostile nation. . . . however its chief target is the enemy strategic decision-making staff. . . . Modern psychological warfare is exercised not only in war but also in peacetime largely and incessantly.⁹⁷

Like Russia, it believes that the centers of gravity for the American way of war are power projection, alliances, and domestic political support—all of which it is confident it can target and manipulate to its advantage in crisis and war.

Aiming at the situation inside the enemy camp and the structure of his war system, making use of contradictions, we should break the enemy's aggressive alliance by every possible means and destroy his conspiracy.⁹⁸

Like Russia, it imagines and plans for full-spectrum deterrence and full-spectrum war-fighting (with one key exception, as discussed below). Taylor Fravel has described the emergence of these factors in the 1990s and early 2000s, noting that China's presidents were key motivators of this new focus.⁹⁹ Like Russia, it attributes a psychological role for deterrence—its stated role is “to shock and awe the opponent.”¹⁰⁰

Like Russia, it sees asymmetry of stake, geography, and governance as critical to its theory of victory and as giving it significant advantages against a major power adversary with significant escalation potential.

Like Russia, it has devoted time, energy, and high-level focus to understanding the potential escalation dynamics of a regional war and to developing a strategy for securing its objectives at reasonable cost and risk. A cornerstone of this strategy (also like Russia) is there is a set

97 Ibid., 338, 372.

98 Ibid., 472.

99 Fravel, *Active Defense*, p228-241.

100 Peng and Yao, *Science of Military Strategy*, p214.

of escalatory actions that will have the effect of achieving decisive effects without enraging those whom it attacks. This thinking is reflected in China's so-called war control strategy.

The objective of war control is to prevent the occurrence of war and, once war is inevitable, it is necessary to control its horizontal and vertical escalation and do the most to reduce the negative consequences or to gain a major victory at minor cost.¹⁰¹

Proceeding from the assessment that the era of unlimited wars has passed, this strategy envisions the application of military, political, economic, and diplomatic capabilities to shape the overall situation in China's favor in order to win while keeping limited wars limited. In its military aspects, it focuses on posturing forces for intimidation and deterrence, subordinating military actions to political objectives, choosing strikes on targets promising decisive effects while avoiding strikes on targets promising vengeful counterattack, balancing offense and defense, taking care not to enrage an enemy, and ensuring political control of the war termination phase.¹⁰²

But there are some noteworthy differences between the Russian and Chinese approaches. The most striking difference relates to the role of nuclear weapons and their integration with conventional deterrence and war-fighting. Relative to Russia, the role and degree of integration are quite modest. China's tradition of nuclear minimalism is deeply engrained. Its leaders do not see a large nuclear arsenal as necessary to establish its claim as a major power or to secure its deterrence objectives. No first use is more than political rhetoric. Instead, China's leaders have emphasized the development of weapons it considers more useable in conflict and thus more credible as deterrents for non-nuclear contingencies—especially conventionally-armed

101 Ibid., 197. See also Alison A. Kaufman and Daniel Hartnett, *Managing Conflict: Examining Recent PLA Writings on Escalation Control* (Arlington, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, 2016); T.R. Heath *et al.*, eds., *The PLA and China's Rejuvenation* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017); and Burgess Laird, *War Control: Chinese Writings on the Control of Escalation in Crisis and Conflict* (Washington, D.C.: Center for New American Security, 2017).

102 See "China's Thinking on Escalation: Evidence from Chinese Military Writings," in Forrest Morgan *et al.*, eds., *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008), p47-81.

ballistic missiles, counter-space weapons, and cyber means.

A second noteworthy difference is revealed in an elaboration of the “fundamental principles” of war control, one of which is “to compromise appropriately and to strive for the benefit for both sides or all sides . . . Many crises are not ‘zero sum.’”¹⁰³ This is a theme that is alarmingly difficult to find in Russian strategic thought.

An Assessment

Faced with the unipolar challenge in the 1990s, leaders in Russia and China focused on putting their intellectual houses in order. They turned to their military experts to develop a set of ideas about modern conflict and about how to bring the United States and its allies to culminating points in an unfolding conflict—that is, about how to sharpen their choices about whether and how to proceed in defending the interests that have been put at risk. To do this successfully, they had to understand the nature of those potential choices, a great deal about both Blue and Red, and the means of affecting them in a manner to induce Blue restraint. Although their national approaches are somewhat different, those differences are in degree, not kind, with the exception of the regional nuclear role.

The resulting theories of victory also meet the three explanatory criteria set out at the end of Chapter 2. They explain how it might be possible to persuade the United States and/or its allies to sacrifice some important interest rather than continue to fight and/or escalate and to acquiesce to a long-term settlement favoring Red objectives. They also explain how their possible escalatory actions would not lead to an uncontrollable spiral of escalation. As we will see in Chapter 5, they also explain how it would be possible to fulfill the ambition to re-make regional and global orders without going to war.

But are they also sound? They have not so far been tested, except perhaps in war games. They give a strong impression of being systematic and well supported in their expert communities. But there is also an element of wishful thinking in some of the expectations about Western behavior. Indeed, their theories appear to make some assumptions about Western behavior that we would not accept. These include the assumptions that (1) the citizens of the Western democracies would

103 *Ibid.*, 205.

not be willing to bear costs or risks to defend their interests, (2) that Russian escalation would induce Western restraint rather than even stronger resolve, and (3) that limited nuclear employment by Russia against the West would result in a Western choice to de-escalate rather than to punish the nuclear aggressor and teach the right lesson for history, as the American public would see it.

In short, these theories place a huge bet on an understanding of Western stake and resolve that isn't well supported by historical experience. Their calculus of asymmetry of stake and resolve is less theory than wishful thinking. They appear poised to repeat the tragic miscalculations of leaders in Imperial Japan in striking Pearl Harbor, North Korean leaders in attacking the South, Saddam Hussein in annexing Kuwait, and Osama bin Laden in conducting the 9/11 attacks. Contemporary Russian and Chinese leaders would be well served to remember the cautionary advice to the Soviets of Herman Kahn. In his famous book *On Escalation*, he reminded Soviet leaders of the American propensity to see the world in terms of good and evil and right and wrong. Thus, he cautioned, as a people we are slow to rouse but once roused are willing to use "extravagant force to expunge a hated enemy."¹⁰⁴ In employing a nuclear weapon against the United States or against someone the United States has promised to protect, an enemy may discover that the United States is both sobered and enraged.¹⁰⁵

An important related question is: Has the existence of these theories changed the behavior of leaders in Russia and China? These theories have certainly involved military reform and procurement as organizations and capabilities have been tailored to new purposes. The combination of improvements to strategies, plans, and capabilities seems to have had the effect of increasing leadership confidence and underwriting more assertive international roles, military and otherwise. In President Putin's 2018 assessment, "efforts to contain Russia have failed."¹⁰⁶ In the 2019 assessment of China's leadership, "the configuration of strategic power is becoming more balanced."¹⁰⁷ Whether that new confidence might also translate into a willingness to risk direct military confrontation with the United States remains the central but

104 Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New York: Praeger, 1965).

105 Roberts, "How Wars Must End."

106 From his March 1, 2018 televised speech to the Russian people.

107 People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in the New Era*, 2019.

unanswerable question. The answer must have something to do with their assessment of their progress in pursuing their revisionist agendas in circumstance short of war. We will turn to this matter in the Gray Zone discussion in a later section. But the answer must also have something to do with whether Russian and Chinese leadership can remain confident in their theories of victory as the United States and its allies craft their own theories and modify their strategies, operational concepts, and capabilities accordingly.

Toward a Blue Theory of Victory

A survey of U.S. national strategy documents of past and present administrations and of the professional literature published by the war colleges and other military educational institutions suggests that interest in the new strategic problem has been episodic and ad hoc, with focus improving in recent years. Many of the pieces of the puzzle can now be found, usually crafted by people with expertise in a single war-fighting domain. But there are not enough pieces of the puzzle to discern its overall size, shape, and character.

For the particular task of developing a Blue theory of victory that meets the requirements set out at the end of Chapter 2, a three-step process is needed. We must:

1. “Go to school” on Red the way Red has gone to school on Blue
2. Develop a generic counter to the generic Red theory of victory
3. Tailor that model to specific regional contexts

These are all tasks that the U.S. expert community can and should do in partnership with U.S. allies, who have interests and equities to account for as well as (in some cases) a good deal of intellectual capital of their own.

This chapter sketches out starting points for each of these tasks. But before doing so, it is useful to understand Blue’s collective underperformance. What accounts for the fact that “we’re already behind in adapting” (recalling Chairman Dunford’s observation)? Past experience provides some important lessons for future progress.

Why Are We Already Behind?

