

Responding to a Limited Theater Nuclear Attack: The Arms Reduction Path vs. the Nuclear Deterrence Path

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Washington faces a choice: reduce the size of its nuclear force or expand and diversify the existing nuclear arsenal.

If Washington follows the advice of nuclear reduction advocates, the United States will be positioned to lose a limited nuclear war.

If Washington builds the deterrent it needs, it is more likely to deter not only nuclear attack, but conflict, in general.

Washington defense policy experts recognize the current deteriorating security environment in which Russia is modernizing its strategic arsenal and engaging in nuclear coercive threats and China is expanding its nuclear forces.¹ They also recognize that the United States' nuclear arsenal is a relic of the Cold War, with the newest nuclear warhead built in the 1980s.² At the same time, the last nuclear arms control treaty, the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), will expire in February 2026 and the prospect for negotiating a follow-on treaty is bleak.³ That means that within 12 months there will be no limits to the number of strategic nuclear weapons Russia, China, and the United States may field.

While defense policy experts agree that the above is the existing strategic dynamic—and that as Russia and China modernize and expand their arsenals, to

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include fielding nuclear warfighting arsenals that include theater-range, low-yield tactical nuclear weapons—there is divergence among these experts in what the United States should do in light of these developments. The first camp, which this paper identifies as the arms reduction advocates, believes that the United States should not expand or diversify its arsenal and that it should forgo homeland missile defenses. Instead, arms reduction advocates believe the United States should focus on arms control talks with Russia and China as arms control presents the most likely path to security. The second camp, the deterrence advocates, are not opposed to arms control, but believe, instead, that given arms control talks are unlikely to manifest in the foreseeable future, the United States should continue with nuclear modernization and expand and diversify the nuclear arsenal because strength in the face of threats represents the most likely path to security.

The United States then faces a choice: shall it restrain its own capabilities in the hopes of encouraging adversaries to agree to arms control in the face of nuclear expansion by America’s adversaries, or should it field a more robust deterrent to achieve security aims first and consider arms control later, should international conditions improve? Neither group wants a nuclear war and both want to secure American interests—but both camps pursue very different policy choices.

The Arms Reduction Advocates

Arms reduction advocates view the current U.S. nuclear modernization program of record as, at best, sufficient for the deterrence requirements of the current security environment.⁴ At worst, they see the modernization effort as being overkill and call for a drastic reduction in the size of the U.S. nuclear force by retiring the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) leg of the triad.⁵ Moreover, arms reduction advocates unequivocally oppose national missile defense, such as the proposed Golden Dome missile defense architecture.⁶

Arms reduction advocates believe that any expansion of the U.S. nuclear arsenal will trigger an arms race that will result in a worse position for the United States, even as China and Russia would both build and field new nuclear weapons in response to any growth in the U.S. arsenal.⁷ Further, arms reduction advocates believe that missile defense systems such as Golden Dome not only do not work or that they are fiscally unsound—believing that it is impossible to “hit a bullet with a bullet” or that the cost-exchange ratio between offense and defense is not favorable, such that the dollars spent on missile defenses would be better spent on other programs—but that they

are also destabilizing.⁸ In the mind of arms reduction advocates, missile defenses could, at best, cause U.S. adversaries to build even more missiles to overwhelm U.S. missile defenses or at worst trigger a pre-emptive attack on the United States before the system is fielded.⁹ These two points are of course somewhat in contrast in that if missile defenses demonstrably do not work, then they should have little to no impact on America's adversaries—certainly not spur them to significantly increase the number of nuclear weapons within their arsenal. Curiously, that arms reduction advocates largely ignore what Russia and China are doing regarding their own ballistic missile defenses and militarization of the space domain.

Instead, arms reduction advocates argue that the United States should not pursue missile defenses such as Golden Dome, should forgo fielding a larger and more diverse nuclear arsenal, and should induce Russia and China to come to the arms control table for multi-lateral discussions on limiting nuclear arsenal sizes. Indeed, according to the arms reduction advocates, the best way to stave off an arms race, which U.S. nuclear diversification will only exacerbate, is to seek confidence-building measures, risk-reduction and transparency measures, and strategic stability discussions with Russia and China.¹⁰

This is not to say that the desire for arms control is misplaced; simply that the problem is that U.S. adversaries do not want to limit their military and do not want to dialogue with Washington the way Moscow was willing to 15 years ago.

