

Rethinking Deterrence

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Deterrence became a major element of American strategy with the advent of nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons delivered by long-range missiles were unstoppable and produced unsurvivable effects. This unstoppable destructiveness created the great strategic problem of the Cold War – how to defend against nuclear attack. The solution was to deter it, to make adversaries conclude that the retaliation for any nuclear attack would produce equal or greater destruction in their own country. While this solution was never entirely satisfactory, even when cloaked in the elegant formula of game theory, it guided American strategic thinking for decades.

Deterrence depends on an opponent's belief that you will inflict unacceptable damage if a core national interest is threatened. After 1945, the U.S. had ample stores of credibility. It had won a desperate global war to defend Europe. With its British allies, it had mercilessly firebombed Germany, and at the end, used nuclear weapons against two cities. The experience of the Second World War with its immense losses marked Soviet thinking, and Eisenhower's dictum that nuclear weapons would be used if there were "trustworthy evidence of a general attack against the West" set a clear threshold that the Soviets were loath to test. The Cuban Missile Crisis reinforced the credibility of nuclear deterrence. While the ultimate effect was to frighten both sides into negotiations, Kennedy's apparent willingness to risk nuclear war to defend vital U.S. interests made deterrent threats credible.

The strategic context for deterrence has changed markedly. Instead of a single, sluggish, near-peer opponent, the U.S. faces an array of rivals with differing goals, capabilities and tolerance for risk. The symmetry in doctrine, weapons, and risks that made Cold War deterrence effective no longer exists, nor is there any meaningful platform for strategic negotiation. The differing strategic cultures and doctrines of our leading military competitors – Russia, China, Iran and North Korea, make deterrence strategies more complex and less effective. Cold War nuclear deterrence produced an uneasy stability through a combination of negotiation, public statements, signaling, and weapons acquisitions. This stabilizing construct no longer exists. An inability to make credible threats, the efforts of potential opponents to circumvent deterrence, the destabilizing effects of new military technology and the global diffusion of power all combine to weaken deterrence.

The International Environment for Deterrence

The world we expected at the end of the Cold War, one shaped by shared universal values, the rule of law, and untrammelled markets, now faces significant political challenges to which the U.S. and its allies are ill equipped to respond. The end of the Cold War and the brief period of American supremacy that followed it was only a temporary pause in conflict and competition among states. If the U.S. was the "indispensable power" that alone could win the "game" of international affairs in the 1990s, our opponents seek to change the game to one where they have the advantage. In particular, while the U.S. can claim to have defeated communism, this is not the same as defeating Russia and China, whose revanchism and resurgent efforts to reshape

international relations are influenced by both deep concern over U.S. intentions and by a desire to outwit and evade deterrent threats.

Opponent motives include antipathy to the unipolar moment, a desire to undo the Western-centric international structure, and increase their own regional influence. Both Russia and China seek to reshape international affairs in ways that favor their interests. Russia's position is essentially defensive, to maintain Russia's international influence and position as a great power. China, is still defining its global role as it moves from "outsider" to major power in the international system and considers how to amend this system to reflect China's new status. China and Russia have made steady efforts in the last few years to create coherent alternatives to the conceptual framework for international order assembled by the U.S. and its allies after 1945.

There is a degree of commonality in their views of the U.S., shaped by a shared counter-narrative of American power and intentions that each finds compelling. This counter narrative would begin with the victory of the first Persian Gulf war, where the American military demonstrated its unmatched superiority in conventional conflict against Soviet-style forces (and Iraq had the fourth largest military in the world at that time). Post-cold war triumphalism and the unipolar moment suggested that the U.S. was not bound by the usual constraints in international relations. The Serbian conflict was deeply troubling to both Russia and China as a sign of unbridled U.S. willingness to use force without international sanction, something confirmed by the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

That invasion, the Color Revolutions, Arab Spring, and the pro-democracy policies of both the Bush and Obama administrations, was interpreted by Russia, China and others as a commitment to regime change. Then-Prime Minister Medvedev's statement linked the revolts in the Arab world, which he believed were instigated by Western "outside forces" who were conspiring to topple the Russian government illustrates this fear. Medvedev said "Let's face the truth. They have been preparing such a scenario for us, and now they will try even harder to implement it."¹ Iran and North Korea share similar beliefs about "regime change." These fears reflect an underlying recognition of a political fragility in these countries that inclines them to paranoia.