It is not as if the U.S. government has ignored this problem. Since at least 2009, national leaders have regularly conducted their reviews of national security strategy and defense policy and posture, made their judgments about the types of conflicts requiring U.S. preparations, generated military planning guidance, updated operational plans, and

sought improved capabilities.¹⁰⁸ The Obama administration in its first term put its military planning focus on “21st century contingencies” and pathways to escalation arising from efforts by regional aggressors to escalate their way out of failed military adventures.¹⁰⁹ In its second term, it put a clearer focus on major power contingencies and renewed military planning against Russia.¹¹⁰ In addition, it implemented a Defense Innovation Initiative to advance thinking about advanced capabilities and deterrence.¹¹¹ All of these efforts involved intense and sustained civil-military cooperation. The Trump administration has brought major power rivalry to the center of U.S. security policy—along with an emphasis on winning. To cite its 2017 *National Security Strategy*:

We must convince adversaries that we can and will defeat them—not just punish them if they attack the United States. We must ensure the ability to deter potential enemies by denial, convincing them that they cannot accomplish their objectives through the use of force or other forms of aggression.¹¹²

Nor have U.S. alliances ignored this problem. Already in 2012, NATO conducted a review of its overall deterrence and defense posture; ever since, and especially after Russia’s forced annexation of Crimea in 2014, it has been adjusting that posture consistent with its commitment to ensure it remains “fit for purpose” in a changing security debate. For an even longer period, U.S. alliances with the Republic of Korea and Japan have been working to “adapt and strengthen” regional deterrence architectures to cope with a nuclear-arming North Korea and China’s increasing strength and assertiveness. These efforts have brought with them new debates within alliance structures

108 They have also commissioned supporting analyses from federally funded research centers, some of which has been made publicly available. See for example Forrest E. Morgan, *Dancing with the Bear: Managing Escalation in a Conflict with Russia* (Paris: IFRI Security Studies Center, 2012).

109 The White House, *Report on Nuclear Employment of Strategy of the United States*, specified in Section 491 of 10 U.S.C. (June 12, 2013) and Department of Defense *Quadrennial Defense Review 2014* (2014).

110 Ash Carter, “A Strong and Balanced Approach to Russia,” *Survival* 58, no. 6 (2016), p51-62.

111 Cheryl Pellerin, “Hagel Announces New Defense Innovation, Reform Efforts,” DOD News (November 15, 2014).

112 *National Security Strategy of the United States* (December 2017), p28.

and in capitals about the new strategic problem.

But these planning activities and intra-governmental policy debates generated little sustained attention from those not participating directly in them. If the NDS Commission has it right, the thinking about strategic conflict done by participants in nuclear posture reviews, for example, has not penetrated into the thinking of leaders in the armed services, combatant commands, or the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Nor have non-governmental experts been engaged anything more than episodically. As a former STRATCOM commander put it in 2018 (during a not-for-attribution discussion): “the analytic community has been Missing in Action on this agenda while the U.S. military community has been working it for a decade.”

What explains these unhappy facts? Part of the problem is competing priorities. After all, since 9/11 the United States has been involved in protracted, difficult counter-insurgencies and a sustained global counter-terrorism campaign.

Part of the problem is the inherent complexity of modern strategic conflict. Recall Chairman Dunford’s summary: transregional, multi-domain, and multifunctional.

Another part of the problem is the strategic atrophy previously discussed. In the first two decades of the Cold War, the United States reorganized, built new organizations, and invested broadly to do the needed new thinking about the changed and changing world. In the first decade after the Cold War, it stood down many of those organizations and disinvested broadly. So far at least, there has been no renewal of the scale or quality comparable to 60 years ago. Federally funded research and development centers (FFRDCs) working for the Department of Defense have only recently begun to reconstitute some of the capacity for strategic analysis stood down in the 1990s.

Part of the problem is the allure of false remedies. Some turn to history for prior solutions to similar problems; NATO’s flexible response doctrine of 1968 provided a solution to the problem of conventional/nuclear integration that looks appealing to some today in a very different context. Others turn to new technology; missile defense, conventional prompt global strike, nuclear modernization, and now hypersonic missiles have all been touted at one time or another as the solution to instability in the new strategic landscape.

And to be frank, part of the problem is hubris, as argued above by

Peter Roberts. That hubris stems in part from the dominant position of the West after the Cold War, in part from the inexperience of military loss by current national leadership, and in part from a sense that the United States has all the trump cards it needs in its nuclear arsenal. Tom Ehrhard has elaborated on the consequences of such hubris: “Winners almost always fall prey to hubris; dramatic winners always do. This is the pathology of victory. But history exacts a price for hubris. The U.S. national security bureaucracy has been afflicted by a multitude of strategic viruses over the past 30 years.”¹¹³

A special form of hubris attaches to the notion that the United States can gain strategic dominance over major power rivals. They have the will and the capability to deny us that goal, as their military modernization programs clearly affirm. All too often, senior political and military decision-makers dismiss escalation risks with the argument that our enemies “wouldn’t dare” because “we have the ability to turn them into glass parking lots.” Asked if such a smoldering ruin would look like victory to the U.S. president, American people, and the world, silence generally follows. This is wishful thinking—of the most dangerous kind.

The lessons of these experiences are clear enough. Looking to the future, sustained leadership focus and engagement are essential. A more integrated DOD study architecture is needed. New concepts and approaches should be rigorously tested. More bandwidth is needed within and outside the U.S. government. Hubris should be punctured by leaders before experience does so.

Finally, part of the problem is the absence of a clear and compelling formulation of the new strategic problem, one that focuses attention on all of its many dimensions and on the right questions. Such a formulation must be informed by the thinking of adversaries who believe they can get the best of us regardless of our hubris. In short, we need a theory of victory of our own.

Blue Task: Go to School on Red

Just as Red went to school on Blue two or more decades ago, Blue must now get smart about Red. That is, the United States and its allies must understand the strengths and vulnerabilities of Russia and China,

113 Thomas P Ehrhard, “Treating the Pathologies of Victory: Hardening the Nation for Strategic Competition,” *2020 Index of U.S. Military Strength* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 2019), p19.

their ways of modern warfare, and their theories of victory. Some good headway has been made on this task in recent years, as Chapter 3 attests. As a general proposition, it appears that better progress has been made in understanding Russian and Chinese capabilities and operational concepts than in understanding their overall strategic approach to conflict with the West and their theories of victory.

The near absence in expert literature of an analysis of vulnerabilities as the leaders of Russia and China might perceive them is striking. A key vulnerability must be uncertainty about the extent to which they can count on sustained public support in time of crisis and war with the United States and its allies. As leaders in both countries have had to resort to extreme measures of control and repression to maintain their grip on power, the strength and durability of their internal political coalitions must be a source of great uncertainty in a circumstance in which their actions are bringing significant costs and risks to their countries and regimes.

Also striking by its near absence is any discussion of their net assessments of their progress in advancing their revisionist agendas and in shifting the balance of strategic power and influence in their favor. Do they see themselves as succeeding or failing in their efforts and, whatever their conclusion, are they more or less likely now to accept the risk of direct armed confrontation with the United States and its allies?

Blue Task: Develop a Generic Theory of Victory

Let's recall the generic Red Theory of Victory:

1. If war with the United States appears inevitable, it is necessary and possible to create a *fait accompli* and to deter a decisive U.S. response by reminding it and its allies of their vulnerabilities.
2. If the United States resolves to try to restore the status quo ante militarily, this can be effectively halted by separating the allies from each other and from the United States with threats and attacks that differentiate among them.
3. If these efforts fail, U.S. military action can be made sufficiently costly to it by kinetic and non-kinetic attacks to stall its pursuit of its war objectives. In extreme circumstances, kinetic attacks might also include attack

with non-strategic nuclear weapons.

4. If these efforts fail to bring timely war termination and something significant is newly at risk, then reminding the United States of the vulnerability of its homeland to attack will cause the United States to come to terms.

This theory is built on coercion, blackmail, and brinkmanship to achieve specific aims while keeping a limited war limited. It presents the United States and its allies with a choice between de-escalation and risky escalation at major decision points. Each of these is a “culminating point” as Clausewitz conceived it—that point where a choice must be made between the costs and risks of continued war and the stake.

What core principle should guide the Blue theory of victory? A number of concepts are in discussion. One is deterrence. It’s certainly the case that the United States seeks to deter aggression by Russia and China and their escalation if war occurs. But as an organizing concept for strategy, its utility is diminished by its strong association with nuclear strategy and with the Cold War. Moreover, it doesn’t promise much in the way of new thinking about how to win.

An alternative core principle is escalation control. Such control would be nice to have but is simply impossible against a major power armed with nuclear weapons. Even in the rare instance when it might have the technical means to do so in a narrow, military-operational sense, the United States is unlikely to be able to prevent countering actions by the enemy that it would find costly.¹¹⁴

A better core principle begins with understanding Red’s approach, and presents Red with choices about how much risk and cost it is willing to bear to bring the United States and its allies to each decision point. Just as Red seeks to influence Blue’s calculus of benefit, cost, and risk, Blue should seek to influence Red’s. Think of this as the “escalation calculus.” The Joint Staff has described a “deterrence calculus” consisting of an enemy’s calculus of the benefits of a certain course of action, its costs and risks, and the potential benefits, costs, and risks of other potential courses of action, including inaction.¹¹⁵ This useful construct also fits the Red and Blue escalation calculus. Each side

114 Michael Fitzsimmons, “The False Allure of Escalation Dominance,” *War on the Rocks* (November 16, 2017).

115 Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Strategic Deterrence Joint Operating Concept* (December 2006).

wants to affect the other's assessment of the benefits, costs, and risks of different courses of action at key decision points.

In short, the core concept of the Blue theory of victory should be countering coercion by stripping away Red's confidence in their escalation calculus. A key benefit of such an approach would be to increase the confidence of Blue in its escalation calculus. Such an approach, if successful, would enable the United States to seize and keep the initiative, shift the costs and risks of escalation onto Red, and compel the enemy to accept U.S. terms for ceasing hostilities.

This approach can be applied to the generic problem above with the following hypotheses.

