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New Threat Realities and Deterrence Requirements

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The SW-21 conference sponsors have asked multiple worthy and overarching questions. But given the time available, we must narrow the aperture for our respective remarks. In doing so, I would like to discuss two of these overarching questions briefly:

- **First:** What are the changes in the security environment posed by regional powers?
- **Second,** and, correspondingly: What do these changes suggest regarding the possibility of new requirements?

Most of my remarks along these lines today focus on Russia and deterrence policy considerations because that has been the focus of my work for decades. But there are important parallels with regard to US-Chinese relations that we can discuss as well.

Previous speakers have focused on the first question regarding changes in the security environment. So I will offer a brief, up-front conclusion in this regard: the world has become a much more dangerous place since the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) and Western security policies and practices need to adjust to this new reality.

Until recently, that conclusion would have been deemed far-fetched. Indeed, a basic presumption underlying past NPRs was of an increasingly benign world order in which nuclear weapons would play a declining role in terms of both the threat they pose and their security value. The post-Cold War world supposedly was moving beyond such methods and concerns. Nuclear deterrence was deemed decreasingly relevant to US relations with Russia and China, and irrelevant to the most serious threat, nuclear terrorism.



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 415 | January 30, 2017

Indeed, for most of the previous twenty-five years, US policy increasingly has been captured by three related refrains regarding the post-Cold War era: 1) nuclear terrorism was the remaining greatest threat; 2) nonproliferation was the highest priority and key to countering this greatest threat; and, 3) in turn, US nuclear reductions and limitations were the key to nonproliferation.

The policy direction that followed these three refrains regarding US nuclear weapons was that their salience and numbers should be lowered, both for their lack of value and to advance our *highest nuclear policy priority*, nonproliferation.

The postulates underlying these lines were and are questionable at best, but taken together they led inevitably to the conclusion that nuclear deterrence was an outdated subject and strategy, and US nuclear forces were of greatly-declining value and interest.

It's difficult to overstate the certainty that attended this policy direction. It was reflected in a highly-regarded 1991 *Foreign Affairs* article written by three senior former officials and authors, including the late Robert McNamara. To wit, hostility with Russia was described as, "hardly more likely to be revived than the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries between Catholics and Protestants in Europe."¹ Over two decades later, the Global Zero Commission study similarly said, "The risk of nuclear confrontation between the United States and either Russia or China belongs to the past, not the future."²

Unfortunately, that new world was short-lived, as some doughty realists said would be the case. We are now playing catch-up as nuclear deterrence once again is identified as priority number one by senior US civilian and military leaders. As a 2016 DoD report states: "The nuclear deterrent is the DoD's highest priority mission."³

What happened? The supposed new world order and its corresponding nuclear policy line so embraced by the West were mugged by reality, particularly including Russia's and China's blatant drives to overturn existing orders and their expanding nuclear capabilities. These drives appear ultimately to have persuaded key folks in the Obama Administration that the new world order is not emerging; that nonproliferation is not the highest priority goal; and that robust US nuclear capabilities and threats remain critical for the deterrence of enemies and the assurance of allies.

As former Secretary of Defense Carter noted in November 2016, "While we didn't build anything new for 25 years, and neither did our allies, others did – including Russia, North Korea, China, Pakistan, India, and for a period of time, Iran. We [now] can't wait any longer."⁴

Belief in a benign world order is self-serving for satisfied, status-quo powers, and thus has been extremely difficult for the West to discard. However, Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and its on-going pressure and explicit nuclear first-use threats against NATO states and neutrals have demonstrated today's stark reality.⁵

The Putin regime, for example, appears to believe that it has an exploitable escalation advantage; that is, the West is expected to stand down in the face of Russian nuclear escalation threats or employment. According to open sources, we saw this dynamic play out in Russian exercises as early as *Zapad 99*.⁶

Russia's explicit nuclear-first use threats and reported planning for first-use employment reflect a partial failure of Western deterrence strategies, and the mounting palpable fears of some US allies reflect a partial failure of assurance.⁷ This is not speculation about some dark future; these partial failures are here and now.

