

POLICY MEMO

How to Strengthen US Deterrence and Weaken the Attempts of Rival Nuclear Coercion

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On February 24, 2022, Russia started the largest European war since 1945 as it intensified its invasion of Ukraine to a new level and threatened escalation to nuclear war. Though Vladimir Putin has not detonated a nuclear weapon, he used, and continues to use,¹ his nuclear arsenal to threaten the United States and other NATO nations against continuing to support Ukraine's defense. Through pre-invasion nuclear saber-rattling,² verbally threatening to employ nuclear weapons on the battlefield,³ and putting such weapons on alert,⁴ Russia caused President Joe Biden and his administration to declare repeatedly their fears of "World War III"⁵ and to adopt a gradual, highly cautious approach to helping Ukraine. The White House has chosen to provide only weapons suitable for operations to allow Ukraine to achieve some tactical victories

and prevent Russia from a quick and final victory,⁶ but this aid does not allow Ukraine to achieve and sustain the military victories necessary to win the war.⁷

Thus, Russia appears to have successfully used nuclear threats to deter the United States from certain actions that are on lower levels on the spectrum of escalation, enabling itself to control escalation⁸ to serve its aims. Russia's explicit and implicit nuclear threats deterred US officials from providing Ukraine with real-time targeting data and heavy artillery early in the war⁹ and electronic warfare capabilities later in the war.¹⁰ The nuclear threats also caused US officials to press Ukraine not to hit Russian targets deep behind Russian lines.¹¹ Russian officials have ample grounds to

conclude that their nuclear coercion has affected the course of the war in their favor.

A consequence of Russia's successful nuclear coercion is that the fighting may become unnecessarily protracted and further strain NATO unity.¹² As the war drags on, fractures in NATO could become more prominent, which increases risks that Russia miscalculates and assesses that it could successfully attack a target inside a NATO country, perhaps one of the Baltic states, thinking that NATO would not come to that smaller ally nation's defense.¹³ By taking the more risk averse approach at the start of the war, as the White House did, risk has not decreased entirely. Instead, the Biden administration simply shifted it further to the right and compounded its potentially devastating impact.

Russia's deterrence efforts against the United States are especially troubling in light of Moscow's strategic ties to the People's Republic of China. Admiral Charles Richard, the commander of the US Strategic Command, has warned of the collaboration between China and Russia.¹⁴ Notably, Russia's war against Ukraine has not caused China to stop its joint military drills with Russia.¹⁵ The China-Russia convergence is occurring as the PRC dramatically expands its nuclear arsenal, which Admiral Richard has characterized as a "strategic breakout."¹⁶ Admiral Richard has noted that the United States developed the current plans for its nuclear weapons program before China adopted its current, highly aggressive strategy.¹⁷ And the deputy commander of US Strategic Command, Lieutenant General Thomas Bussiere, has warned that China will surpass Russia as the United States' top nuclear threat in the next few years.¹⁸ Thus, the US should be willing to supplement or alter its current strategic deterrent capabilities to successfully deter both China and Russia, as well as rogue states like North Korea and Iran.

US government strategists have long held that successful and morally acceptable deterrence relies on counterforce targeting.

This means that the US threatens opponents' military forces, command and control centers, and leaders—not their civilian population centers. Driving this point home, Keith Payne and David Trachtenberg write, "For over five decades and on a fully bipartisan basis, the United States has explicitly rejected a 'counter-city,' 'minimum deterrence' policy—sometimes also referred to as an 'assured destruction' threat—despite its relatively modest retaliatory force requirements, because of its potential incredibility as a deterrent and its moral repugnance."¹⁹

Counterforce deterrence has three main characteristics. In 1974, then Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger explained, "One, the opponent should see no vulnerabilities or asymmetries in the force balance between the two sides that he can exploit; two, we should have the ability to clearly indicate the strength of our resolve and, three . . . if deterrence should fail, we should have the ability to terminate that conflict at the lowest levels of violence."²⁰ Counterforce deterrence is exactly that—deterrence, though critics argue that it is essentially synonymous with plans to fight a nuclear war. Critics who oppose shifting strategies, adding to, or otherwise strengthening the US nuclear force to more credibly hold at risk the growing number of potential enemy targets, misunderstand strategic deterrence. This misunderstanding has meaningful implications.