1. Blue can deter the attempted fait accompli by composing a conventional deterrent that cannot readily be overwhelmed and, if attacked, would implicate many in the resulting response. Blue can credibly claim that an attack on an ally's vital interests would run the same risks for Red as an attack on U.S. vital interests. Moreover, it can reduce the coercive value of threatened missile attacks with missile defense. In short, an improved conventional deterrent with improved strike capability would raise Red's expected costs while missile defenses would reduce Red's expected coercive benefit.
2. U.S. allies can be sufficiently assured to keep them in the fight with the movement of forces, both defensive and offensive, and with the further integration of capabilities. They can also display their own resolve not to be coerced out of defending their interests, separately from the display of U.S. resolve to defend them. Red might choose to respond with intensified attacks but would have to contend with the risk that these would generate pressure from U.S. allies on the United States to seek a decisive outcome, thus raising the risk for Red.
3. Blue can sustain power projection with better protection of assets in their ports of embarkation and debarkation, more dispersed operations, and better homeland defense of critical infrastructure. Blue can also retaliate sharply in response to regional missile strikes in a way that should disincentivize further Red escalation.
4. Red employment of nuclear weapons can be deterred with

a credible threat to respond. If such deterrence fails and Red conducts a limited nuclear strike, a proportionate response can awaken Red to its miscalculation of Blue resolve and would not lead to further nuclear escalation by Red because Red would understand that such actions would create new stakes for Blue.

5. The United States can deter attacks on its homeland with a mix of defensive and offensive capabilities and clear threats.
6. With improved resilience in cyber space and outer space, the United States and its allies can reduce Red's expected benefit of attack. Improved U.S. and allied strike capabilities in these domains would increase Red's expected costs.
7. The perceived asymmetry of stake favoring Red is simply wrong. A regional conventional war against a nuclear-armed adversary would raise fundamental questions about U.S. credibility as a security guarantor and about the post-war reputation of nuclear weapons. These are significant stakes. The United States can effectively communicate its stake.
8. The asymmetry of governance plays to Blue's advantage, not Red's. Their strongman reputations notwithstanding, leaders in Russia and China lack political legitimacy, as they hold power in part with the barrel of the gun and coercion. Their legitimacy will be exposed in a national crisis involving high cost and risk. Blue's democratic character is a source of strategic strength in that divided publics usually come together when attacked and their unity provides the resolve necessary to defeat an aggressor.
9. The asymmetry of geography is not consequential. Any significant attack on U.S. forces or on a U.S. ally would be met with a significant U.S. response. Further Red escalation to attacks on the U.S. homeland would change the nature of the war for the United States by creating significant new stake for it, justifying a significant response onto the attacker.

Victory for Blue in crisis and war should thus be defined as preservation of the sovereignty and safety of the United States and its allies, of the regional security order that the challenger seeks to undermine with his actions, and of the integrity of the U.S. role as a security guarantor. Victory requires effectiveness in bringing an armed challenger to

a culminating point, preferably sooner rather than later, where it judges that the costs and risks of continued war are unbearable. The theory involves bringing Red leadership repeatedly to decision points it would rather not face, while escaping Red's efforts to do the same to Blue, thus stripping away their confidence in their escalation calculus.

In this theory of victory, the United States would not "control" escalation. It would impose new cost and risk on its adversary to influence their escalation calculus. Adversary responses would not be "controlled." They would be coerced or incentivized. Some forms of Blue escalation may not be decisive in influencing that calculus. The tangible escalation thresholds would be at decisive points, where an adversary is compelled to choose between a course of action that isn't working and is growing more costly and risky and a course of action that safeguards some interests even if it falls short of victory. This is a counter-escalation strategy as opposed to an escalation-control strategy.

A central, unresolved question in this generic Blue theory is whether victory requires punishment of Red. This question would be especially sharp in a situation in which Red employs nuclear weapons. Would the victims of nuclear-backed aggression and nuclear attack see a post-war return to the status quo ante as an acceptable outcome? Would the status quo ante be seen as a viable basis for an enduring and just settlement to the issue in dispute? If the answer to both questions is no, then Red will seek some way to punish Red without motivating it to continue or expand its employment of nuclear weapons. In the circumstance, it may have means for doing so; or it may not. This is a dilemma that should not be wished away. But the theory is that Blue will not have to face this dilemma because the existence of robust strategic nuclear forces makes any nuclear escalation too risky.

Blue Task: Tailor for NATO

Whereas Russia has a comprehensive strategy for regional cross-domain coercion and war against NATO, NATO has a general deterrence strategy and comprehensive deterrence and defense posture. The general deterrence strategy follows from NATO leadership assessment that it is "an alliance without enemies," even if it has some difficult neighbors.¹¹⁶ The comprehensive deterrence and defense posture

116 NATO, *Active Engagement, Modern Defence: Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of*

encompasses an “appropriate mix” of nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities for deterrence that, the alliance promises, will be adapted to remain “fit for purpose” as the security environment changes.¹¹⁷

Following Russia’s armed annexation of Crimea, at the summer 2014 Wales summit NATO took steps to strengthen conventional deterrence along its northern flank and protection against Russian hybrid warfare techniques. Two years later in Warsaw, NATO made additional decisions to adapt deterrence to new multi-domain challenges presented by Russia and to bolster its nuclear deterrence policy. Since the inaugural summit of the Trump era, NATO’s focus has been on consolidating efforts to strengthen and adapt the deterrence posture.

Over the last few years the debate among NATO experts about how best to respond to Russia’s preparations for war has reflected a number of ideas around which a NATO theory of victory in time of crisis and war could be built.¹¹⁸ It would include the following premises:

1. If one or more of its members is attacked, the Alliance will be united and resolved to defend both the ally and the principle that an attack on one is an attack on all. Attempts at coercion and limited demonstrations of force to generate fear will only increase this resolve.
2. A tempting conventional *fait accompli* can be (has been) made un-tempting by strengthening conventional deterrence on NATO’s northern flank, where a multi-national force (which includes troops from all three of NATO’s nuclear-armed members) serves as a tripwire, compelling Russia to kill soldiers of many countries and to face the prospect of a quagmire.
3. Any attempt to “de-couple” the United States from the defense of Europe by threatening or conducting limited attacks on the U.S. homeland will only backfire, as the United States has an abiding interest in a stable, peaceful Europe. Moreover, such attacks would bring out the strong sense of shared histories and values in the American body politic.
4. Moscow has many economic, political, and military reasons

the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (2010).

117 NATO, *Deterrence and Defense Posture Review* (2012).

118 Lukasz Kulesa, *Envisioning a Russia-NATO Conflict: Implications for Deterrence Stability: A Euro-Atlantic Security Report* (London: European Leadership Network, 2018).

not to escalate a conflict in Europe that is going badly for it. But if it chooses to do so, whether vertically or horizontally, NATO can shock leaders in Moscow into understanding their severe miscalculation with its diverse set of kinetic and non-kinetic strike capabilities. NATO can also reduce Russia's expected benefits of limited kinetic and non-kinetic strikes on the West with limited missile defenses and resilience in cyber space and outer space.

5. Russia would not cross the threshold to major nuclear war in Europe or to unrestrained strategic warfare against the United States because of the credibility of the strategic deterrents of NATO's three nuclear-armed members.
6. Russia would not cross the threshold to limited nuclear war in Europe because (a) it fears an escalation spiral and (b) NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements are effective in signaling the collective nuclear resolve of the alliance and in ensuring limited, in-theater retaliation for any limited, in-theater Russian nuclear attacks.
7. If Russia were to cross the nuclear threshold, it would likely do so in only a limited way as a first step. Its further escalation could be deterred with a proportionate NATO response that demonstrates its intention to continue to defend its interests and with the preparation of additional forces that demonstrate the capability to do so.
8. NATO's stake in a war with Russia will not be less than Russia's. Indeed, by raising questions about the sovereignty and integrity of a NATO member in a way that would not be raised for Russia in a limited defensive war, NATO's stake would be more substantial than Russia's. Moreover, for the United States a failure to respond effectively would undermine U.S. security commitments globally.

To reiterate, this is a collection of ideas in episodic discussion within the alliance. To the best of my knowledge, they are not written down in a single place. They have certainly not been knit together by the alliance into a coherent theory of victory.