It also reflects an unresolved ambiguity in American foreign policy over the balance between promoting democracy and maintain stability. Eisenhower rejected "rollback," e.g. confronting authoritarianism, for "containment," because the risk of confrontation was too great, but the ghost of rollback lingers and has shaped American policy in our efforts to bring political change to undemocratic or poorly governed areas. These well-meaning policies may reflect post-war triumphalism or a belief that just as the Marshall Plan reshaped Europe after World War II, the U.S. had an opportunity to reshape the world after the Cold War. The effect, however, has been to create an antipathy to America that is most pronounced in our most likely military opponents. These nations selectively chose those American actions that support their view of an aggressive, expansionist power. This has led them to seek strategies, tactics and technologies that can thwart American power and circumvent deterrence.

The failures of American interventions in the Middle East damage its credibility and suggest a degree of strategic ineptitude that gives adversaries greater confidence. To counter American

¹ <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/kremlin-sees-peril-in-arab-unrest/431523.html>

global activism, some adversaries use irregular warfare and others develop asymmetric military technologies, including cyber-attack. Their efforts are designed to damage the West and create a more favorable international order while avoiding military confrontation. It is difficult to deter such challenges since opponents use tactics that minimize the risk of an unacceptably damaging U.S. response.

These elements – an intrusive political agenda, non-nuclear strategic capabilities, and a certain clumsiness in action – shape adversary strategies. Opponents seek to prevent the U.S. from imposing political change and believe that they can circumvent U.S. military force. This is the political context for deterrence. Our opponents have tested deterrence and found its limits, and will continue to test the U.S. in their efforts to constrain it and advance their own interests.

Nuclear stigmatization and Changes in Warfare

Nuclear weapons changed warfare. Since their advent, there have been no major clashes among nuclear armed states. Since 1945, there has been a steady decline in the levels of violence. The risk is simply too great. Nuclear weapons have a profound effect on the calculation of leading military powers when it comes to war, making them more cautious in using war as a tool of statecraft.² Massive global conflicts that would drag on for years, e.g. World War III, are unlikely. Nuclear weapons create existential risk that make mass mobilization and “total war” too hazardous.

The destructiveness of nuclear weapons has created a powerful political reaction. The use of nuclear weapons has been gradually stigmatized since the 1960s. By the end of the Cold War the utility of nuclear weapons was significantly constrained, with implicit understandings of no first use and a role limited only to deterring another state from using nuclear weapons. Some statesmen now even called for their complete abolition.³ But a reluctance to use nuclear weapons for anything other than defense, and then only in response to a nuclear attack, does not mean the end of conflict.

Our most likely major opponents, Russia and China, see U.S. advances in military technology as destabilizing and are acting to counter the perceived threat. The reaction of likely opponents to American military technology improvements is a continuation in some ways of the shock Russia, China and others felt when the U.S. used space, information networks and precision guided munitions (PGMs) to rapidly defeat a massive, Soviet-style military in the 1990 Persian Gulf War. What is new is the belief among potential adversaries that the U.S. will use its new technologies for strategic effect, changing the equation for stability and deterrence in unfavorable ways they cannot predict.

New classes of weapons have created a strategic problem. PGMs, long-range hypersonic strike

² Mueller examines this contentious statement by counting the declining number of casualties in inter-state conflict. John Mueller, “War has Almost Ceased to Exist: An Assessment,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Volume 124, 2009, <http://politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/THISPSQ.pdf>

³ This nuclear sunset could be reversed if recent Russian threats are serious. The Putin regime has reintroduced the idea of nuclear warfighting. It is possible that this is simply a Russian calculation that they can use nuclear threats to frighten the West and to compensate for the decline of their conventional forces, and much of their current practice is focused on political manipulation and opinion shaping and nuclear threats are a part of this.

capabilities, unmanned aerial vehicles, cyber attack, and anti-satellite weapons have changed warfare and provide new strategic capabilities. Our major opponents, Russia and China, see U.S. advances in military technology as destabilizing and are acting to counter this perceived threat.

