

NUCLEAR DETERRENCE FOR A NEW CENTURY

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Over the course of the Cold War, the majority of American strategic thinkers gravitated to the notion that mutual nuclear deterrence, built around survivable retaliatory capabilities on both sides, made strategic relations between the United States and the Soviet Union predictably “stable.”¹ Both countries, the thinking went, would be deterred from highly provocative behavior by a mutual fear of escalation to a general war in which the level of nuclear destruction to the civilian infrastructure and population would far exceed any possible gain for either side. Consequently, each would avoid provoking the other in the extreme.² Over time, this vision of mutual deterrence stability became so widely accepted that it even garnered a popular moniker: the “balance of terror.”

In the United States, general acceptance of this deterrence paradigm had concrete consequences: stable deterrence came to be defined as mutual capabilities for strategic nuclear retaliation against cities, and strategic forces were categorized based on their expected effect on the “balance of terror.” Those forces compatible with *offensive retaliatory threats to cities and industry* were labeled beneficial and “stabilizing.” Those capable of defending society against such threats, on the other hand, were deemed to be the opposite.



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This simplistic equation, known as Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), became the prism through which many in the press, Congress, armed services, and Executive Branch thought about and judged strategic forces. It also turned into the organizing principle for U.S. arms control, which became oriented around eliminating bad, “destabilizing” systems, such as missile defense, while preserving a limited number of good, “stabilizing” offensive nuclear forces.

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False confidence

From the outset, however, extreme confidence in Mutual Assured Destruction required specific assumptions about human decision-making, the character of the United States and the Soviet Union, and the context of the Cold War itself. For MAD to work predictably, certain conditions in the U.S.-Soviet relationship had to exist: leaders would communicate in times of crisis well enough to comprehend their respective threats and thresholds for nuclear retaliation; they would conduct a well-informed, unemotional, and rational cost-benefit assessment of the potential consequences of brinkmanship and conflict; and they ultimately would prudently decide that the disincentives to taking pro-

vocative actions would outweigh any incentives to the contrary.

During the Cold War, each of these characteristics simply was assumed to exist in U.S.-Soviet deterrence relations. We chose to believe that Soviet leaders would be “sensible” and calculating after our own fashion, meaning that they would inevitably choose to be cautious in the face of a nuclear threat to cities; that caution was the only “rational” choice and guaranteed deterrence. By viewing Soviet leaders essentially as the mirror images of ourselves, we could take for granted the conditions necessary for stable deterrence, and conclude that it would function reliably.

Over time, this proposition became a comforting Cold War tautology—the lethality of our strategic nuclear threat ensured deterrence against all but the irrational because only the irrational would not be deterred by the lethality of our strategic nuclear threat. Former National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy expressed this view all too well in his classic 1969 *Foreign Affairs* article. “In the light of the certain prospect of retaliation there has been literally no chance at all that any sane political authority, in either the United States or the Soviet Union, would consciously choose to start a nuclear war,” Bundy wrote. “This proposition is true for the past, the present, and the foreseeable future. For sane men on both sides, the balance of terror is overwhelmingly persuasive.”³

Why? Because, according to Bundy, “...a decision that would bring even one hydrogen bomb on one city of one’s own country would be recognized in advance as a catastrophic blunder; ten bombs on ten cities would be a disaster beyond history; and a hundred bombs on a hundred cities are unthinkable.”⁴ Nuclear deterrence

thus was considered “easy” to understand and to guarantee.⁵ It became a simple function of balance. Mutual nuclear threats to cities ensured stable mutual deterrence, and such vulnerability was easy to orchestrate with nuclear weapons.

Viewing deterrence through this MAD prism led us to limit or reject supposedly “destabilizing” strategic forces, including imposing strict limitations on ballistic missile defense (BMD) development, testing and deployment, quantitative limitations on the deployment of *Minuteman* and later *Peacekeeper* ICBMs, and accuracy limitations on strategic ballistic missile warheads. In particular, missile defense became a long-term casualty of our confidence in MAD. Critics argued successfully for decades that because MAD could be made reliable through the balance of terror, BMD offered nothing of value and in fact could upset “stability” by threatening “the other side’s deterrent.” It came to be seen as the “enemy” of deterrence and U.S. arms control.