What would a theory of victory look like if it were embedded in a NATO strategy of conflict with Russia? Utilizing the standard ends-

TOWARDS A NATO DETERRENCE STRATEGY AND POSTURE FIT FOR A NEW PURPOSE

NATO Ends	Ways	Means
1. To win the battle for the peace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Signal clearly the stake of the transatlantic community in a Europe whole and free Set expectations for NATO's wartime behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An updated Security Concept and coordinated messaging from capitals Explanations of NATO's own theory of victory, additional capabilities, and demonstrations Strategies to counter information warfare Investments in the capacity to "out-think and out-innovate" adversaries
2. To deter an article 5 challenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Negate Russian hybrid warfare Erode Russian confidence in its next escalatory step by making the fait accompli look more like a risky quagmire that also carries unacceptable risk of uncontrolled escalation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effective national homeland defense Avoidance of provocations Realistic capacities to protect and project; conduct exercises to demonstrate capacities
3. To reverse a fait accompli	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eject invading Russian forces Erode Russian confidence in its next escalatory step 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rapid reaction forces backed by reinforcements capable of projection into theater while under attack Demonstrations of the ability to penetrate Russian A2/AD bubbles Demonstrations of the reliability of NATO air and cruise missile defenses Demonstrations of integrated nuclear and conventional operations
4. To persist to achieve war aims despite rising costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Destroy invading Russian forces Widen war by attacking supporting military assets in Russia Erode Russian confidence in its next escalatory step 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assured strike capabilities, including deeper prompt non-nuclear Resilience in cyber space and outer space to more ambitious Russian attacks Dispersal of (stealthy) DCA Additional demonstrations of integrated nuclear and conventional operations
5. To deter limited nuclear attack in Europe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Displays of collective nuclear resolve and the transatlantic link Erode Russian confidence in its next escalatory step 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Modernized) nuclear sharing arrangements Credible limited nuclear responses to both limited and grouped nuclear attacks at all stages of conflict, together with high readiness at this stage and reliable adaptive planning High readiness of strategic forces of P-3 and coordination of messaging
6. To deter non-nuclear attacks on the U.S. homeland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Threats to credibly detect and defeat such attacks and retaliate by non-nuclear and nuclear means Erode Russian confidence in its next escalatory step 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited protection of U.S. national capital region from cruise missile attack along with improved anti-submarine warfare in the Atlantic and Pacific Kinetic and non-kinetic response options Displays of readiness of strategic forces and leadership statements of intent
7. To deter initiation of nuclear attacks on the U.S. homeland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Threats of massive retaliation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resilient nuclear forces Resilient command and control (requiring resilience in cyber space and outer space) Presidential statements of intent

Figure 3.

ways-means construct, Figure 3 provides an illustration.

In reference to Figure 3, note the need to think ahead to potential next escalatory steps by Russia. Steps up the escalatory ladder involve the imposition of both cost and risk on the adversary. In my experience, American experts often consider only the cost-imposing part of the strategy.

Note also the absence so far of any discussion of punishment of Russia as part of a NATO endgame strategy. As already discussed, NATO's deliberation over the necessity of punishing Russia would likely be highly contentious. Some would see it as necessary to secure a longer-term peace, whereas others would see it as contrary to that purpose by stoking Russian resentment. NATO leaders would have to make a judgment in the circumstance, which would likely be driven by assessments of the severity of the damage done by and to Russian forces and of the willingness of leaders in Moscow to abandon their project to remake the European security order after their failed aggression.

In "winning the peace," note the requirement for a balanced approach toward Russia encompassing political-military preparations to deter conflict with political-diplomatic measures to relax tensions and improve the political relationship with arms control and other means. The principles set out in NATO's 1967 Harmel report remain valid today: the alliance must maintain adequate military strength and political solidarity to deter aggression and other forms of pressure and to defend the territory of member states while at the same time pursuing a more stable relationship with Russia in which the underlying political issues can be resolved. As Harmel argued, "the ultimate political purpose of the alliance is to achieve a just and lasting peaceful order in Europe accompanied by appropriate security guarantees."¹¹⁹ Whether leaders in both East and West could find agreement on the requirement of a just and lasting peace is an open question (it proved impossible in 1945). A simple return to the status quo ante would satisfy neither. Such a peace would seem to require that one or the other abandon its principal project, whether the Western project to build a Europe whole and free or President Putin's project to un-do the existing Western order and implant something more deferential to Russian interests as he understands them. This seems unlikely

119 NATO, *Report of the Council on the Future Tasks of the Alliance* (1967).

without regime change in Moscow—or the West.

To enable this strategy, the alliance requires a diverse set of capabilities for deterrence and defense. For decades, NATO could comfortably say (in summit communiqués, for example) that it retained the “appropriate mix” of conventional and nuclear capabilities for deterrence and defense. But over the last decade, the deterrence and defense “toolkit” has expanded, with the addition of missile defenses as well as capabilities in the new military domains of cyber space and outer space. A graphic depiction of this comprehensive toolkit and its potential deterrence values is shown in Figure 4.

A central, difficult, and polarizing issue at NATO, as elsewhere, is the nuclear question: What is the proper and necessary role of nuclear weapons in NATO’s theory of victory and what capabilities are needed to enable that role? Decades of discussion, debate, and policymaking have led to an uneasy agreement among NATO heads of state and government that nuclear weapons have a role in NATO strategy. NATO has declared that it will remain a nuclear alliance so long as nuclear weapons remain and that its nuclear forces are an essential element of its deterrence and self-defense posture and the ultimate guarantee of the sovereignty and integrity of the allies.¹²⁰

But the focus here is on the specific question of nuclear weapons in NATO’s theory of victory. In facing a nuclear-armed adversary that gives nuclear weapons a central role, NATO’s nuclear forces can be understood to play limited but unique and so far irreplaceable roles. The fundamental role of NATO’s nuclear forces in time of crisis and war with Russia would be to strip away Moscow’s confidence that the costs of putting in jeopardy the sovereignty of a NATO member, of jeopardizing the integrity of the North Atlantic Treaty, and of nuclear employment toward these ends are bearable. They serve an equally important role in stripping away Moscow’s confidence that the risks of such aggression are in fact calculable.

NATO leaders have maintained the alliance’s unique nuclear sharing arrangements despite some significant political opposition within the participating nations. They have done so for two primary reasons. The sharing arrangements allow NATO members to demonstrate to Moscow their collective resolve to withstand nuclear aggression and to uphold the

120 NATO, *Strategic Concept 2010* (2010).

A COMPREHENSIVE REGIONAL DETERRENCE ARCHITECTURE

Blue Tools Key Red Thresholds	Conventional Forces	Missile Defense	Cyber	Non-nuclear Prompt Strike	NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements	U.S./U.K./ France Strategic Nuclear Forces
Attempt fait accompli	Deny quick win Create tripwire	Reduce expectation of decisive effect				
Expand conventional		Reduce benefits of limited strikes	Increase expected price of attack and make risks difficult to calibrate			
Expand cyber and space		Reduce confidence in sustained performance of A2/AD Seize and maintain some initiative				
Nuclear de-escalation strike		Deny confidence in "sober not enrage"			Display collective resolve	Retaliatory risk
Nuclear re-attack					Threat of limited retaliation	Significant risk threshold
Homeland attack						Uniquely credible threat

Figure 4.

principle that, even under nuclear attack, an attack on one will be treated as an attack on all. The sharing arrangements also demonstrate that U.S. nuclear forces would automatically be implicated in any Russian war against NATO, given the role of forward-deployed U.S. forces as a potent signal of the "transatlantic link." Without the sharing arrangements, NATO members would have to rely on the threats of its three nuclear-armed members to employ their strategic forces in a war in Europe, which may not be seen as credible in Moscow if it believes that the risk of such action is low given the effectiveness of its own strategic deterrent.

NATO's incremental approach to the development of its deterrence

strategy and posture has resulted in considerable progress. But has it been a success? Is it effective—or would it be in a time of crisis—in stripping away whatever confidence President Putin and his senior advisors might have about armed confrontation with NATO? The answer is not obvious, as NATO’s strategy appears untested against the requirements of a theory of victory. There is reason to be optimistic, as NATO’s adaptations to the post-2014 situation have substantially buttressed conventional deterrence of a potential fait accompli on its northern flank. But there is also reason to be pessimistic, as NATO’s success would hinge fundamentally on the effectiveness of the United States in projecting conventional power from the continental United States through contested spaces into the European theater of operations, as well as in managing escalation, which the NDS Commission concludes it is essentially unable to do at this time.¹²¹

This ambiguous conclusion reflects the fact that there is no agreed upon methodology for answering this question (“Has it been a success?”). NATO, like the United States, needs a net assessment methodology—one that accounts not simply for a quantitative balance of forces but also for the different strengths, vulnerabilities, and strategies of the two sides.

Blue Task: Tailor for Northeast Asia

Like NATO, U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea have been focused on adapting and strengthening deterrence for a changed and changing security environment. Likewise, these alliances have taken a broad view of the deterrence toolkit and pursued a comprehensive approach to adaptation and strengthening encompassing each of the military domains. Another similarity to NATO is that these alliances face difficult questions about whether the hard won progress of the last decade or two is sufficient to meet new challenges.¹²²

But the strategic landscape in Northeast Asia is different from the landscape in Europe in various significant ways. Three key differences stand out. One is the absence of a multilateral alliance structure. On the one hand, this simplifies matters: agreement between two is much

121 Heinrich Brauss, *NATO Beyond 70: Renewing a Culture of Readiness* (Tallinn, Estonia: International Centre for Defence and Security, 2018).

122 Brad Roberts, *Extended Deterrence and Strategic Stability in Northeast Asia* (Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies, 2013).

easier to achieve than consensus among 30. On the other hand, Japan and South Korea have an uneasy relationship, given the unsettled political questions from the past, resulting in real barriers to improved coordination in dealing with regional threats. Although they recognize that their divisions would likely seem to be a lucrative target for enemies in time of crisis and war, the barriers to substantially improved trilateral cooperation are substantial. This imposes some limits on a Blue theory of victory that emphasizes holding alliances together while an enemy tries to divide us.

Despite their differences, Japan and South Korea have a common concern about the credibility of the U.S. commitment to defend them. They worry that the United States will be de-coupled from their defense in time of crisis and war because of the risks to the U.S. homeland of defending them in an era of long-range nuclear-armed missile strike systems. This increases the salience of U.S. efforts to negate the coercive value of limited strikes by regional challengers.