A deep concern for both Russia and China is that the U.S. will use this combination of advanced conventional weapons and cyber attack to strike preemptively their nuclear forces and other high value targets. Conversations with Russian and Chinese officials suggest they believe that the U.S. could employ its new weapons to achieve strategic effect without the use of nuclear weapons, thus circumventing their own nuclear deterrent capabilities and reducing the deterrent value of Russia and Chinese military forces. These beliefs changing the equation for stability and deterrence in ways we cannot easily predict.

The United States is hardly alone in pursuing advanced weaponry, but this has had unanticipated effects. For example, the tacit understanding between the U.S. and the Soviets on immunity for space reconnaissance systems has not been duplicated with the Chinese. Russia's military modernization efforts and its use of "New Generation Warfare" (called "hybrid warfare" in the West) put unexpected pressures on nuclear deterrence in Europe. Russian declarations emphasizing an increased willingness to use nuclear weapons may also reflect a reaction to American technological developments. China's pursuit of advanced weaponry aims to duplicate and defeat U.S. existing and future capabilities.

One Chinese official, for example, compared U.S. cybersecurity efforts to American missile defense programs, saying that just as missile defense is intended to cancel out China's nuclear deterrent, U.S. cyber defense is intended to allow America to strike China with "impunity." Russian interlocutors point to NATO's new doctrine for responding to cyber attacks as destabilizing as it allows for preemptive strikes using weapons such as unmanned aerial vehicles and precision-guided munitions, weapons, against which the Russians believe that they cannot easily defend. While there is always an element of posturing in Russian pronouncements, Russian strategists and policymaker believe they are at risk from new American weapons, assert that the U.S. might use them to circumvent nuclear war in attacking Russia, and regularly cite UAVs, cyber attack, and PGMs as a significant threat. Russian analysts during the Cold War believed that inter-continental ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons created the possibility of a surprise attack that would lead to decisive victory. Cyber-attacks, which operate at even greater speed than ICBMs, and which could be used to paralyze command and control and launch systems could produce a "counterforce" effect without relying on nuclear weapons.

This is not the "arms race" of the Cold War, which was embedded in a negotiating framework that provided some ability to manage military competition. The current disparity between U.S. military forces and those of potential opponents is too great to balance in the kind of orchestrated arms race of the Cold War. In response to new military technology, these adversaries have chosen strategies to compensate for overwhelming U.S. conventional superiority. All of our opponents have great respect for American conventional military capabilities. They will seek to avoid actions that would trigger an American military response. This can involve hybrid military tactics (as in Ukraine), covert action (as in Iraq). China, which is the only competitor able to afford it, attempts to match U.S. conventional capabilities while also pursuing damaging actions that do not justify the use of force (such as espionage, disinformation, or the creation of

competing international financial institutions).

In a “global-zero” world, where nations eliminate nuclear weapons from their arsenals, the new non-nuclear technologies could give the U.S. strategic capabilities that Russia and China know they cannot currently match. Nor are there negotiations to manage opponent concerns. No one questions the utility of the new military technologies, but their political implications have not been thought through, nor have political strategies for confidence-building and possible limitations been developed. As militaries adopt new technologies and tactics and as nuclear weapons are increasingly relegated to passive (if not a symbolic role), fundamental aspects of deterrence must be rethought. New opponents and new forms of attack may not be deterrable and opponent actions and strategies will seek to circumvent deterrence.