In short, arms reduction advocates seek to ignore the devolution of nuclear affairs, including the collapse of nuclear diplomacy and increase in threats facing the United States and its allies, all while claiming to care about U.S. leadership, the United Nations system, all the things that make up the so-called rules-based international order. In the final analysis, they want nuclear weapons to be completely irrelevant to all other national security domains. Unfortunately, that is not the world that exists today (and probably never *really* was).

The Deterrence Advocates

Deterrence advocates suggest that the United States must not only continue the nuclear modernization program of record by replacing existing intercontinental ballistic missiles, bombers, submarines, and nuclear weapons themselves, but must also augment the deployed nuclear force by fielding more and more diverse types of nuclear weapons as a means to deter America's adversaries from carrying out a strategic attack on the

U.S. homeland or employing nuclear weapons during a regional conflict.¹¹ Deterrence advocates offer that such an augmentation of the U.S. nuclear arsenal—both among strategic warheads and among forward deployed non-strategic warheads—should be pursued in light of current and emerging Chinese and Russian nuclear advantage.¹²

Further, many, but certainly not all deterrence advocates, support the development of missile defenses such as Golden Dome in order to protect the American people and forces from missile attacks.¹³ Deterrence advocates point to the efficacy of regional missile defenses in real-world combat situations in the Middle East and Ukraine for how missile defenses can not only obviate limited missile attacks but also large-scale, mixed salvo attacks of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drone attacks. For them, the recent conflicts in Europe and the Middle East prove that nations can, in fact, “hit a bullet with a bullet.”¹⁴

Deterrence advocates are not opposed to arms control talks per se, but do not believe that they are likely in the near term, given that Russia and China have rejected all requests from Washington to engage in arms control discussions.¹⁵ Indeed, deterrence advocates offer that arms control can offer benefits—but that Russia and China must be incentivized to engage in arms control discussions before they agree to come to the negotiating table. And so long as those nations field arsenals that are larger, more diverse, or newer than the American arsenal—and so long as the U.S. nuclear modernization program continues to face significant cost and schedule overruns—then China and Russia have no incentive to engage in arms control discussions.

In short, deterrence advocates (primarily those coming from conservative politics or past support for “peace through strength” approaches) acknowledge the relevance of the military balance to arms control. This is in striking contrast to arms reduction advocates who push a narrative that any U.S. reaction to Chinese and Russian posture changes invites a destabilizing counter-reaction from Beijing and Moscow, a framing that always puts the blame on the United States. Such a theoretical distinction is important in that while both camps support arms control, they very much disagree on how arms control talks can be initiated and sustained. Deterrence advocates largely believe that deploying credible military capabilities are required to make the other party “worried enough” to return to the arms control table. This is in stark contrast to arms reduction advocates who believe that any deployment of a new American military capability will prevent or discourage meaningful arms control dialogue. These two views are diametrically opposed.

Moreover, if the deterrence advocates are correct, their policies are more likely to bring about the arms control discussions that arms reduction

advocates so desperately seek. In this sense, deterrence advocates are not just “leaving the door open” to arms control discussions, but they are also actually pursuing a more coherent and likely effective arms control strategy than the arms reduction advocates themselves.¹⁶

What If a Nuclear War Erupts?

The United States faces a choice: (1) Forgo nuclear modernization and any attempt at fielding a larger and more diverse nuclear arsenal and credible missile defenses while focusing on bringing China and Russia to the arms control table; or (2) build and field modern nuclear capabilities and missile defenses that can give U.S. adversaries pause, while still keeping the door open for arms control discussions.

When trying to determine which of the two options the United States should pursue, one should examine the consequences of either choice should deterrence fail and nuclear war breaks out.

This paper accepts that a regional, limited nuclear war is a more likely scenario than a large-scale nuclear exchange between two major nuclear powers, given that the United States and countries like Russia and China maintain survivable second-strike capabilities. Indeed, while many argue that there is no such thing as a limited nuclear war, that any nuclear employment inexorably will lead to uncontrolled nuclear escalation culminating in a cataclysmic nuclear exchange, there is no evidence that this is the case—and the burden of proof for saying so falls on those who contend that any nuclear use would lead to uncontrolled nuclear exchange. Indeed, much nuclear wargaming has demonstrated that limited nuclear wars can be fought—and ended—before a cataclysmic nuclear exchange takes place.¹⁷

While a limited, theater-range nuclear war is not a certainty, it is nevertheless a possibility—one that cannot be dismissed, given the reliance of our adversaries on non-strategic nuclear weapons and their increasing use of nuclear threats, *and is far preferable to any shift in strategy or posture that removes the possibility, however slight, of preventing that global conflagration.*

If one posits that a limited nuclear war can—but does not axiomatically¹⁸—lead to a general nuclear exchange, one should consider what might happen if the United States fails to deter an adversary from using nuclear weapons in a theater conflict that does not escalate to a general nuclear exchange.