Another key difference between Europe and Asia from the perspective of theories of victory is the presence of two rather than just one major military problem. Although NATO faces security challenges of multiple kinds and from different directions, its primary deterrence challenge comes from Russia, seemingly the only state adversary that might pose a challenge to a NATO Article 5 guarantee. In contrast, in Northeast Asia, threats emanate from both North Korea and China—threats that are experienced differently by Japan and South Korea. The U.S.-Japan alliance must address the twin challenges of protecting Japan from North Korean attack and from Chinese pressure campaigns, whereas the U.S. alliance with the RoK focuses primarily on the defense of the RoK from potential attack by North Korea. This requires tailoring of the theory of victory to multiple purposes. NATO may come to face this challenge if its relationship with Iran becomes more confrontational.

A third key difference is the much more modest role of nuclear weapons in China's military and political strategies relative to the role they play in Russia's strategies. This is not to imply that their role is unimportant; on the contrary, China attaches high value to its nuclear deterrent, as its large investments in modernizing and diversifying that force in recent decades attest. But whereas Russia puts its nuclear forces front and center in its strategy and has prepared for nuclear war-

fighting at every level of combat, China keeps its nuclear forces in the background, adheres to a no-first-use strategy, and prepares to control conflict and to prevail by conventional means. This puts different demands on the Blue theory of victory from those generated by the high degree of conventional-nuclear integration evident in Russian strategy.

Thus, the region presents a number of scenarios for U.S. defense planners. Many of these are in the Gray Zone and thus are treated in the next chapter. Some involved armed confrontations with North Korea. As argued elsewhere in this essay, these scenarios would likely be similar to those involving major powers. But the focus here is on wars between major powers and the single most worrisome contingency in this regard is a possible war between China and the United States over Taiwan. This stands out as of special concern because, from China's perspective, it would involve questions of national sovereignty and, from America's perspective, it would involve questions of national values.

Here too various premises have been in episodic discussion among interested defense experts in recent years, around which a theory of victory might be constructed:

1. If Taiwan is attacked without provocation, the United States will come to its defense with the resolve to do what is necessary. Attempts at coercion and limited demonstrations of force to generate fear will only increase this resolve.
2. A tempting conventional *fait accompli* can be made un-tempting by strengthening Taiwan's ability to impose significant costs on the People's Republic of China's maritime power projection capabilities.
3. Any attempt to "de-couple" the United States from the defense of Taiwan by threatening or conducting limited conventional missile attacks on U.S. forces, U.S. allies, and perhaps also the U.S. homeland will only backfire, as the United States has an abiding interest in a stable, peaceful East Asia. Moreover, such attacks would bring out the strong sense of shared histories and values in the American body politic.
4. Beijing has many economic, political, and military reasons not to escalate a conflict over Taiwan that is going badly for China. But if it nonetheless chooses to do so, whether vertically or horizontally, its leaders can be shocked by U.S. military action

into understanding their severe miscalculation with its diverse set of kinetic and non-kinetic strike capabilities. The United States, Taiwan, and perhaps also U.S. allies in the region can also reduce China's expected benefits of limited kinetic and non-kinetic strikes on them with limited missile defenses and resilience in cyber space and outer space.

5. China would be highly unlikely to resort to nuclear first use in this or any scenario, including to reverse a loss over Taiwan, because it can tolerate a loss (on the argument that Taiwan isn't going anywhere and China's position will only improve over the long term).
6. The stake of the United States in a war with China over Taiwan will not be less than China's. American values would be at risk. Moreover, a failure to respond effectively would undermine U.S. security commitments globally.

The defense of Taiwan has been an enduring mission for the U.S. military. But for China, preparations to seek a military solution to the long-running stand-off have been a high national priority. Chinese military planning does not, however, focus on the Taiwan contingency alone; the expectation of a possible armed confrontation with the United States is the key driver of Chinese military modernization.¹²³ This implies that the U.S. theory of victory in such a contingency may well be tested and thus needs to be robust. There is little evidence of sustained, substantive U.S. focus on self assurance that the theory is indeed robust.

In assessing progress in coming to terms with these challenges, the United States and its East Asian allies are again presented with an absence of the necessary net assessment methodology.

Blue Task: Tailor for the Neglected 2nd Theater

The generic Blue theory of victory must also be tailored for the facts that (1) the United States alone guarantees the security of states in multiple regions and (2) success in any war against a major power would require many of the military assets now dispersed globally for

123 Roy Kamphausen, ed., *PLA Missions Beyond Taiwan* (a book project of the National Bureau of Asian Research, the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, and the George Bush School at Texas A&M University, 2009.)

other purposes. As the NDS Commission concluded, the management of those assets would mean pulling them away from other regions and allies.¹²⁴ One theater will end up being stripped of assets in service of another. This is especially troubling at a time of close strategic cooperation between Presidents Putin and Xi, as opportunistic aggression in one region might be coordinated with opportunistic aggression in another, leading to a U.S. loss in one or both.

The only conceivable remedies present difficult choices for the United States. One such remedy is to increase reliance on nuclear deterrence to compensate for conventional weakness. The United States has not had to contemplate such a step since early in the Cold War and for decades has had a broad and deep bipartisan commitment to reducing the roles of nuclear weapons. To increase reliance would require new nuclear declaratory policies which, given their particular purposes, would have to be developed in cooperation with U.S. allies. Increased reliance would likely also require adjustments to the operational posture, whether a return of some assets previously withdrawn from Europe or the permanent peacetime stationing of such assets in or near East Asia. Such posture adjustments would bring with them difficult new questions about the necessary measure of coordination of decision-making between the United States and its allies on whether, when, and how U.S. nuclear weapons might be employed.

The other difficult choices relate to the degree of dependence the United States can accept on the contributions to deterrence of its allies. Over the last two decades, U.S. leaders have generally encouraged allied contributions to regional deterrence architectures as useful for deterrence and beneficial to burden-sharing. But they have also been reluctant to lose the freedom of maneuver that comes with dependence on those allies. And they have been wary of significantly improving allied strike capabilities, out of concern for the possibility of unwelcome autonomous action in time of crisis.

A credible theory of victory in the neglected second theater requires that the United States both become more dependent on allied deterrence capabilities and more willing to ensure a credible nuclear deterrent for this particular problem.

124 Jim Mitre, "A Eulogy for the Two-War Construct," *Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (2019).

Cautionary Notes

As with the Red theory of victory in crisis and war, there are aspects of the Blue theory that may not be proven if put to the test in crisis and war. A strong conventional deterrent may, in the end, simply look like a lucrative target (just as U.S. naval forces deployed to Pearl Harbor in 1941 proved to be).¹²⁵ U.S. claims to treat an attack on an ally as an attack on itself might not be seen as credible by U.S. adversaries, who might probe for confirmatory evidence. U.S. allies may not be sufficiently assured in a widening war to stay in the fight. Leaders in Washington might conclude that the U.S. stake in defending a regional order is indeed not equal to that of the challenger, leading them to sacrifice important allied interests. Adversary leaders might have anticipated proportionate responses by the United States and its allies and absorbed them without strategic effect, leaving the United States and its allies to deliberate additional escalatory steps. Delay in responding to Red nuclear aggression might be interpreted by Red as a lack of nuclear resolve, potentially encouraging further nuclear attacks. Adversary leaders might be enraged rather than sobered by U.S. actions and conclude that further such actions could put national integrity and their political control at risk, potentially leading to further escalation. The off-ramps offered at this stage might seem unacceptable to a wounded and angry—but still powerful—adversary.

These possibilities put the onus onto U.S. defense planners to test hypotheses, clarify assumptions, and separate wishful thinking and hubris from reasoned analysis. They also reinforce the urgency of substantive collaboration with U.S. allies so that new strategic thought is coherent and the climb up the learning curve is accelerated.

Rethinking the Nature of Red-Blue War

Chapter 1 provided some high-level observations about the nature of potential conflict between Red and Blue, which can now be refined in light of the preceding exploration of their theories of victory.

Although the war-time clash of general purpose military forces would occur in a regional context, and although the primary Red objective would be to compromise the U.S.-backed regional security order,

¹²⁵ Thomas C. Schelling, "Foreword," in Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1960).

such wars would likely have a significant transregional dimension. Red might see it as useful and necessary to attack U.S. forces in other regions to inhibit their movement to the theater of concern. It might see it as useful and necessary to attack critical infrastructure in the United States supporting U.S. power projection relatively early in a conflict to inhibit that power projection. And it might see it as useful and necessary to attack the U.S. homeland in the later stages of a conflict to motivate a U.S. decision to terminate the war before it takes the next major escalatory step to broader attack on the U.S. homeland. As such, attacks would be intended to sober but not enrage the United States. Presumably, they would be limited in nature, leaving Americans to worry about worse to come.

The exploration of Red and Blue theories of victory has also helped to illuminate the potential escalation dynamics in such a war. More precisely, it has added some complexity to the usual picture. The usual picture is of a bell curve reflecting the degree of conflict escalation as a function of each actor's decision to escalate or deescalate at critical points. In fact, there are at least three curves in such a model: the Red curve, the Blue curve, and the curve of U.S. allies. Each belligerent fights at its own level and in its own way; one need not follow another in escalating or de-escalating. This is in part because each actor faces a complex choice between escalation, deescalation, and continuing to fight as before. Moreover, each escalatory step involves choices about what costs to impose but also what risks—and conversely, about what risks to accept as a signal of resolve.