To be sure, we did not limit or reject these capabilities *solely* because our preferred deterrence paradigm deemed them “destabilizing.” But, as Ted Greenwood concludes in his study of U.S. Cold War strategic force acquisition practices, its effect could be decisive.⁶ During the Cold War, MAD was the “the supreme dogma of the ascendant branch of the defense and arms control communities,”⁷ and it was solidly against BMD and other supposedly destabilizing strategic forces.

The Bush revolution

The comforting but now vapid Cold War refrain that deterrence will “work” reliably certainly continues to be heard today—a sort of all-purpose argument against new nuclear capa-

bilities, and against missile defense. The confidence in deterrence that typified the Cold War now is presumed to apply to post-Cold War rogue threats—as if the dramatic changes in opponent and context are irrelevant. Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, for example, has written: “What deters them today is what will always deter them—the certainty that if they attack us with weapons of mass destruction their regimes will be destroyed. In other words, what is protecting us right now from the most likely rogue threat ... is classic deterrence.”⁸

In the contemporary threat environment, the predictable functioning of deterrence is likely to be the exception, rather than the norm.

One of the most important developments in the Bush administration’s thinking is a rejection of strategic planning based on unwarranted confidence in the predictability of deterrence. This more sober view of what to expect from deterrence is not predicated upon the simplistic assumption that rogues are somehow incapable of rational decision-making, or that deterrence must fail, as some have wrongly suggested.⁹ Rather, it is based on a recognition that the characteristics we assumed to be in place in the U.S.-Soviet deterrence relationship, courtesy of mirror imaging, manifestly do not pertain to America’s relations with rogue states. In the contemporary threat environment, there is quite likely to be a relative lack of mutual familiarity and understanding, leaders may not be well informed, communications may not be reliable, opponents may

not calculate according to our definition of “sensible,” and deterrence may not be a simple function of force balances. In these circumstances the predictable functioning of deterrence is likely to be the exception, rather than the norm.

Within the Bush administration and the armed services there is growing recognition of the fact that Cold War deterrence is *not* appropriate vis-à-vis contemporary opponents.

McGeorge Bundy and others asserted as a universal proposition that deterrence would work because, “a hundred bombs on a hundred cities are unthinkable.”¹⁰ By doing so, Bundy revealed far more about what he believed to be “unthinkable” than articulating any universally shared sensibility or value. In the past, leaders have been more than willing to run the risk of utter societal destruction in pursuit of their goals. Some, such as Adolf Hitler and Japan’s War Minister in 1945, Korechiki Anami, welcomed the destruction of their own societies; Hitler actually promoted it. PRC Chairman Mao Zedong disparaged U.S. nuclear capabilities because, “Even if U.S. atom bombs... were dropped on China, blasted a hole in the earth or blew it to pieces, this might be a big thing for the solar system, but it would still be an insignificant matter as far as the universe as a whole is concerned.”¹¹ Mao disdained the deterrent effect of U.S. nuclear forces, writing dismissively of potential Chinese losses, “All it is is a big pile of people dying.”¹² A line from Mao’s poetry reads, “Atom bomb goes off when it is told./ Ah, what boundless joy!”¹³ The threat

of “a hundred bombs on a hundred cities” may have been “unthinkable” to an American defense intellectual like McGeorge Bundy, but that tells us nothing about whether deterrence will or will not function reliably against others.

Within the Bush administration and the armed services there is growing recognition of this reality, and of the fact that Cold War deterrence is *not* appropriate vis-à-vis contemporary opponents. As President Bush emphasized on May 20, 2003:

The contemporary and emerging missile threat from hostile states is fundamentally different from that of the Cold War and requires a different approach to deterrence and new tools for defense. The strategic logic of the past may not apply to these new threats, and we cannot be wholly dependent on our capability to deter them. Compared to the Soviet Union, their leaderships often are more risk prone Deterring these threats will be difficult. There are no mutual understandings or reliable lines of communication with these states¹⁴

The typical threat now confronting the U.S. is that of regional rogue powers led by a variety of tyrants and dictators who may not be the prudent, attentive, well-informed leaders we assumed the Soviets to be during the Cold War. Rogue leaders have few shared characteristics except, as Ian Buruma has observed in *The New York Review of Books*, “they all have one quality in common: striving for absolute power consigns them to a world of lies.”¹⁵ The contemporary challenge facing U.S. strategic planners is to understand such leaders sufficiently well to establish tailored policies of deterrence that “work” more by design than by luck.