A counterforce posture can withstand an adversary's first strike and still hit what the adversary values most. Counterforce also offers the *possibility* of controlling escalation if deterrence breaks down, as the United States aims to keep the war on the lowest levels of violence and destruction possible. *What matters is convincing the opponent of what the US could and would credibly do in a variety of contingencies.* The US might invite aggression if it (1) fails to shape opponents' calculations so that he perceives no asymmetry to exploit, (2) fails to convince opponents of its resolve, or (3) fails to invest in and maintain a deterrent that enables the US to

terminate that conflict at the lowest level of damage possible if deterrence fails. While Washington adjusts to the shifting threat environment—which includes two rivals that are relying more heavily on their nuclear weapons to achieve their revanchist aims—it needs to adapt its deterrent. Adapting the deterrent is complex and difficult work, but its difficulty is no excuse for choosing a simpler albeit ineffective and dangerous path that could lead to a calamitous war that ends in US defeat.

In 2018, the Trump administration released the last Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), which recommended continued investments in the Obama administration’s modernization plan. It also recommended supplemental nuclear capabilities in response to Russian threats to lower the nuclear threshold of attack. The supplemental capabilities sought to raise the nuclear threshold. But strategists conceived of that nuclear posture before Russia’s current war of choice against Ukraine, before China’s strategic breakout, and before mounting evidence showed that the two authoritarian revanchist nations were more than occasional partners. Those 2018 plans are still necessary, but they are insufficient if the US is trying to account for the plausible and yet unknown scenarios that could occur in the next few years, let alone the next decade. The Biden administration has maintained the bipartisan nuclear modernization effort, but it canceled one of the supplemental capabilities that the military says it needs to raise the nuclear threshold in a potential war.²¹ This decision raises serious questions about the administration’s willingness to compete in the new geostrategic environment.

The reality is that the United States faces two sophisticated, hostile, and nuclear-armed powers that want to dismantle US-led alliances and replace the US-led system of commerce and trade. The two countries could also coordinate their nuclear-backed strategies against the US to advance their revanchist aspirations. Russia and China are significantly different and sometimes distrust each other, so some strategists conclude that these powers would probably not coordinate nuclear attacks (either sequentially or simultaneously). But mounting

evidence shows that such coordination *is* plausible, and the potential risks are so great that America needs a strategy that can confront both nuclear powers sequentially and simultaneously.²² Even without coordinating they could leverage one another’s nuclear arsenals for their advantage.

By treating Russia as the only nuclear peer adversary and discounting China as a lesser nuclear threat, the US would effectively abandon a credible counterforce deterrent. This path would also leave the US president with few acceptable options in case adversaries choose nuclear brinksmanship. In the most nightmarish scenario, China and Russia could attack simultaneously, or they could use nuclear coercion against a target in their region, which would threaten most US strategic systems. After a simultaneous attack by two nuclear peers, the United States would have a very small nuclear arsenal with which to respond.²³ Even if decision-makers conclude that these scenarios are remote, they are far less remote now than they were five or ten years ago. Their plausibility also makes the US far more vulnerable to nuclear coercion.

By learning from Moscow’s nuclear coercion and the Biden administration’s risk aversion in defense of Ukraine, while taking the China-Russia convergence into consideration,²⁴ Washington can better adjust its nuclear posture. While each American president’s risk tolerance could vary, making adjustments to the US strategic deterrent could grant the president and future presidents more options so that he would be much less susceptible to Chinese nuclear coercion if Beijing were to employ a similar strategy in a campaign against Taiwan. But failure to learn or adjust would increase the risk that a US rival would employ a nuclear weapon and usher in a new a perilous age of nuclear warfare.