Opponent Strategic Culture - Risk Tolerance and Experience

A range of subjective factors shape deterrence. How adversaries interpret our threats depends on their history and strategic culture and the most likely outcome is misinterpretation.⁴ The Soviets, despite considerable openness, signaling, and public statements by the U.S., misunderstood the intent of deterrence, interpreting American threats not as defensive measures but as aggression. New opponents with less experience in negotiation and strategy than the Soviets will make similar mistakes. Many Chinese scholars, for example, see deterrent threats simply as threats intended solely to coerce China, not as defensive measures. Authoritarian regimes share an inclination towards suspicion and paranoia, perhaps created by their fears of their own populations, and it is through this paranoid prism that they view deterrence.

Nor do current adversaries share the same attitudes towards risk. All calculate the risk of retaliation, but these calculations are based on different preferences and expectations. Some opponents, like ISIS and other jihadist groups, are for all purposes, undeterrable. Non-state actors are driven in part by antipathy to American power, by alternate concepts of governance, and disdain for existing regimes. Their tolerance for risk is greater than state adversaries and threats are less effective in deterring them. There is a much more complex discussion of how the risk shapes non-state actor planning, but it does not deter them from attack.

Many of the supporting assumptions for classic deterrence no longer hold. Deterrence assumed symmetry in targets, allowing each side to hold the others cities or strategic forces as hostages. This symmetry no longer exists. Some potential opponents may be more willing to accept losses than the U.S. - North Korea's leaders have never demonstrated concern for their citizens and Iran was willing to accept horrific losses to defend itself in the Iran-Iraq conflict - and their reaction to deterrent threats will reflect this. The combination of asymmetry in targets and greater opponent tolerance for risk reduce the ability to deter.

The U.S. now faces new classes of opponents with differing tolerance for risk and differing historical experiences. All of these new opponents are risk averse, but in different ways, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all deterrent policy no longer is sufficient. Through a long process in developing national strategies, they have sought to find ways to minimize and manage the risk of U.S. military action. Potential adversaries have the last two decades devising tactics and

⁴ Strategic culture being shaped by a nation's history and concepts for the use of force.

technology to manage risk and circumvent deterrence. The goal for opponents is to resist or counter the U.S. without triggering military confrontation or retaliation. Against such opponents, compellence (which Schelling defined as an action that persuades an opponent to cease or reverse an action) is of dubious value. Having failed to deter actions that do not justify retaliation, we are unlikely to compel their cessation.

Evading Deterrence

The current disparity between U.S. military forces and those of potential adversaries is too great to allow a stable conventional military balance to develop. In response, adversaries have developed strategies to compensate for and overcome U.S. conventional superiority, to engage in conflict in ways that reduces risk to acceptable levels. These trends have serious implications for both nuclear deterrence and for deterrence in general. This new style of warfare seems designed to deliberately circumvent the deterrent forces assembled by the United States and its allies.

All of our opponents fear American military capabilities. They will seek to avoid actions that would trigger an American military response. This can involve hybrid military tactics (as in Ukraine), political manipulation through disinformation and disruptive tactics (such as supporting anti-immigrant or nationalist groups in Western Europe), covert action, or political efforts to separate the U.S. and its allies. China, which is the only competitor able to afford it, attempts to match U.S. conventional capabilities while also pursuing damaging actions that do not justify the use of force (such as espionage, disinformation, or the creation of competing international financial institutions).

Opponents have developed tactics and technologies designed to circumvent deterrence by skirting the threshold of what could be considered the use of armed force, using coercive actions that stay below the UN Charter thresholds of “use of force” or “armed attack.” In this new style of conflict, a mixture of unconventional tactics and strategies, including proxy forces, covert action, cyber operations, and political manipulation can achieve strategic goals. The emphasis is on coercion rather than the use of force. The constraints on the use of force created by the risk posed by nuclear weapons and the influence of international law highlights the central problem for understanding and managing interstate conflict; conventional warfare is now only part of a larger range of coercive actions available to nations and many of these actions will not justify the use of military force in response, rendering deterrent threats ineffective.

Credible threats cannot rely on nuclear weapons or conventional forces. Their use is constrained by commitments to proportionality that shape both national decision making and international opinion on the use of force. International expectations constrain the ability of democracies to use force much more than in the past and have a particular effect on public opinion in the West. The result is a disinclination for prolonged conflict and for the direct use of force.