If Washington Follows the Policies of the Arms Reduction Advocates. Imagine a world in which it is the year 2032 and the United States has followed the path of the arms reduction advocates. In this world, the United States has an arsenal that is smaller and less diverse than it is now.

It has not deployed additional low-yield warheads to Europe. There are no non-strategic warheads in East Asia. The United States has not expanded the ballistic missile submarine fleet. It has eliminated the ground leg of the nuclear triad following the cancellation of the Sentinel missile program and the retirement of the Minuteman III missile. It has also cancelled the Sea-Launched Cruise Missile-Nuclear and the Long-Range Stand-Off (LRSO) nuclear cruise missile. Due to a lack of U.S. response to the growth of nuclear capabilities in China and Russia's continued intransigence, a greater number of countries question the efficacy of America's extended deterrence commitments and are pursuing indigenous nuclear weapons programs. In addition, the United States does not field a credible and resilient homeland missile defense system from adversary missile threats, following the cancellation of the Golden Dome missile defense shield.

In this world, Washington has done all this at the urging of the arms reduction advocates in order to demonstrate good faith to Russia and China in the hopes of luring them to the arms control table.

Despite such demonstrations of goodwill, Russia and China continue on their current real-world programs. They refrain from engaging in arms control talks with the United States. They continue to expand and field diverse nuclear arsenals that are increasingly capable of carrying out a wider range of missions, including nuclear warfighting.¹⁹ Russia continues to deploy more than ten times the number of non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe than the United States and does so on a variety of cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and modern gravity bombs. China continues its break-neck nuclear expansion and fields an ever larger arsenal of strategic nuclear weapons that can range the American homeland and low-yield nuclear weapons on theater-range missile systems designed to target American servicemembers, allied bases, and naval vessels.²⁰ Both countries continue their current efforts to field credible missile defenses, which only continue to mature in the coming years.²¹

Should the United States find itself in a conventional conflict with China or Russia, it would be at an automatic disadvantage. Even if the United States had conventional advantage and was winning the conflict using military forces such as carrier strike groups, fighter aircraft, and ground forces, U.S. comparative weakness in theater nuclear capabilities and homeland missile defenses could incentivize our adversaries to escalate by employing theater-range, non-strategic nuclear weapons on U.S. forces within theater or worse by threatening a limited strike on the U.S. homeland.

This is not to say that the United States lacks *any* credible nuclear options at the non-strategic threshold. It does have a limited number of low-yield

gravity bombs and a very limited number of low-yield submarine-launched ballistic missiles²²—but these are largely token capabilities due to their low numbers and are not optimized to engage in a protracted limited nuclear war, particularly in the Pacific theater. In addition, an American President is less likely to engage in a conflict with nuclear-armed adversaries in the first place due to existing theater nuclear disadvantage vis-a-vis China and Russia. If a theater nuclear war does manifest with Russia or China, then the United States will be engaging in a nuclear war at a decided disadvantage from the outset of the conflict—which means that U.S. capitulation is more likely than if it had a credible theater nuclear warfighting capability. While an American President can engage in some limited nuclear conflict with low-yield options, the credibility and efficacy of such a course of action will be called into question by America’s nuclear-armed adversaries. Indeed, U.S. assertions that it is willing to engage in a limited theater nuclear war with an adversary that enjoys theater nuclear advantage may well look like a face-saving bluff and only induce more damage on the United States rather than steering the conflict towards termination on terms favorable to the United States.

In either scenario—a limited nuclear strike on the U.S. homeland or nuclear strike within the theater on U.S. or allied forces or targets—the United States’ dearth of nuclear capabilities, particularly, low-yield nuclear options, would limit the U.S. response to either (1) capitulation; (2) a continuation of the conventional campaign with no discrete nuclear response; or (3) an asymmetric strike on the adversary’s nuclear forces using high-yield strategic weapons generated out of the American homeland (some number of which may be intercepted should the adversary be successful in fielding credible homeland missile defenses). None of these three responses are likely to deescalate the conflict or enable the United States to achieve its objectives absent significant risk of additional adversary nuclear employment.