Russia’s Nuclear Weapons Program: A Force Designed to Beat the US

While analysts disagree over what Russia sought to achieve by invading Ukraine, Putin explicitly declared that he wanted

to conquer all of Ukraine. If successful, Russian troops would have been able to strike into Europe and threaten NATO. Specifically, Putin could use states with ethnic Russian populations as a pretext for further aggression, as he did in Ukraine.²⁵ Russia could achieve its larger goals—breaking the US-led alliance and expanding Russian control of territory beyond Ukraine—by subjugating Ukraine. Therefore, Washington needs to adequately arm Ukraine so that Kyiv can win the war. Ukrainian victory is key to preserving NATO's security and preventing a larger calamitous war in Europe.

Russia's nuclear weapons program and saber-rattling have been a salient part of Putin's strategy of coercion. The Biden administration twice delayed a routine testing of the Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles explicitly because it did not want to provoke Putin. Then the White House canceled other tests because it did not want to provoke Xi Jinping during China's large-scale naval blockade exercise around democratic Taiwan.²⁶ But routine testing in the face of adversaries' aggression would have communicated America's steady resolve and commitment to the nuclear deterrence. Adversaries did not interpret these delays as examples worthy of emulation. In April, merely weeks after President Biden decided to shelve the planned ICBM flight test, Russia tested a new "Sarmat" ICBM, which Russian state television aired.²⁷

Because Russia has refused to include theater nuclear weapons in arms control treaties and has invested heavily in them, Putin has a nuclear weapons program that can asymmetrically threaten the US. Nearly 2,000 Russian warheads are theater-range and with diverse means of delivery, while the US has spent recent decades retiring or dismantling its tactical nuclear weapons. Current public estimates say that Russia has 10 times more theater-range nuclear weapons than the United States.²⁸ Yet the Biden administration sought to halt the development of an additional theater-range nuclear delivery system, the nuclear sea-launch cruise missile (SCLM-N), even though the 2018 Nuclear

Posture Review concluded it was a necessary adaptation to address the threat of such theater programs. US military officials opposed cancelling the missile, and both the House and Senate rejected the White House plan.²⁹

Just a handful of days after the invasion of Ukraine, Putin ramped up Russia's nuclear coercion campaign, very publicly putting Russian nuclear forces on "high alert" in response to what he deemed to be aggressive statements from NATO members. This escalation is consistent with warnings that strategists and military leaders have made. For example, General Philip Breedlove repeatedly warned Congress that Putin's decades-long nuclear buildup was lowering the nuclear threshold. The buildup would allow Moscow to escalate and use a nuclear weapon in a purely conventional military conflict to cause the US to surrender rather than respond militarily.³⁰

China's Nuclear Weapons Program: A Force to Achieve Global Dominance

The Chinese Communist Party, led by the successful rise of President Xi Jinping, has clearly signaled its intention to supplant the US as the world's preeminent power.³¹ According to internal CCP materials—including the People's Liberation Army textbook *Great Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics* and another textbook for military officers called the *Strategic Support for Achieving the Great Chinese Resurgence*—the current US-led system is flawed, and the CCP must replace it with the "China model."³² Thus, Washington should not base its strategy on the premise that China and the US have national interests that are sometimes merely at odds. Insisting that Beijing and Washington just disagree on access to natural resources or fair trade suggests that some kind of mediation might resolve the conflict. Instead, the CCP's motivation is highly ideological and intrinsically tied to its national identity, so it views competition with the US as zero-sum. The CCP hinges the legitimacy of its geopolitical aim of becoming the global leader on its unification with Taiwan, and it seeks to

seize and subdue Taiwan in a short, sharp war. Therefore, the US-led alliance to defend the status quo against CCP imperialism should seek to convince Beijing that the PRC's military campaign against Taiwan and its supporters will be unsuccessful.³³

While China's strategic culture is disinclined to embrace national partnerships or alliances, Beijing has publicly embraced Russia as a key "friend." Indeed, at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, just days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the two powers signed an agreement in which they pledged a partnership with "no limits."³⁴ Since Russia's decision to escalate its invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has become much more dependent on China. This development is consistent with China's aim of not sharing power in a multi-polar world, but of dominating the world order and replacing the US-led order with the China model. Maintaining an equal partnership with Russia—a country with an economy that is a tenth the size of China's³⁵ and a conventional military force that Ukraine has greatly diminished—would be at odds with Xi's *modus vivendi*. The only significant category in which Russia has outmaneuvered the US and outpaces China is in nuclear weapons.