This apparent reality now compels some NATO members to consider difficult choices: last year for example the Undersecretary of State in Poland's Defense Ministry stated publicly that Poland may have to choose between creating its own non-nuclear deterrent or "drift towards a 'Finlandized' status in



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 415 | January 30, 2017

order to decrease the likelihood of Russian attack.”⁸ Anyone who misses the message contained in such public statements simply does not want to hear it.

A well-known commentator recently said publicly that such allies are just “nervous nellies,”⁹ and their fears should not drive US policies; a former senior defense official asked rhetorically, “Why should we be responsible for their paranoia?” Such disdainful, condescending statements fail to recognize that our allies do understand their own security conditions, and if we care about our alliances (which we must), we cannot disdain their security concerns.

There is now something of a consensus in Washington regarding these new threat realities and the corresponding revived importance of nuclear deterrence and assurance. So, we can move logically to our second question: What do these new realities suggest regarding new US requirements for deterrence and assurance? This should be a central question of the new US Nuclear Posture Review and also a serious question for the new Ballistic Missile Defense Review.¹⁰

The first-order generalized answer is the requirement for US flexibility and resilience to adapt as necessary to a hostile, dynamic, and unpredictable environment. That answer alone is no small change from the previous dominant post-Cold War policy direction which sought largely to limit and reduce US nuclear capabilities on a continuing and progressive basis.

But, to answer the question of requirements in greater detail depends on the answer to a prior question that to my knowledge few have asked and no one has yet answered in detail: What are the specific factors that underlie our opponents’ felt freedom to contest US deterrence strategies, change post-Cold War boundaries, and threaten us, our allies and neutrals with nuclear first use?

Recent recommendations regarding new requirements in Europe range widely—from doing nothing; to heightening Western conventional capabilities and their readiness; to matching Russia’s numerous nuclear escalation options with the deployment of multiple new types of US strategic and theater nuclear strike capabilities.

What often is missing from these recommendations, however, is their linkage to any explanation of why Russia believes it has an escalation advantage, and how the recommended responses address the factors underlying that Russian belief.

For example, if the Russian perception of advantage flows from particular political conditions or lax Western signaling, then our new requirements must be geared toward fixing those political conditions or communication lapses. If instead, Russian perceptions of advantage are based more on operational military considerations, nuclear and/or non-nuclear, then that must be the object of our focus. Obviously, these possible factors are not mutually exclusive—Russian perceptions of advantage may follow from a combination of factors.

In the absence of establishing the linkage between specific problems and remedy, any recommended fix may be deemed as helpful or unhelpful as the next—with the exception of “do nothing,” which should be considered a non-starter because it would leave in place conditions that are too dangerous to be allowed to continue.

I wish Russian leaders would make our work in this regard easy by publicly identifying and weighting the factors they believe give Russia an escalation advantage. Unfortunately, they do not. Consequently, as was the case during the Cold War, we are reduced to interpreting shadows on the wall—fully aware that Russian *dezinformatsiya* can distort the shadows.

That said, based on numerous open Russian writings and speeches over years, there are some consistent themes that I suspect underlie Moscow’s perceptions of an exploitable escalation advantage over NATO; from there it is possible to derive a few corresponding Western requirements.



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 415 | January 30, 2017

I do not present these in order of importance because I don't know *how or if* Russians weigh these factors, but they reportedly do assess the correlation of forces carefully and broadly, and take it seriously. We can start with the psychological and political factors: Russian goals, stakes, and will. Such factors may seem amorphous to some here today, but they are at the heart of deterrence and assurance considerations.

Russia is driven to correct the perceived injustices of the post-Cold War order forced on it by the West. The reigning belief in Moscow is that the West has further highly-aggressive designs against Russia, including regime change, and that Moscow must act to restore its power position or it will suffer further. Russia's goal of overturning the post-Cold War settlement makes friction with the West inevitable, and involves high stakes.

Importantly in this regard, both cognitive studies and historical analyses consistently indicate that, in general, the drive to recover something dear that has been lost, including honor – as appears to inspire Russian leaders – will also inspire considerable willingness to risk further loss. (Gambling casinos live on this very human penchant).