Opponent objectives – increased regional influence and diminished U.S. international authority - make it unlikely that they will launch some kind of major attack using conventional or nuclear forces or some cyber equivalent of a strategic nuclear attack. They can whittle away U.S. power without direct confrontation. In turn, the massive military force assembled to deter the Soviet Union in the Cold War may now have a destabilizing effect.

Credible threat and redlines

If U.S. threats are credible, opponents are less likely to take action. Effective deterrence requires credible threats. This assumes that opponent behavior is determined in part by their perception of the risk of U.S. retaliation (based on their tolerance for risk, their assessment of constraints on the U.S. use of force, the regional military balance, and other factors). The goal for opponents is to resist or counter the U.S. without triggering retaliation. If opponents assess the risk of U.S. retaliation as low, they will act against the U.S. and its interests.

We can adduce foreign estimates of the credibility of U.S. deterrent threats by looking at their behavior. Two events may have shaped opponent perception of the credibility of U.S. threats. The first is the February 2014 Russian intervention in Ukraine, which the U.S. was unable to deter or intervene effectively. The second was the confusion over the Syria chemical weapons “redline,” which some foreign commentators interpreted as a U.S. retreat. It is suggestive (but not conclusive) that the confusion over the Syria chemical weapons redline, was followed by aggressive and intrusive actions in cyberspace by China, Iran, and North Korea, using coercive cyber operations against targets in the U.S. in an unprecedented fashion. These actions stayed below the threshold of the use of force, complicating and slowing the U.S. ability to respond.

Iran’s harassment of U.S. financial institutions illustrates this problem. Iran used low-level cyber “attacks” to block bank websites. Iran probed the networks of American critical infrastructure companies to find vulnerabilities it could use for damaging attacks. To deter Iran, then-Secretary of Defense Panetta laid out a clear declaratory policy; the U.S. would take preemptive military action to prevent cyber-attacks that could cost American lives or cause significant economic harm to the U.S.⁵ The pace of Iranian activities declined briefly after Panetta’s remarks, then resumed full force. If the initial problem was how to signal Iran about risk, this quickly evolved into asking what to do when Iran ignored our signal.

In the Cold War, deterrence was part of a larger process to create strategic stability through a combination of negotiation, public statements, signaling, and weapons acquisitions. In varying degrees, these actions were aimed at shaping opponent perceptions and understanding of American policy. One thing we know from the Cold War, however, is that Soviet understanding of U.S. intentions was more limited than we suspected at the time, shaped more by their own beliefs and interpretations. Signaling,⁶ in this context, was only sporadically successful. There is no similar strategic engagement today and indeed until recently some might have said that this kind of strategic dialogue was unnecessary, increasing the likelihood of misinterpretation and decreasing the effectiveness of deterrent threats.

Given opponent perceptions of the U.S. propensity to use force and of their beliefs about the intent behind the development of advanced weapons, why are deterrent threats not more credible? Some of this has to do with underlying assumptions about proportionality, the idea that

⁵ <http://archive.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5136>

⁶ An exchange of information between potential opponents about discomfort and intent without explicit messages or potentially escalatory and politically difficult official communications

a response should not be excessive when compared to the triggering event, and the increased influence of international law on inter-state conflict (particularly for western nations). There is an implicit threshold accepted by the international community that justifies the use of force as legitimate. Staying below this threshold reduces the risk of retaliation and makes threats to use force in retaliation less credible. Opponent assessment of U.S. leadership also reduces the ability to make credible threats - as one Chinese General put it, the U.S. has “amazing capabilities, [but] no will.”

Deterrence Requires Clarity on Vital National Interests

The most effective threats for deterrence come from linking retaliation to an attack on a vital national interest. Cold War deterrence was effective in defending two vital interests – preventing nuclear attack on the U.S. and the conventional invasion of Europe, clear thresholds associated with clear retaliatory responses – massive destruction of the Soviet Union’s military forces, industrial capacity, population, and political leadership. Deterrence was based on a more than adequate arsenal of thermonuclear weapons and their immense destructive capability. While there was debate about credibility – would the U.S. really risk its own cities to protect Europe, could delivery system be foiled, would a first strike eliminate the retaliatory force – after the Cuban missile crisis, the immensity of the nuclear threat made the Soviets cautious in acting directly against these vital American interests.

