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Detering without Provoking – And De-Escalating Crises and Conflicts

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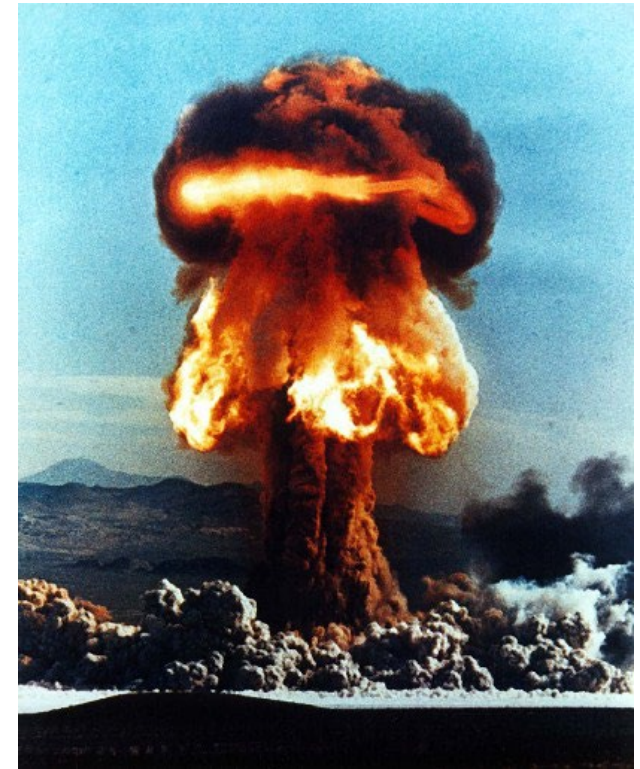
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Need to consider what adversary responses U.S. actions will provoke

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- ❑ Bismarck: very dangerous to play chess one move at a time
 - ⌘ Need to think through plausible adversary responses, what they mean for security
- ❑ Example: What the ROK and the United States see as deterrent and defensive, North Korea may see as an offensive threat – provoking a dangerous North Korean response
- ❑ To maximize security, for each weapon purchase, military plan, action in crisis, need to assess (a) defense-deterrent value; and (b) provocation risks



Source: DOE

Multiple stages where “provocation” is an important factor in overall security

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□ Peacetime:

- ⌘ Will particular foreign policy initiatives, weapons deployments, or targeting policies, increase adversaries' incentives to build up their forces or adopt dangerous policies?
- ⌘ Example 1: Fear of U.S. counterforce and BMD capabilities part of the driver for:
 - New Russian weapons;
 - Russian reliance on LOW/LUA;
 - Chinese buildup;
 - possible Chinese shift to LOW/LUA
- ⌘ Example 2: German fears that war was inevitable and enemy capabilities were growing were a key contributor to World War I
- ⌘ Example 3: Russian security and loss-of-status fears from NATO expansion and Ukraine's westward trajectory may have contributed to Russia's brutal aggression against Ukraine

Multiple stages where “provocation” is an important factor in overall security (II)

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❑ Crisis:

- ⌘ Will particular preparations or force deployments be seen as signals of intent to launch a strike? Could they provoke an adversary attack?
- ⌘ Examples:
 - Flying bombers right to the edge of the DMZ
 - Threatening attacks on DPRK leadership
 - Reinforcements sufficient to pose an invasion threat

❑ Conflict:

- ⌘ Actions to destroy, defend against adversary forces may provoke desperation, fear – and perhaps escalation
- ⌘ Example: U.S. drive into North Korea in Korean War, and toward Yalu River, provoked Chinese fears that led to their entry into the war

Example: In Korea, misperceptions could provoke unwanted escalation

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❑ Imagine:

- ⌘ A major North Korean provocation – e.g., shelling an island again
- ⌘ ROK decides to strike back hard, to reestablish deterrence
- ⌘ North Korea uses ~6 conventional missiles against U.S. airbases as a warning
- ⌘ ROK, U.S., begin a campaign to destroy the DPRK's missiles
- ⌘ DPRK faces “use them or lose them” pressures – and an air campaign they might mistake for a prelude to invasion



Source: Reuters

- ## ❑ Would Kim be deterred from nuclear use, or see it as needed for regime survival?