The multi-domain character of modern war has added further complexity, with the additional means by which to impose cost and risk. It also adds a significant risk of unintended consequences. The complexity of potential nuclear escalation was already amply demonstrated by Hermann Kahn with his elaboration of 44 rungs on the nuclear escalation ladder.¹²⁶ The multi-domain challenge has led some to propose an escalation lattice instead.¹²⁷ But the challenge may be simpler than it seems; recall that Kahn's rungs were aligned with a much smaller number of key thresholds: crisis intensification, regional war, central sanctuary attack, and general war. These remain relevant in the contemporary

126 Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (London: Routledge, 1965).

127 Jon R. Lindsay and Erik Gartzke, eds., *Cross-Domain Deterrence: Strategy in an Era of Complexity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

context. Unlike the separate rungs, these are the escalation thresholds most promising in terms of their impact on the adversary's calculus of benefits, costs, and risks of continued war.¹²⁸

A final insight into the problem of escalation follows from this Red-Blue analysis. This is the uncertainty and risk associated with the conviction that it is possible to “sober but not enrage” an enemy by inflicting precisely the “prescribed dosage” of pain. This may well prove impossible. It seems especially unpromising in crises involving roughly symmetric stake. The result of such action could be catastrophic.

128 Caitlin Talmadge, “Emerging Technology and Intra-War Escalation Risks: Evidence from the Cold War, Implications for Today,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 6 (2019), p864-887.

Red and Blue in the Gray Zone

A theory of victory that does not encompass conflict in the Gray Zone is incomplete. But what is the Gray Zone? What is the nature of conflict there? What does victory in the Gray Zone mean?

Frank Hoffman has rightly argued that “the definition of Gray Zone conflicts remains both expansive and elusive.”¹²⁹ Western attention seems to have been captured serially by each new experience: Russia’s “little green men” in Ukraine, China’s maritime militia, Russia’s political warfare campaign against Western democracies, China’s information stratagem, and Russia’s “active measures” against Western citizens, among others. Like the blind men in the parable about the blind men and the elephant, Western experts have tried to describe the whole animal through the experience of each new discovery.

One obvious place to look for a definition of Gray Zone conflict is in the writings of Russian and Chinese experts and officials. But their literature on this subject is relatively sparse. Neither uses the term Gray Zone. This may have to do with the fact that many Gray Zone activities are illicit. It may also have to do with the possibility that these activities are more ad hoc and opportunistic than strategic. There may be no systematic thinking about victory in the Gray Zone. Or, it may only now be taking shape. Oscar Johnson has argued that “the broadening of the Russian understanding of war has been a long-term evolutionary process.”¹³⁰ Or it may just be a secret. Chinese military experts have come close to providing a definition—with the term “quasi war,” defined as “a middle place” on the spectrum of conflict “in which militaries are involved but war has not broken out—[with] characteristics of both war and peace.”¹³¹ Russian experts

129 Frank G. Hoffman, “Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges,” *PRISM* 7, no. 4 (2019), p36.

130 Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War*, p7.

131 Peng and Yao, *Science of Military Strategy*. See also Andrew S. Erickson and Ryan D. Martinson, eds., *China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019).

focus on the blurring of the line between peace and war.¹³²

For purposes of this analysis, the Gray Zone is defined as that part of the spectrum of conflict not involving armed hostilities. In one sense, it is a zone of peace, given the absence of war. But it is not peaceful, insofar as conflict is underway, including with military actions of various kinds. In a sense, the term Gray Zone captures an old idea: the search for advantage without the costs and risks of war. As E.H. Carr argued in 1939, “the common interest in peace masks the fact that some nations desire to maintain the status quo without having to fight for it, and others to change the status quo without having to fight to do so.”¹³³ But the term also captures something new: the asymmetric strategies of major power adversaries. Recall Peter Roberts’ conclusion that the adversaries of the West have “reconceptualized warfare and reimagined conflict.”¹³⁴ This is nowhere more evident than in their Gray Zone strategies. Conflict in the Gray Zone is not tangential to the new strategic problem; it is central to it.

Their Gray Zone Strategies

The catalogue of Russian Gray Zone activities is both impressive and alarming. It includes, for example, active measures against targets of influence, targeting killings of so-called enemies of the state, interference in Western electoral processes, information confrontation strategies, actions to freeze conflicts around its periphery, and (re-)assertion of influence in regions of U.S. influence. Such activities align well with the primary aims of Russia’s grand strategy as defined by President Putin.

The catalogue of Chinese activities is also impressive and alarming. It includes assertiveness in the maritime domain, the employment of maritime militias, information confrontation strategies, and the establishment of relationships of economic dependence with neighbors in Eurasia, among others. Such activities align well with primary aims of China’s grand strategy as defined by President Xi.

Their strategies for conflict in the Gray Zone can be depicted in the standard ends-ways-means construct. See Figures 5 and 6.

132 Gerasimov, “World on the Brink of War.”

133 E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis: 1919–1939* (London: MacMillan Press, 1939), p52-53.

134 Roberts, “Designing Conceptual Failure in Warfare.”

RUSSIA'S APPROACH TO GRAY ZONE CONFLICT

Ends	Ways	Illustrative Means
Destroy the existing European security order	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reassert Russian influence in "near abroad" while pushing back Western and U.S. influence • Undermine the E.U. and the "European Project" • Exploit and expand divisions within NATO • Undermine Western leaders, institutions, values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create frozen conflicts • Meddle in European domestic politics • Step up active measures • Fabricate advantageous narratives and constantly reinforce them in the news cycle • Foster energy dependence
Replace the U.S.-led international order	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reassert Russia's influence wherever U.S. exercises influence • Undermine adversary leaders, institutions, values • Promote polycentric order bases on spheres of influence • Promote a new Eurasian order together with China 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-engage in the Middle East, Northeast Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere in a zero-sum approach to U.S. • Build common cause with China and others • Step up active measures
Set the conditions for success in a short war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set the expectation that U.S. actions will be contested • Set the expectation that direct military conflict is possible • Set the expectation that U.S./allied actions will have nuclear consequences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Display new capabilities, new concept of operations (CONOPS), new strategies • Demonstrate leadership engagement and confidence • Implement reflexive control strategies aimed at making public fearful and leaders risk averse

Figure 5.

Toward a Red Theory of Victory in the Gray Zone

What might victory in the Gray Zone mean to Moscow and Beijing? The answer here is that it means essentially the same thing as victory in war: the accomplishment of high-level strategic objectives set out by national leadership and reflecting their desire, as revisionist leaders, to re-make the world and thereby to prevail in the conflict that, in their assessment, the United States has brought to them. This concept of victory is less about winning *in* the Gray Zone than it is about winning *through* the Gray Zone. That is, it is about translating incremental gains at the operational level of the strategy into strategic gains for the nation

CHINA'S APPROACH TO GRAY ZONE CONFLICT

Ends	Ways	Illustrative Means
Reestablish sovereignty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encroachment out to 9-dash line • Secure favorable settlement of Taiwan issue • Deny U.S. efforts to gain Absolute Security 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Claim outcroppings, build air bases • Employ maritime militias to contest control • Develop a “fully modern 21st century military”
Restore harmonious international order	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regain “rightful place” as regional hegemon • Pursue “a continuous expansion of China’s national interests” • Partner with Russia or Eurasian security, polycentric order • Entangle others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase comprehensive national power • Compete in S&T to gain competitive advantage • Implement Belt and Road Initiative • In regional diplomacy, pursue bilateralism, not multilateralism
Prevent or forestall outbreak of war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safeguard national territorial sovereignty • Safeguard maritime rights and interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Position and posture for military intimidation and deterrence
Set the conditions for success in war if it proves necessary or unavoidable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare to seize control by putting U.S./allies on defensive immediately and to control escalation • Demonstrate and test resolve • Raise concerns in U.S.-allied countries about the costs and risks of war with China • Divide U.S. from its allies and reinforce doubts about the U.S. commitment and staying power 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare a “shock and awe campaign” • Operate occasionally with aggressive rules of engagement • Challenge THAAD* deployments to RoK while pursuing BMD (missile control) with Chinese characteristics • Implement the “3 warfares” (public opinion, psychological, legal) aimed at “compromising the capability of opponents to respond” in war and also in peacetime <p style="text-align: right;">*Theater High-Altitude Air Defense</p>

Figure 6. *Science of Military Strategy*: “Quasi war—on the continuum of conflict, a middle place in which militaries are involved but war has not broken out—[with] characteristics of both war and peace.”

in its long-term conflict with the United States over world order issues.

What is their theory for how these ends might be achieved? Recall that their theories of victory in crisis and war are built on the idea of bringing the United States and its allies to key decision points where they face an unpalatable choice between escalation and appeasement

in the context of asymmetry of stake. In the Gray Zone, the opposite idea informs Red strategy. Red seeks to ensure that the United States and its allies are never compelled to choose to defend an interest. Decision points are avoided, not created. This is the so-called boil-the-frog strategy: heat the water slowly and the frog doesn't recognize its peril before it is paralyzed. Russia and China seek to slowly re-make the orders in which they sit without generating a strong backlash. Russia, for example, wants to paralyze the U.S. political system while at the same time pressing for relief from sanctions. China wants to stake its claims to unoccupied reefs by building bases on them without generating a joint Japan-U.S. military effort to contest control. To be sure, leaders in Russia and China must envision a "culminating point" where the United States and its allies come to terms politically with the re-made order. But in the Gray Zone they seek quiet acquiescence, not dramatic capitulation. They seek to subdue their enemy without fighting.