Russia believes it has the need and the will to overturn the status-quo, while it judges NATO's will and decision-making to be less uniform and determined to resist *if the risk of war looms, particularly nuclear war*. Moscow's apparent self-image and skepticism regarding NATO in this regard constitutes a perceived exploitable advantage that threatens deterrence.

Please note that I am not saying Russia wants war, but that its calculation of an asymmetry in the readiness to risk war, including nuclear war, is key to our considerations of deterrence and new requirements.

In short, Russia appears to have some felt-freedom to move against the West given its perception of this asymmetry of need and will. Just how much freedom Russia believes it has to move, I believe, is not fixed. It depends on Russian calculations of NATO's determination and strength to resist. That is a calculation I believe the West can affect by its statements and actions.

For example, some commentators say that the Putin regime has dangerous designs on Baltics states, others say it has no such designs. My point is that there probably is not a fixed answer to this question. Rather the Putin regime is pragmatic and the West can affect its designs and actions vis-à-vis the Baltics and elsewhere. This constraint is what makes Russia today so different from Germany in the late 1930s, and why deterrence is so critical.

What is required in response? Most generally, the West must end Russian perceptions that its will and readiness to break the West at the risk of war is greater than the West's will and readiness to prevent it from doing so.

We can help in this regard with consistent, assertive alliance-wide declaratory policies and actions communicating the message that the United States and NATO will not prove wobbly, *even under threat of nuclear war*, i.e., that Moscow has no exploitable political-psychological advantage in terms of *goals, stakes and will*. This is a tall order, but there is ample room for improvement in Western efforts to do so.

A related theme in Russian writings that underlies this perception of exploitable advantage, perhaps unsurprisingly, involves the apparent belief that Russia has corresponding force posture advantages over the West, nuclear and non-nuclear. These range from much greater local conventional force capability and readiness in the short-run, to nuclear escalation options to which NATO is thought to have no acceptable response given Russian skepticism about Western will and nuclear credibility.

The interaction here between Western non-nuclear defense preparedness and the perceived credibility of Western nuclear escalation options is important: the lower the credibility of Western



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 415 | January 30, 2017

nuclear escalation options, the greater is the likely requirement for forward defense. To use Cold War terms, a conventional “trip wire” that is believed by Moscow to lead to nothing much, will be of no value for deterrence or otherwise.

In addition, the greater the Western effort to put defensive capabilities in place to protect NATO front-line states, the more likely it will be that Moscow will see Western escalation commitments as credible. Why? Because it will demonstrate Western willingness to put itself on the line for this cause. The West understood this point well during the Cold War. The difference now, of course, is that NATO front-line states are former parts of the Soviet Union or former members of its Warsaw Pact.

That said, addressing Russia’s perceptions of exploitable advantage cannot escape the nuclear dimension. Given Russian views regarding escalation, the credibility of the West’s nuclear escalation threat is central. There is no non-nuclear prescription that can fully address Russia’s perception of an escalation advantage that is at the heart of the West’s deterrence problem.

Western options that could help in this regard include the obvious, such as: increasing DCA survivability and readiness; increasing the active defense of key NATO nodes and assets against conventional and nuclear strike; advancing the delivery date of the F-35 and B61-12 combination;¹¹ and having some very low-yield options available on accurate US strategic missile systems.

Other less obvious options include, for example, inviting allied personnel from front-line states such as Poland to serve as DCA pilots. Whether the West needs new nuclear strike capabilities, particularly given Russian violation of the INF Treaty, is an open question.

However that question is resolved, a more assertive supporting nuclear declaratory policy should complement any such steps. The long-held notion that uncertainty and ambiguity with regard to Western escalation will be adequate to support deterrence needs to be reconsidered. The historical evidence is overwhelming that uncertainty and ambiguity sometimes are not adequate to deter; explicit and direct threats are necessary in some cases. The Putin regime may be such a case. A useful example of a more direct declaratory policy was provided in 2016 by the then-new British Prime Minister, Theresa May when asked in Parliament if she would ever authorize a nuclear strike. She responded yes without hesitation. Prime Minister May added, “The whole point of a deterrent is that our enemies need to know that we would be prepared to use it. . . We must send an unequivocal message to any adversary that the cost of an attack on our United Kingdom or our allies will be far greater than anything it might hope to gain.”¹² I have no doubt that Moscow paid considerable attention to that unambiguous deterrence signal.