Escalation risks link deterrence of large-scale war and smaller provocations

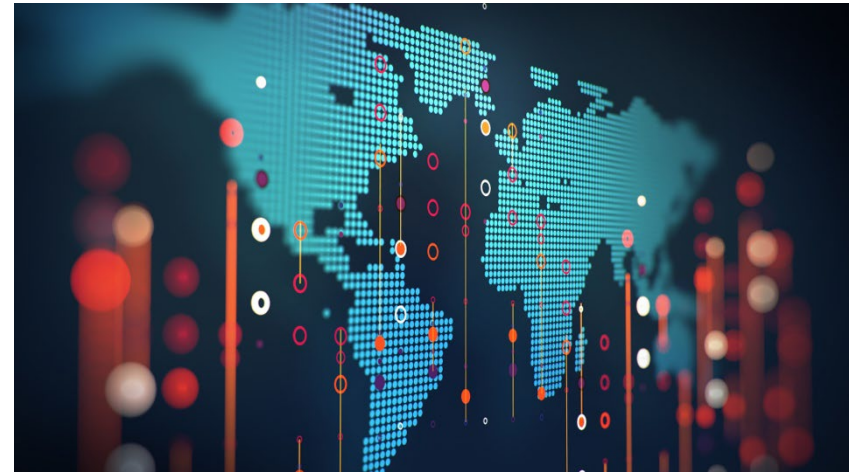
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- ❑ “Core” deterrence – stopping full-scale war “out of the blue”
 - is likely to be strong
 - ⌘ Adversaries understand the risks of attacking the United States
 - ⌘ So far, adversaries also deterred from large-scale attack on U.S. allies – though some coming to doubt credibility of U.S. response
- ❑ Deterrence of smaller-scale provocations has sometimes failed in the past – severe responses less credible
- ❑ In planning responses to such provocations, U.S. and allies need to consider *both* the effect on deterring further outrages *and the* risk of provoking adversary escalation
- ❑ Crises with nuclear-armed states are difficult to manage
 - ⌘ Misperceptions of the other side’s actions, intentions
 - ⌘ Events neither leader ever intended
 - ⌘ Hatred, fear, time pressure, poor information...

All such conflicts likely to be complex, multi-domain, maybe multi-player affairs

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- ❑ Future conflicts likely to involve many domains – land, air, sea, space, cyber
 - ⌘ "Integrated," "multi-domain" deterrence still poorly understood
 - ⌘ Will asymmetric responses – e.g., conventional strikes in response to devastating cyber attacks – increase escalation risks?
 - ⌘ Lessons of past crises:
 - Fog of crisis increases chance of escalation
 - Signaling often misinterpreted
- ❑ In multi-polar nuclear world, will others join in, or stay out?



Source: CSIS

Kennedy's lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis

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- ❑ Always give your adversary a face-saving way to back down
 - ∞ But how to do that credibly, in the heat of crisis or conflict?
- ❑ Military forces are large, difficult-to-control enterprises, creating a “fog of crisis” just as there is a “fog of war”
 - ∞ “There’s always one son-of-a-bitch who doesn’t get the word”



Source: JFK Library

The need to deter without provoking creates difficult policy dilemmas

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- ❑ U.S. often wants to maintain non-nuclear superiority, for deterrence and defense
 - ⌘ But conventional inferiority may lead an adversary to consider nuclear use – few non-nuclear options
- ❑ A Korean dilemma: ROK and U.S. want to maintain, improve ability to target DPRK nuclear forces, leadership
 - ⌘ DPRK fear of such targeting increases
 - Their incentive to build more, better nuclear missiles
 - The “use them or lose them” pressures they face in conflict
 - Their incentive to “predelegate” nuclear use authority dangerously
- ❑ These dilemmas are everywhere...
 - ⌘ Many things NATO doesn't do for Ukraine to avoid provoking Russia
 - ⌘ Many things Russia doesn't do to advance its war to avoid provoking NATO
 - ⌘ Etc...

Decisions need to include broad context – other countries, other national interests...