It is harder to deter threats against diffuse national interests. U.S. national interests are defined by an assumption that a global market ruled by law where U.S. firms can compete on equal footing with foreign companies will best advance its interests. This is not a military problem. A commitment to defend the even more amorphous “global commons” creates military requirements, but without clear thresholds for violation while seeming both intrusive and arrogant. U.S. interests are now much more diffuse.

Defining the political independence and territorial integrity of Europe and Japan as a vital interest was compelling, particularly as it came after the tangible demonstration of commitment produced by a massive U.S. effort in the Second World War, which included the use of nuclear weapons, the creation of a formal defensive alliance, and the stationing of significant forces in an extended defensive perimeter. In contrast, the Carter Doctrine proclaimed that the U.S. would use its military forces to defend oil resources in the Persian Gulf. This did not deter Iraq from invading its oil rich neighbor in 1990. Nor did it deter Iran from creating a proxy-state ally in Lebanon, from expanding its influence in Iraq, or from engaging in terrorism using proxies. Russia, found tactics that have allowed it to re-extend its influence in the near abroad over Georgia and Ukraine while circumvention U.S. deterrent threats. China is not deterred from extending its maritime borders

Many analysts have commented on the shortcomings of “extended deterrence” and there is a long list of things the U.S. has been unable to deter. In extended deterrence, the nuclear deterrent force is used to produce not only strategic effects (in this case, the territorial defense of the U.S. and its allies against military attack), but also to dissuade opponents from undertaking actions below the strategic threshold. The fundamental question problem for extended deterrence is the difficulty of making a credible threat that on an issue of less than strategic

importance, the defender will risk existential consequences that threaten the survival of its nation. This question came up repeatedly in discussion of using nuclear deterrence to defend Europe. The crux of the problem lies with the immense destructive capability of nuclear weapons, which is disproportional for almost all extended deterrence scenarios.

Opponents likely calculate that actions that do not affect vital national interests will not trigger a damaging U.S. response. The U.S. could change these calculations if it convinced opponents it had an expansive definition of vital national interests, such as defending the “global commons,” but these broad definitions are unpersuasive and are usually reinterpreted as a defense of American “hegemony.” Other countries define vital national interests in a more limited fashion and it is through this narrower lens that they measure U.S. pronouncements. For extended deterrence, we can deter opponents from contemplating invasion or nuclear attacks on allies or friends, but not from undertaking many coercive actions, including most kinds of cyber attack

Deterrence requires a careful identification of national interests, the threats they face, and the means to protect them. Strategic ambiguity is not artful, it is confusing. Richard Betts, another theorist of the classic age of deterrence, recently wrote, “Deterrence should be ambiguous only if it is a bluff.”⁷ While a reasonable goal for policy would be to seek to expand the number of threats than can be deterred, we must recognize that this is a much-constrained space, and reducing risk will require conceptual tools other than those inherited from the Cold War. The linkage between vital interests and strategy is attenuated, leading to efforts of varying degrees of seriousness to duplicate Eisenhower’s “Solarium Project” and develop a new “Grand Strategy.” Any strategy will require a clear definition of vital national interests, unambiguous thresholds for retaliation, and a recognition that there are some threats and challenges that have no military solution and cannot be deterred.

Rethinking Deterrence

Deterrence did not figure very highly (if at all) in military strategy until the advent of nuclear weapons. A review of the use of the term deterrence in English language published sources shows almost no reference before 1890, a sharp and steady increase beginning in 1950 and peaking in 1986, followed by a slow decline. Of course, ancient strategists spoke of the need to have an adequate military force to discourage other states from attacking, but until the 1950s, strategists considered how best to use force to defeat other nations, not how to frighten them into inactivity.