Indeed, if the President chooses the latter course of action while maintaining a relatively inferior strategic nuclear arsenal, the President may be committing the American homeland to overwhelming strategic attack. In addition, beyond deescalation, the vulnerability to a strike against the homeland (especially if the United States had a relatively qualitatively and quantitatively inferior strategic force and lacked credible missile defenses) would create a suicide or surrender dynamic for the United States. In a world where China has conventional ICBMs and potentially space-based launch platforms like fractional orbital bombardment systems, such a situation for the United States would be even worse.

Consequently, in the world of the arms reduction advocates, the United States would find itself losing a nuclear war against an adversary that enjoys

nuclear advantage. Put another way, by following the advice of the arms reduction advocates and cutting its capabilities unilaterally, the resulting capability gap between the United States and its adversaries convinced adversaries that they have a *usable* advantage over the United States. In short, U.S. comparative military weakness made war more likely to occur and deterrence more likely to fail.

If Washington Follows the Policies of the Deterrence Advocates. Now, imagine a world in which the United States followed the path advocated by deterrence advocates. In such a world, the United States has a larger and more diverse nuclear arsenal than the one it has today. This future arsenal includes credible, forward deployed non-strategic nuclear weapons in East Asia and a somewhat larger number of deployed non-strategic weapons in Europe.²³ The United States not only maintains the intercontinental ballistic missile leg of the nuclear triad, but it has uploaded additional warheads onto its land-based and sea-based nuclear missiles. The United States also has built credible homeland missile defenses such as Golden Dome. The United States still does not field as many nuclear weapons as Russia or China—but its nuclear forces are sufficient to give America’s adversaries pause before carrying out a large-scale attack on an American ally or the U.S. homeland.²⁴ The United States has not ruled out arms control and remains ready to engage in arms control discussions—once China and Russia are ready for discussions to address nuclear risks and stockpile sizes.²⁵ Indeed, fielding such theater options may make arms control more likely by showing China and Russia that they have no path to achieving a meaningful nuclear-warfighting edge against the United States.

In this world, China and Russia also field larger and credible nuclear forces than what they have today, including low-yield theater-range forces, and they also continue fielding their own missile defense architectures—but there is far less asymmetry in the size and composition between the American arsenals and those fielded by Russia and China. Those arsenals in aggregate are still larger and more diverse than the American arsenal, as the United States does not seek nuclear superiority over the combined arsenals of the autocrats in Russia and China, but the disparity is far less stark than in the previous scenario.

Put another way, by building a force that is larger and more diverse than the one the United States fields today, coupled with a credible missile defense architecture such as Golden Dome, deterrence is more likely to be effective—and for longer periods in more acute crises—than in the world advocated by the arms reduction advocates.

In the scenario in which Washington follows the advice of the deterrence advocates, should the United States find itself in a conventional conflict with

China or Russia, it would have sufficient theater-based non-strategic nuclear weapons and homeland-based strategic weapons, coupled with credible homeland missile defenses, such that adversaries are not incentivized to pursue coercive nuclear escalation strategies (as in the previous scenario) because the autocrats do not have the advantage in missile defenses and in nuclear forces.

As such, if the United States had conventional advantage and was therefore winning a theater conflict using military forces such as carrier strike groups, fighter aircraft, and ground forces, a lack of clear advantage in strategic capabilities among either party would obviate any real incentive for any party to escalate to the nuclear threshold. Indeed, having a credible conventional military combined with credible homeland and theater-based nuclear weapons and missile defenses likely means that a conventional conflict between the United States and the autocrats in Russia and China is less likely to break out in the first place—because the autocrats have a much, much smaller pathway to victory than a world in which they have nuclear advantage.

This is not to say that nuclear escalation in such a world would be impossible—but doing so would be done in the absence of clear advantage and would be a move of great risk or even desperation, not one based on a rational assessment of comparative advantage, strengths, and benefits.

Conclusion

Far too often, arms reduction advocates see any growth in American strategic capabilities—be they nuclear weapons or credible missile defenses—as being at best useless, or at worst, self-defeating. Instead, they offer that the safer option is to not pursue a path that may be seen by America’s adversaries as escalatory and, instead, focus on getting Russia and China to the arms control table through restraint and goodwill, despite 15 years of rejection by Moscow and Beijing.

This is wrong-headed and ultimately increases the chances of conflict and complete deterrence failure with Moscow and Beijing.

Those who want to avoid not only nuclear war but also confrontation, in general, must return to a military lesson as old as antiquity: that weakness invites conflict while strength ensures peace.

Indeed, as Ronald Reagan once said, “We know only too well that war comes not when the forces of freedom are strong, but when they are weak. It is then that tyrants are tempted.”²⁶

Let us hope that American policymakers remember such lessons.

Endnotes

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