The difficulty of such an approach has been suggested by Mahdi Obeidi, the former director of Iraq's nuclear centrifuge program:

...the West never understood the delusional nature of Saddam Hussein's mind. By 2002, when the United States and Britain were threatening war, he had lost touch with the reality of his diminished military might. By that time I had been promoted to director of projects for the country's entire military-industrial complex, and I witnessed firsthand the fantasy world in which he was living ... sort of like the emperor with no clothes, he fooled himself into believing he was armed and dangerous. But unlike that fairy-tale ruler, Saddam Hussein fooled the rest of the world as well.¹⁶

We believed we had great insight into the thinking of the Soviet leadership, could communicate well with its officials, and that those leaders ultimately would behave in well-informed, reasonable and predictable ways. Consequently, we could be wholly confident deterrence would "work." But today, there is no basis for comparable faith with regard to rogue regimes.

In their day, early proponents of the Cold War balance of nuclear terror claimed with great confidence that the "principles that underlie this diplomacy of violence" are valid across time, place and culture.¹⁷ More recently, journalists and editorials from prominent newspapers repeat the same Cold War mantra: "The logic of deterrence transcends any particular era or enemy."¹⁸

If that were so, deterrence truly could be easily understood and practiced. But such a comforting notion was coherent only with the mirror-imaging and unique conditions of

the Cold War—and even then only barely so. Today, confidence in the predictable functioning of deterrence is well and truly a thing of the past. It no longer can be considered predictable with confidence, nor can old axioms from MAD serve as a basis for designing our post-Cold War security policies and forces.

This is certainly not a rejection of deterrence writ large,¹⁹ but a lowering of expectations that traditional deterrence can be expected to function reliably and predictably and a rejection of the old "good" and "bad" force categorizations derived from MAD.

Because deterrence is less certain, defensive steps—such as deployment of missile defense—have new urgency to protect the U.S. population, territory, expeditionary forces and allies.

Moving beyond MAD

Just as confidence in MAD had the effect of undercutting the rationale for missile defense and various nuclear force initiatives, reduced confidence in deterrence increases the merits of those same strategic programs. Because deterrence is less certain, defensive steps—such as deployment of missile defense—have new urgency to protect the U.S. population, territory, expeditionary forces and allies. And precisely because deterrence is less certain today, steps to increase its effectiveness against a spectrum of potential opponents have fresh salience. These may range from seeking a better understanding of opponents to deploying a spectrum of capabilities aimed at improving the

probability that we can deter diverse opponents.²⁰

The Bush administration—in contrast with its detractors—has adopted a policy position that is wholly compatible with the new threat environment. It likewise has taken steps to increase the effectiveness of deterrence across a spectrum of threats, and to prepare for its possible failure. These have included President Bush's decision to deploy a layered ballistic missile defense architecture, a Defense Department and Energy Department-requested feasibility study of earth-penetrating warheads, movement toward strategic non-nuclear weapons, greater freedom to examine very low-yield nuclear weapons, and the inclusion of nuclear and non-nuclear strike capabilities in the "New Triad."

Criticisms of the Bush administration's Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) and related administration strategic initiatives tend to be the predictable Cold War axioms about deterrence derived from MAD. Deterrence, this line of thinking goes, is reliable, so there is no need to deploy missile defense,²¹ or to be overly concerned about the threat of a rogue nuclear, electro-magnetic pulse (EMP) attack.²² And because deterrence is reliable, there is no need for new types of nuclear capabilities.²³ After all, deterrence will work, even against ruthless, eccentric leaders such as Saddam Hussein.²⁴ This perspective also logically opposes U.S. capabilities suitable for threatening an enemy's military forces, because under MAD, they were considered antithetical to "stable" deterrence.

In short, Cold War-like confidence in the predictable functioning of deterrence remains the all-purpose rationale for *not* revising our thinking about deterrence or our nuclear force

structure, *not* preparing to protect ourselves against deterrence failure, and *not* moving away from our Cold War legacy nuclear arsenal. What appears to be unrecognized by most critics of the Bush administration is that the assumed conditions that permitted Cold War confidence in MAD no longer pertain. Under post-Cold War conditions, those who make confident predictions about reliable deterrence will be proven wrong; it is only a matter of time.

Overconfidence in deterrence has been a staple of the U.S. strategic community for almost two generations. It has been absorbed by an entire cadre of academics who address the subject, journalists who report on it, members of Congress who decide which military programs will or will not be funded, and civilian and military officials who seek funding for forces. The NPR and the Bush administration's strategic initiatives should be understood for what they are—attempts to keep pace with the dramatic changes that have taken place in the global security environment.