Deterrence was very much a product of its times. The U.S. now needs to recalculate national interests, credible threats, and strategic engagement to define where it can still be effective. We must reframe deterrence for a political environment shaped by nuclear weapons, great power competition, and (relative) Western decline to understand its limits and identify how it can be strengthened.

If opponents assess the risk of U.S. retaliation as low, they will act against the U.S. and its interests. We must reframe deterrence in this political context to understand its limits and

⁷ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2013-02-11/lost-logic-deterrence>

identify how it can be strengthened. An initial conclusion of this project was (pace Brodie⁸) that the chief purpose of strategy should be to speed the transition from deterrence to warfighting.

An initial conclusion of this project⁹ was that deterrence will be less effective in the pursuit of foreign policy goals, particularly in new areas of conflict like space and cyberspace. Competitors have different tolerances for risk and have refined their tactics to circumvent deterrence, and in response we will need to develop additional tools of influence. The mere existence of a force and the implied threat this creates is no longer sufficient to deter action. If deterrence is to be strengthened, it may require a new administration to engage in retaliation or countermeasures to the degree necessary to restore credibility. While the risk of escalation must be considered and managed, credibility requires a demonstrated willingness to respond or retaliate.

There is advantage from an increased reliance on “countermeasures,” retaliatory actions not involving the use of force. The use of indictments and the threat of sanctions to win agreement from China to limit commercial espionage is a salient example of the use of countermeasures. Efforts to deter China before this were largely unproductive, suggesting that an overreliance on force (or the threat of force) hampers the U.S. ability to change competitor calculations. There has been a sequence of linked events - the PLA indictments the response to Sony, the threat of sanctions before the Xi-Obama summit, followed by the Iran indictments. These actions created consequences for malicious actions and signaled that attacking the US can have penalties. Pace Brodie’s^[4] as the chief purpose of strategy should now be to speed the transition from deterrence to warfighting, the imposition of consequences for malicious or coercive action. A more active retaliatory posture (and a demonstrated willingness to use non-nuclear force) is required to strengthen deterrence.

There would be benefit from creating a framework for engagement and negotiation between the U.S. and potential opponents on the effects of new military technologies on stability. There has been some progress in this area in defining norms and confidence building measures to reduce the risk of conflict using cyber-attack, but there is no similar, sustained, process for direct negotiation with other major powers on other strategic issues. The U.S. needs to redefine the arms control agenda to reflect technological change, not so much as to strengthen deterrence but to improve stability in international relations and decrease the risk of opponent miscalculation.

In this reassessment, the nuclear precedent is not the best guide for strategy. Fundamental aspects of deterrence must be rethought. Our opponents seek to circumvent or undercut deterrence in ways that never occurred to the Soviets. An American foreign policy aimed at maintaining the post-1945 international status quo will fail. We cannot expect to prevent, avoid, or deter challenges or change in international relations. Military power will not improve our position in this politically dynamic environment and may in fact exacerbate tensions. The

⁸ Brodie said “Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose.”

⁹ James A. Lewis, Reconsidering Deterrence for Space and Cyberspace, In Anti-satellite Weapons, Deterrence and Sino-American Space Relations, Michael Krepon & Julia Thompson, Editors, Stimson Center, September 2013

^[4] Brodie said “Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose.”

implications of this for the position of deterrence in American strategy are profound and suggest we are bringing 20th century conceptual tools to the strategic problems of the 21st.

New opponents and new challenges will not always be deterrable. There are some challenges that cannot be deterred, and there some foreign policy goals that cannot be achieved using the threat of military force (if they can be achieved at all). The concept of deterrence has become attenuated, and U.S. has not done the work of calculating how deterrence works, what threats are credible, and how best to communicate this to those whose behavior we wish to change.

Perhaps the most important lesson is that future deterrence will require greater clarity on vital interests. Effective deterrent threats are established by declaratory policies that link interests and threats in ways difficult for opponents to misinterpret or circumvent. Redefining vital national interests now that the unipolar moment is over will require reassessment of both the post-1945 status quo and the aspirational goals that have guided American foreign policy.