Another key feature of the Red theory of victory in the Gray Zone is the emphasis on risk imposition. By increasing risk for the United States and its allies through actions in the Gray Zone, as opposed to imposing costs, leaders in Russia and China intend to erode the resolve of the United States and its allies. Toward this end, they attach value to friction in international relations. As crisis managers, Westerners generally seek to de-escalate and resolve crises as quickly as possible; in contrast, Russian and Chinese crisis managers generally seek to prolong crises and dial escalation up and down in order to put psychological pressure on the United States and its allies.¹³⁵ For this Red purpose, Blue redlines can be quite useful as they reduce uncertainty and risk by clearly mapping out their room for maneuver. They are also useful for knowing where occasionally to cross a line to emphatically communicate resolve and stake.

This theory of victory shares the flaw of the theory of victory in crisis and war. It appears to assume that the frog isn't able to recognize its peril and escape the fate intended for it.

Toward a Blue Theory of Victory in the Gray Zone

As they struggle to define the Gray Zone and the nature of conflict

135 Michael D. Swaine, Tuosheng Zhang, Danielle Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises: Case Studies and Analysis* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006).

within it, experts and policymakers in the United States and allied countries have also debated how to organize the needed response. Different models have emerged.

One is ad hoc and reactive in character. It assumes a multi-faceted response is necessary to the multi-faceted Gray Zone challenges from Russia and China. It involves, for example, actions aimed at negating Red attempts at coercion, discovering illicit behaviors and exposing them, and closing electronic and other entryways to Western political systems once they've been discovered open. Given the great variety of "means" now being pursued, the result is a large and complex policy agenda that exhausts the institutions and individuals responsible for countering Red in the Gray Zone. This is the current U.S. approach.

Another model is more strategic in character. Here the best example is the "affirmative program . . . of methods short of war . . . for countering the Soviet threat" in the 1950 document known as NSC 68, which set out the Cold War containment strategy.¹³⁶ The "affirmative program" set out specific policy objectives ("ends") as well as the ways these would be accomplished. It left the specific means to the various executive departments. The inferred theory of victory is that a careful balance of Western resolve and restraint would contain Soviet power and encourage its collapse. See Figure 7.

An additional model is represented by the Gray Zone strategies of Russia and China. These are both strategic and opportunistic, both overt and covert.

Of these models, the one that best suits the United States is the NSC 68 model. It is strategic, affirmative, and long term. It does not depend on a significant covert component of illicit action.

To derive a theory of victory requires that victory be meaningful and possible. Many doubt that this is so in the Gray Zone. They see the United States and its allies as destined to be in a reactive mode in their role as status quo powers. Here it is useful to recall what's at stake. Leaders in Russia and China want to re-make the regional and global orders. We should understand that the collapse of NATO in Europe, of the European Project more generally, and of U.S. alliances in East Asia would bring with it (1) a sharp increase the expectation of

136 NSC-68, *A Report to the National Security Council on United States Objectives and Programs for National Security* (April 14, 1950), p62-63.

A U.S. MODEL? NSC 68's "METHODS SHORT OF WAR" (1950)

Ends	Ways
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage and promote the gradual retraction of undue Russian power and influence from the present perimeter areas around traditional Russian boundaries and the emergence of the satellite countries as entities independent of the USSR. • Encourage the development among the Russian peoples of attitudes which may help to modify current Soviet behavior and permit a revival of the national life of groups evidencing the ability and determination to achieve and maintain national independence. • Eradicate the myth by which people remote from Soviet military influence are held in a position of subservience to Moscow and to cause the world at large to see and understand the true nature of the USSR and the Soviet-directed world communist party, and to adopt a logical and realistic attitude toward them. • Create situations which will compel the Soviet Government to recognize the practical undesirability of acting on the basis of its present concepts and the necessity of behaving in accordance with precepts and the necessity of behaving in accordance with precepts of international conduct, as set forth in the purposes and principles of the UN Charter. • In pursuing these objectives, due care must be taken to avoid permanently impairing our economy and the fundamental values and institutions inherent in our way of life. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a level of military readiness which can be maintained as long as necessary as a deterrent to Soviet aggression, as indispensable support to our political attitude toward the USSR, as a source of encouragement to nations resisting Soviet political aggression, and as an adequate basis for immediate military commitments and for rapid mobilization should war prove unavoidable. • Assure the internal security of the U.S. against dangers of sabotage, subversion, and espionage. • Maximize our economic potential, including the strengthening of our peacetime economy and the establishment of essential reserves readily available in the event of war. • Strengthen the orientation toward the U.S. of the non-Soviet nations; and help such of those nations as are able and willing to make an important contribution to U.S. security, to increase their economic and political stability and their military capability. • Place the maximum strain on the Soviet structure of power and particularly on the relationships between Moscow and the satellite countries. • Keep the U.S. public fully informed and cognizant of the threats to our national security so that it will be prepared to support the measures which we must accordingly adopt.

Figure 7.

renewed war to re-settle the political landscape along with (2) the partial loss of sovereignty and strategic autonomy now enjoyed by those neighboring Russia and China, and (3) a weakening of U.S. values and authority. Much more is at stake in the Gray Zone than a supposedly decayed international order and a few disputed rocky outcroppings in seas neighboring China.

In short, victory is a meaningful concept at the strategic level of conflict in the Gray Zone. It means bringing decision-makers in Moscow, Beijing, Pyongyang, and Tehran to a “culminating point” where they choose acceptance of the international order, or of peaceful political means to change it, over continued conflict with it. This would take the form of decisions to acquiesce to the existing regional and global orders, to stop undermining Western political and security interests, and to turn their competitive aspirations to legitimate playing fields, whether economic or political. While competition would not cease, conflict would.

This would require convincing those decision-makers that the costs and risks of their current courses of action are rising unacceptably and that there are alternative courses of action available to them that promise reduced costs and risk as well as some economic, political, and security benefits. Those benefits would also have to seem enduring. The theory requires also that they, even as insecure regimes, are able to accept the assurances of the United States and its allies that their interests will be respected even if they do not defend them militarily.

A lesser form of victory, though victory nonetheless, would be effectively negating their efforts to coerce the U.S. and its allies with military and economic threats. Red leaders may not be persuaded to abandon their combative messages but they can be rendered politically irrelevant if the threats are seen to lack credibility.

The main supporting elements of this Blue theory of victory in the Gray Zone are the following:

- Additional incremental gains by Red can be denied with a comprehensive and coordinated Blue approach to improved defense and protection. Continued Red failures would erode their confidence.
- Blue can shift the balance of strategic influence over

time with more robust competitive strategies in science, technology, and other sectors. This would steadily erode the coercive potential of Red military capabilities.

- The United States and its allies can uphold the existing regional security orders, consolidate gains, and selectively widen and deepen those orders by sustaining the commitment to collective security, free trade, and shared values. Their persistence in doing so would also steadily erode Red confidence.
- The United States and its allies can offer cooperation with neighboring major powers that is meaningful and enduring. Such cooperation will help to sharpen Red debates about the costs of armed challenges to Blue.
- The United States and its allies can deny Red confidence in creating the conditions for success in crisis and war, and can do so without motivating unhelpful Red counters, by elaborating the needed Blue theories of victory and deploying capabilities tailored for deterrence and defense. Their departures will create a window of opportunity to renew and improve political relations.
- The United States and its allies can outlast the regimes in Moscow and Beijing; their departures will create a window of opportunity to renew and improve political relations.

Conclusions

To return to the key questions:

- What is the new strategic problem?
- What is a theory of victory? Why do we need one?
- What is the Red theory of victory?
- What is the Blue theory of victory?
- Are there theories of victory for conflict in the Gray Zone?

What is the new strategic problem? It is the problem brought to us by Russia and China, which have made extensive preparations for possible regional war with the United States and its allies. It is a result of a broad multi-dimensional conflict they are pursuing with the United States, one with military, political, economic, and ideological aspects aimed at remaking the regional orders in which they sit and the global order as well. As leaders in Russia and China have defined it, it is zero sum in nature. As they perceive it, this conflict spans peacetime, crisis, and war. Thus, they have developed strategies to advance their interests spanning that continuum. The strategic character of this conflict derives in part from the important roles of nuclear weapons and other high-leverage capabilities in their preparations. It also derives in part from what's at stake—regional security orders in Europe and East Asia providing strategic autonomy to U.S. allies and also to the United States, a set of global institutions and norms largely crafted and led by the United States, and also the reputation of the United States as a reliable guarantor of security to others.

What is a theory of victory? At its simplest, it is a plausible set of principles for overcoming the enemy. More precisely, it is a set of propositions about how and why the behavior of one belligerent in war or conflict short of war will or might affect the behavior of another belligerent in a desired manner. It is a continuous thread running through strategy with an interior logic and causal linkages. Invoking Clausewitz, a theory of victory explains how to bring an enemy to a “culminating point”

where it chooses not to run the costs and risks of further conflict and instead to acquiesce to the preferences of the first actor in terminating the conflict. Such a theory may be little more than a general principle (like “peace through strength”) or wishful thinking based on untested assumptions. A robust theory of victory requires a robust concept of victory that accounts for context as well as the different phases of conflict, including the post-war phase. It must also (1) anticipate key decision points, (2) explain how it might be possible to persuade Red not to use all of the resources available to it while also abandoning the ambition that gave rise to crisis and war, and (3) explain how crisis and war in a second theater of concern can be avoided while resources are diverted to meet the requirements of a major regional war.