The Cold War deterrence paradigm was comforting and convenient. It is now obsolete. Moving beyond it is necessary if we are to adjust our thinking to new realities. But we should harbor no illusions; comforting and convenient beliefs are easily embraced, and given up only with great reluctance. Modernizing our thinking about nuclear deterrence will require a continuing effort to dispel the MAD adages about deterrence and strategic forces so deeply ingrained by our Cold War experience.



1. Notable exceptions to the prevailing confidence in the predictability of deterrence are the incomparable works of Herman Kahn, Fred Iklé, Alexander L. George, Richard Smoke, and Albert Wohlstetter. See Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960); Fred Charles Iklé, "Can Deterrence Last Out the Century?" *Foreign Affairs* 51, no. 2 (1973), and "Nuclear Strategy: Can There Be a Happy Ending?" *Foreign Affairs* 63, no. 4 (1985); Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974); and Albert Wohlstetter, "The Delicate Balance of Terror," *Foreign Affairs* 37, no. 2 (1959).
2. This type of "stability," born of mutual reluctance to run the risk of nuclear escalation, is at the heart of Thomas Schelling's brilliant conceptualization of deterrence during the Cold War. See Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).
3. "To Cap the Volcano," *Foreign Affairs* 48, no. 1 (1969), 9.
4. *Ibid.*, 10.
5. As observed by Robert Jervis in "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," *Political Science Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (1979-80), 617-618.
6. Ted Greenwood, *Making the MIRV: A Study of Defense Decision Making* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 65, 148.
7. John Newhouse, *Cold Dawn: The Story of SALT* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), 9.
8. "Who's Crazy Here?" *New York Times*, May 15, 2001, 25.
9. Those who seek to dismiss concerns about the predictable functioning of deterrence wrongly criticize such concerns as being founded on a simpleminded bigotry against rogue leaders. See, for example, Kenneth N. Waltz, "More May Be Better," in Scott Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, eds., *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: Norton, 2003), 14. And the Bush administration certainly has not concluded that deterrence must fail, as is asserted in Hans M. Kristensen, "Preparing for the Failure of Deterrence," *SITREP: A Publication of the Royal Canadian Military Institute* 65, no. 6 (2005), 10-12.
10. "To Cap the Volcano," 10.
11. Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 414-415.
12. *Ibid.*, 414.
13. *Ibid.*, 485.
14. *National Policy on Ballistic Missile Defense Fact Sheet*, White House, Office of the Press Secretary, May 20, 2003 (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/05/20030520-15.html>).
15. "Master of Fear," *New York Review of Books* 51, no. 8 (2004), 2.
16. "Saddam, the Bomb and Me," *New York Times*, September 26, 2004.
17. Schelling, vii-viii.
18. "In Defense of Deterrence," *New York Times*, September 10, 2002.
19. Some critics of the Bush administration have leveled this charge. See, for example, Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004), 2, 21, and Ivo Daalder, quoted in Michael Gordon, "Nuclear Arms: For Deterrence or Fighting," *New York Times*, March 11, 2001.
20. As discussed in Keith B. Payne, "The Nuclear Posture Review: Setting the Record Straight," *The Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2005), 135-152. For an excellent unclassified review of the NPR, see Kurt Guthe, *The Nuclear Posture Review: How Is the "New Triad" New?* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2002).
21. At a recent symposium on the subject, "Several speakers noted that mutual assured destruction worked for half a century to stay the hand of Soviet Union leaders, who declined to mount any nuclear attack on the United States because that would have provoked a devastating response that would have leveled Soviet cities. Speakers thus questioned why BMD is needed, when mutual assured destruction can achieve the same result." Dave Ahearn, "Opponents of BMD Marshal Argument on Effectiveness, Cost," *Defense Today*, May 17, 2005.
22. See Nick Schwellenbach, "LETTER TO THE EDITOR: The EMP(ty) Threat," *Washington Times*, November 27, 2005, B-2.
23. See William J. Perry et al., "An American Security Policy: Challenge, Opportunity, Commitment," National Security Advisory Group Report, July 2003, 18-20 (<http://www.wslfweb.org/docs/usg/NSAG-7.23.03.pdf>).
24. See, for example, Morgan, 8-9 and Jan Nolan and Mark Strauss, "The Rogues' Gallery," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 4, iss. 1 (1997), 32-35.