Some commentary has suggested that China's nuclear force will remain much smaller than American or Russian nuclear forces for many years, and defensive in nature, so that it does not warrant significant US alarm. There is still much uncertainty, but Washington should appreciate the direction of China's nuclear weapons forces in support of its aggressive national aims. Admiral Richard has testified that China's nuclear stockpile is changing rapidly and could quadruple over the next decade.³⁶ Though China contends that it maintains a minimal deterrent with a no-first-use pledge, those who maintain the US deterrent are unconvinced.³⁷ General Anthony Cotton, who will be the next commander of US Strategic Command, testified before Congress in September 2022 that China's "incredible expansiveness of what they're doing with

their nuclear forces" does not reflect minimal deterrence.³⁸ Moreover, China has consistently rejected overtures from diplomats to discuss its nuclear program or possible ways to limit its forces.³⁹ Devising a US strategy on the hope that China may suddenly want to engage in arms limitations and control is fantastical. Instead, for planning purposes, the US should assume the PRC is advancing its nuclear program to support its revanchist military strategy. In short, China has discovered that expansive goals require expansive forces—and it is wasting no time.

Open reporting shows that China is building ICBMs to lock the US in a state of mutual strategic nuclear vulnerability.⁴⁰ China is also improving its regional dual-capable systems and increasing the quantity of associated nuclear warheads.⁴¹ Like Russia's investments in regional nuclear delivery systems, China has invested significantly in this category, taking advantage of the United States' divestment of regional nuclear systems.⁴² With numerous and diverse delivery systems and formidable warhead production capacity, China could emulate Russia's successful nuclear coercion strategy, which dissuaded the US and NATO from certain kinds of support in Ukraine, in a campaign to seize Taiwan.

Importantly, even though China and Russia may someday soon have similar kinds of nuclear weapons arsenals, the US may not be able to deter each country in the same way. China has a unique strategic culture, risk tolerance, and set of assessments that will differ from Russia's. Indeed, there is uncertainty over whether or how China and Russia will converge. If these countries sequentially or simultaneously attack US interests, the United States, absent major changes, will be unprepared. Because of the uncertainty in both regimes' calculations, the US should hedge for technological and strategic surprise and invest in weapons that increase our options to respond in a variety of plausible scenarios. By doing this, the US can retake the strategic advantage to retain the US-led order and prolong the nuclear peace.

Retaking the Strategic Advantage: Adapt the Strategic Deterrent and Campaign

The following policy recommendations can help the United States become more resilient against Chinese and Russian nuclear coercion and strengthen US deterrence to preserve peace:

1. The US should seek to convince China and Russia that threatening the US with a nuclear weapon offers no advantage. By investing in means to deliver a suite of nuclear weapons in theater that can hold at risk the growing number of adversary targets, the US would have a more credible set of graduated response options against any level of nuclear attack. These options would seek to end the war with the lowest level of destruction without ceding vital interest or risking the national sovereignty of US allies. Washington cannot wait to devise a deterrent strategy that responds to the China-Russia convergence on the hope that diplomatic opportunities might drive wedges in their partnership. In fact, the best hope for successful diplomacy lies in Russia and China recognizing the futility of assaulting the United States. Diplomacy works best when deterrence is sure. Necessary changes could mean the end of the New START Treaty, but the treaty is already in jeopardy due to Russia's war and refusal to allow verification to resume.⁴³ Moreover, the treaty no longer meets the needs of the current threat environment, and its restrictions on the US do more harm than good.⁴⁴
2. The United States should modernize its entire nuclear weapons enterprise, including its hollowed-out workforce. Outdated paradigms and ineffective nonproliferation efforts cannot be permitted to stymie the work of scientists and engineers. Instead, they should be free to explore new nuclear technologies to optimize the effectiveness and security of our nuclear weapons. The US should maintain the legal option to end its moratorium on nuclear testing, which has been in place since 1992, should the need arise. Arms control efforts have pressured policymakers to further codify the end of US nuclear testing, but the Senate has wisely rejected those efforts. Those who want the United States to refuse to consider testing, even if our labs determine it is technically needed, should remember that our adversaries appear to have rejected the same no-testing standard.⁴⁵
3. The United States should shape China and Russia's calculations by demonstrating that the US has ample conventional options, at the appropriate scale, to hold at risk key targets in theater, in all domains of warfare, in defense of its vital interests. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has exposed the United States' shortcomings in the industrial bases' ability to produce affordable weapons at scale. This gap is especially acute in the China context. As analyst Mark Gunzinger has argued, the Air Force should adopt a strategy for developing precision-guided munitions (PGM) with an inventory large enough for a war with two peers. Gunzinger writes, "The Air Force must balance the range, size, speed, survivability, and capacity of munitions in its inventory if it is to maintain a precision strike advantage over China and Russia."⁴⁶ Moreover, the munitions plans need to be devised based on a rapidly growing target set.⁴⁷
4. The United States should leverage modern technology to advance the US homeland missile defense layered architecture so that it can intercept Russian or Chinese preemptive missile salvos against key US nodes. Since the Cold War, the US has held a policy of mutual strategic vulnerability with Russia. The Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty codified this mutual vulnerability until President George W. Bush withdrew the US from the treaty in 2002. However, the US has effectively relied on mutual vulnerability and guaranteed nuclear retaliation with the Russians as a practical matter. The current US homeland missile defense system can only defend against a North Korean missile attack or an accidental or unauthorized

attack. Yet Russia and China have not been restrained in their missile defense development and do not remain intentionally vulnerable to attack.⁴⁸ So the US should no longer maintain a pretense of mutual vulnerability, especially since current technology allows for a more capable defensive layer that would limit the damage from a Chinese or Russian preemptive first strike.

5. Merely possessing the capabilities to deter Russia and China is not enough; the US should use deterrence campaigning to convince China and Russia of US capabilities and resolve.⁴⁹ For example, the US, with our allies when possible, should carry out regular military exercises that integrate conventional and nuclear capabilities. By investing in nuclear and conventional weapons, as well as active and passive defenses so that the US can show the adversary that the United States has the means to prevail in any military attack, America would signal that there is no advantage to launching a conventional war against key US interests or to threatening the US with a limited nuclear employment before or during a conventional war. Demonstrating resolve would show Moscow and Beijing that the cost and risks of going down this path are far too high.⁵⁰

Conclusion

America's most powerful rivals, China and Russia, are highly motivated to break US-led alliances and supplant the US-led world order. So these adversaries are developing new nuclear weapons and investing in military systems that they believe will help them achieve their aims. The US should

be particularly concerned with Russia's explicit nuclear threats and the real possibility that its military planners have lowered the threshold for nuclear employment. China could adopt a similar approach to deterring the United States from defending Taiwan or other US allies and partners. Some experts have already expressed concern that China and Russia's nuclear weapons could prompt the US to increase its nuclear arsenal or adapt its defensive systems in ways that Washington has previously chosen not to do. Similarly, some fear that the United States might engage in a costly and provocative arms buildup that could upset "strategic stability." But adapting the US deterrent to meet today's challenges does not mean it must match the numbers of warheads one for one that our adversaries possess. And it is critical we keep clear in our minds that it is America's rivals, not the US, that have set out on a rapid arms race. And it is America's rivals, not the US, that have national aims to employ military violence to violate the sovereignty of US allies and change the stable status quo. Thus, it is eminently prudent, not provocative or too costly, for the United States to invest in the capabilities and implement the strategies that make America more resilient and less susceptible to nuclear coercion. Doing so would backstop all other US military efforts across the spectrum of domains and help convince adversaries that they would not prevail in a conventional or nuclear war against the United States. Working to shape their calculations now so that they see there is an unacceptably high chance that the US would thwart their military campaign would increase the odds of deterrence holding. In doing so, we would optimize the attractiveness of diplomacy and maintain the US-led order and nuclear peace.

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