Why do we need a theory of victory? It is a necessary condition for strategic competence and strategic success. Without such a theory, the United States and its allies, though armed with many powerful tools, military and otherwise, have no coherent set of ideas about how to marshal them to achieve policy objectives. In case of war, we “could lose,” in the words of the NDS. Or we could win—but in a manner that only sows the seeds of resentment and further conflict. Without such a theory, leaders in Moscow and Beijing could be emboldened to precipitate crises and leaders in allied countries could choose independence and proliferation rather than continued reliance on the United States. Moreover, we face a complex set of challenges in a multipolar security environment marked by multi-domain strategic competition. Without a simplifying concept that can mobilize action of many kinds in a holistic manner, we have good reason to doubt our efficiency in innovating.

What is the Red theory of victory? It consists of the notions that (1) decisive military action by the United States to reverse a *fait accompli* can be prevented by exploiting divisions within and among its allies and the United States itself and (2) the United States can be persuaded to cede some important regional interest rather than employ its full military potential because its stake is not sufficient to engage in sustained brinkmanship and competitive escalation. The Red concept of victory includes more than just seizing and holding some gain. It encompasses also the choice by Blue to terminate conflict on terms that sacrifice the

interest they were defending, thereby showing the regional security orders, as well as the U.S. guarantor role, to be unreliable.

What is the Blue theory of victory? It remains underdeveloped. It can be further developed in a three-step process: (1) “Go to school” on Red the way Red has gone to school on Blue, (2) develop a generic counter to the generic Red theory of victory, and (3) tailor that model to specific regional contexts. Its core concept should not be deterrence or escalation control; rather, it should focus on stripping away the confidence of leaders in Russia and China in their escalation calculus. This is their assessment of the benefits, costs, and risks of escalatory action in crisis and war and also in the Gray Zone. Blue must be capable of reducing their expected benefits of actions consistent with the Red theory of victory while increasing expected costs and risks. Think of this as a counter-escalation strategy and not as an escalation dominance strategy. The generic Blue theory of victory must also account for the requirements of deterrence in the second theater from which assets might be stripped in time of crisis and war. A credible theory of victory in the neglected second theater requires that the United States both become more dependent on allied deterrence capabilities and more willing to ensure a credible nuclear deterrent for this particular problem.

Are there theories of victory for conflict in the Gray Zone? There may be Red theories of victory but they have not been publicly articulated. They can, however, be inferred from Red actions and their linkages to Red objectives. Moscow and Beijing apparently seek to remake the regional orders within which they sit a step at a time but always in a manner that falls below the threshold of military response by the United States and/or its allies. This is a “boil the frog” strategy that seeks to avoid “culminating points” and instead relies on distraction and division within the democracies to change facts on the ground. Blue doesn’t have much of a theory of victory. A strategic, top-down approach is needed. It should be built on three main ideas. First, the United States and its allies can uphold the existing regional security orders, consolidate gains, and selectively widen and deepen those orders by sustaining the commitment to collective security, free trade, and shared values. Their persistence in doing so would also steadily

erode Red confidence. Second, they can shift the balance of strategic influence over time with more robust competitive strategies in science, technology, and other sectors, thus eroding the coercive potential of Red military capabilities. Third, the United States and its allies can outlast the regimes in Moscow and Beijing; their departures will create a window of opportunity to renew and improve political relations.

Next Steps

The preceding arguments are intended in part to serve as a stimulus to the further development of strategic thought on the new strategic problem. It has also pointed to a large number of institutional, cultural, and informational obstacles to past progress. What steps should be taken now to accelerate our collective climb up this particular learning curve?

As a point of departure, we must recognize that thinking about this problem is fundamentally competitive in nature. As Therese Delpech argued in 2012, “ideas have consequences. So does the lack of themWe should not forget that in the nuclear arena, combat is first and foremost an intellectual contest. The side that stops thinking is already losing.”¹³⁷ If, as Chairman Dunford argued, “we are already behind in adapting,” what should we do to catch up? What can and should we do to “out-think” our adversaries, as the National Defense Strategy puts it?¹³⁸

First, ensure sustained, substantive, high-level leadership focus on rapid adaptation for the new strategic problem. It is not a given. After all, the U.S. defense community is today presented with a multiplicity of problems. The new strategic problem is but one of many problems on the defense policy agenda today. Defense leadership must maintain a sufficient and sustained focus despite many distractions and should be aided in doing so by White House support and Congressional oversight.

Second, improve the process by which major defense planning challenges are framed. The policy and posture reviews conducted by each new administration are so balkanized as to prevent the emergence of a coherent set of answers on the requirements noted above. A new study architecture is needed, one that better integrates the various components of strategy.¹³⁹ More than that, this process must produce theories of victory for crisis and war and for the Gray Zone,

137 Therese Delpech, *Nuclear Deterrence in the 21st Century: Lessons from the Cold War for a New Era of Strategic Piracy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2012), p10, 17.

138 *National Defense Strategy*, 2017.

139 Brad Roberts, “It’s Time to Jettison Nuclear Posture Reviews,” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* (January 13, 2020).

collaboratively with allies. It must then use those theories to drive the further development of policy, operational concepts, and capabilities.

Third, expand analytic capacity within and in support of the stakeholder institutions across the U.S. government. Despite broad agreement about the strategic atrophy of recent decades, there is little to show so far in the way of useful next steps. In fact, following on the commitments in the 2017 NDS to reverse such atrophy and to out-think adversaries, DOD has reduced rather than expanded its bandwidth. Its 2020 decision to cancel the Minerva Research Initiative, a modestly priced research program aimed at exploring the values of the social sciences in understanding new security threats, is but the latest example of cutting analytical support to shave a pittance from the defense budget.¹⁴⁰ Recalling the investments and institution building of the first two decades of the Cold War, there has been nothing even remotely comparable in the current period.¹⁴¹ The role of federally funded research and development centers (FFRDCs) could also usefully be amended to give the Combatant Commands better access to their services, in line with the increasingly important roles played by those commands in driving a search for solutions to new military problems.

Fourth, as we invest to “out-think,” we invest to “out-partner.” The new strategic problem requires more effective partnerships for strategic thought with a variety of stakeholders. Some of these are in the private sector—key actors in the new domains of cyber space and outer space. Some of these are among generations of younger scholars who are also increasingly interested in engagement on these issues. And some are U.S. allies. These states also face important questions about how best to help put our collective international house in order on these questions. Some are disengaged, reflecting their assessments that the grievances expressed in Moscow, Beijing, and elsewhere are not consequential for their security. Some are essentially passive recipients of new strategic thought in the United States. A few are *demandeurs*, driving strategic thought in the United States and pushing others. Over the last decade the majority has shifted from the disengaged camp to the more anxious end of the spectrum. But aside from limited high-

140 Consortium of Social Science Associations, “Administration Plans to Eliminate DOD Social Science Research Program” (February 18, 2020).

141 For one roadmap, see Thomas G. Mahnken, *Forging the Tools of 21st Century Great Power Competition* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2020).

level official engagements and limited Track 1.5 dialogue, there is little substantive exchange on these subjects. Thus, there is very little cumulative learning. New mechanisms need to be created.

Fifth, make better use of wargaming techniques to test and refine theories of victory. Such techniques have been underutilized for this problem. Most war games are played at the tactical or operational level of war; but theories of victory must be tested at the strategic level, where decisions are made about what costs and risks to impose and to accept. Most war games are also played largely for educative purposes—that is, to expose the players to a particular problem (such as the nuclear problem); but theory development requires a more systematic approach to the testing of hypotheses and assumptions in a manner that generates cumulative insight.¹⁴² Jon Compton has described just what is needed: “a process of analytical ownership” involving “a design of research that incorporates wargames along with other methods” and a final product that describes “in narrative detail why the effort calibrated around certain theories of success.”¹⁴³

Sixth, adapt the net assessment methodology to the new strategic problem. In a world defined by major power rivalry, long-term competition, and preparations for regional war under the nuclear shadow, senior policymakers need a tool for gauging whether and how power balances are shifting, and with them the risks and costs of war.¹⁴⁴ That tool must go well beyond the standard quantitative balance-of-forces assessment and address, on a Red-Blue comparative basis, the progress each is making in developing and enabling its theory of victory.

142 Ivanka Barzashka, “Wargaming: How to Turn Vogue into Science,” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* (March 15, 2019).

143 Jon Compton, “The Obstacles on the Road to Better Analytical Wargaming,” *War on the Rocks* (October 9, 2019).

144 Peter Roberts and Sidharth Kaushal, “Strategic Net Assessment: Opportunities and Pitfalls,” *RUSI Journal* 163, no. 6 (2018), p66-76.



Modern strategic conflict has not been studied enough by the broader U.S. defense community. But it has been given a lot of thought by our potential adversaries, who have developed a set of ideas for deterring and, if necessary, defeating the United States and its allies—that is, a theory of victory. We need additional critical thinking in this area to develop a theory of victory of our own. We must also be able to communicate to any potential adversary that it will be effective. In this timely and important new work, Brad Roberts points us in that direction. His analysis of strategic thought in Russia and China demands our attention. His elaboration of a Blue theory of victory should directly influence the further development of policies, plans, and capabilities. //

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Brad Roberts' *On Theories of Victory* takes up the challenge, laid out in the 2018 report of the National Defense Strategy Commission, of exploring how the United States and its allies can best meet the threats posed by China and Russia across the spectrum of conflict. Roberts does so in a way that is both thorough and thoughtful, weaving together disparate challenges into a common framework. The volume should spur efforts among the United States and its allies to develop innovative strategies and operational concepts that will allow them to prevail in an increasingly contested environment. //

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