There is much more to say about this critical question of linking Western fixes to the real deterrence problem, but I must stop at this point to stay within my allotted time. I look forward to our Q and A session.

1. Carl Kaysen, Robert S. McNamara, and George W. Rathjens, “Nuclear Weapons After the Cold War,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (Fall 1991), p. 96. Over two decades later, the authors of a prominent report by the Nuclear Zero Commission made essentially the same claim, that is, the prospect of conflict with Russia or China had become a thing of the past.



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 415 | January 30, 2017

2. James Cartwright, Chair, Global Zero U.S. Nuclear Policy Commission, *Modernizing U.S. Nuclear Strategy, Force Structure and Posture* (Washington, D.C.: Global Zero, May 2012), p. 6, available at http://www.globalzero.org/files/gz_us_nuclear_policy_commission_report.pdf.
3. Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Defense Programs, *Strategic Planning Guidance FY 2018-2022*, February 2016, p. 2.
4. Quoted in, Jamie McIntyre, "Carter Says Nuclear-Armed Foes Catching Up to the US," *Washington Examiner*, November 3, 2016, at <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/carter-says-nuclear-armed-foes-catching-up-to-the-us/article/2606380>.
5. Then-Commander of the US European Command, Gen. Philip Breedlove, said in Feb. 2016, "Russia's continued aggressive actions and malign influence remain a top concern for our nation and my highest priority as EUCOM Commander." General Philip Breedlove, Commander, U.S. European Command, U.S. European Command Posture Statement 2016, February, 25, 2016, at <http://www.eucom.mil/media-library/article/35164/u-s-european-command-posture-statement-2016>.
6. Dave Johnson, "Nuclear Weapons in Russia's Approach to Conflict," *Recherches & Documents*, No. 6 (November 2016), p.13, at www.FRSTRATEGIE.org.
7. There are many open discussions regarding allied concerns. See for example, Bradley Peniston, "A Key NATO Ally Looks Nervously at Putin – And Trump," *Defense One*, January 23, 2017, at <http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2017/01/key-nato-ally-looks-nervously-putin-and-trump/134765/>
8. Tomasz Szatkowski as quoted in Giampaolo Di Paola, François Heisbourg, Patrick Keller, Richard Shirreff, Tomasz Szatkowski, and Rolf Tamnes, *Alliance at Risk: Strengthening European Defense in an Age of Turbulence and Competition* (Washington D.C.: The Atlantic Council, February 2016), pp. 25-26, available at <http://publications.atlanticcouncil.org/nato-alliance-at-risk/alliance-at-risk.pdf>.
9. Joe Cirincioni quoted in, Josh Rogin, "U.S. allies unite to block Obama's nuclear 'legacy'," *Washington Post*, August 14, 2016, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/allies-unite-to-block-an-obama-legacy/2016/08/14/cdb8d8e4-60b9-11e6-8e45-477372e89d78_story.html?utm_term=.14d3f106368c.
10. Aaron Mehta, "Trump Signs Order Promising a 'Great Rebuilding' of the Military," *Defense News*, January 27, 2017, available at <http://www.defensenews.com/articles/report-draft-executive-order-would-give-pentagon-short-term-funding-boost>.
11. See Orianna Pawlyk, "F-35 Could Carry B61 Nuclear Warhead Sooner Than Planned," *Tech*, January 10, 2017, at <http://defensetech.org/2017/01/10/f-35-carry-b61-nuclear-warhead-sooner-planned/>.
12. Theresa May, as quoted in House of Commons Hansard, "UK's Nuclear Deterrent," *Parliament.uk*, July 18, 2016, available at <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2016-07-18/debates/16071818000001/UKSNuclearDeterrent?highlight=Care>.

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