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- ❑ Example: Decisions about Korea affect security in China, Japan, Russia as well – and reverberate globally
 - ⌘ Example: Will China react to increased ROK-U.S. nuclear cooperation? Will Japan pursue similar nuclear consultations with the United States?
 - ⌘ Example: Future agreements on INF missiles in Asia would have to take ROK, Japanese, Indian, Pakistani missiles into account
- ❑ U.S. decisions – and the reactions of others – may affect not just security, but other aspects of national well-being as well
 - ⌘ Example: Chinese economic sanctions in response to deployment of THAAD
- ❑ Domestic politics will also affect decisions – including risks of crisis escalation – in all relevant parties (even dictatorships)
- ❑ Alliance dynamics will have their effect, too
 - ⌘ Sometimes one side wants the other to be tougher, sometimes not as tough
 - ⌘ Example: 2017 “fire and fury” crisis

Considering provocation risks already a key part of decision-making

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- ❑ Issue of “what will our adversary do in response” is a key element of decisions
 - ⌘ Especially in crises, conflicts
 - ⌘ Each combatant command, for example, carefully considers provocation risks
- ❑ But do such issues receive sufficient focus?
 - ⌘ 1st consideration almost always immediate defense/deterrence impact
 - ⌘ Evidence that military leaders tend to emphasize the offense, and strengthening their forces



Source: White House/Reuters

Proposal: designate key officials to assess provocation risks

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- ❑ Considering provocation risks should not only be the job of people charged with preparing to fight and win
- ❑ For each geographic area of potential conflict, and for STRATCOM and other global commands, U.S. government should designate a group of people charged with
 - ⌘ Assessing plausible adversary reactions to proposed U.S. actions
 - ⌘ Suggesting, if appropriate, less provocative options
- ❑ Processes for considering options in each area should systematically include balancing provocation risks against deterrent-defense benefits, seeking the optimal balance

How much does the security dilemma drive outcomes?

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❑ One view: “apes on a treadmill”

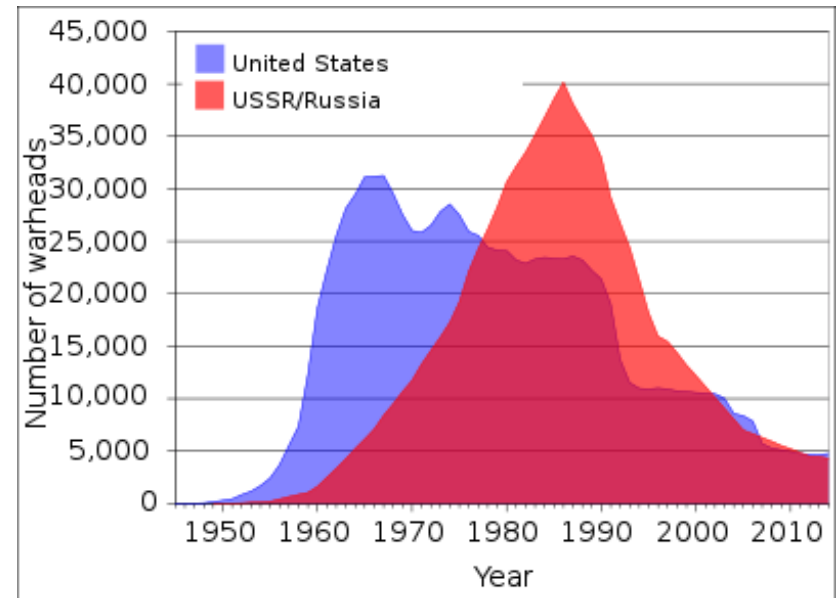
- ⌘ Most arms racing behavior driven by reacting to adversary actions
- ⌘ Crisis and conflict behavior driven in substantial part by fear created by the other side’s actions

❑ An opposing view:

- ⌘ U.S. actions have little effect. Internal drivers – intra-elite politics, industrial interests, etc. –or regime’s innate aggressiveness drive behavior

❑ An intermediate view:

- ⌘ Both are important: Internal actors use adversary actions to make their case



Source: Wikipedia

Deterrence and reassurance

- ❑ Schelling: “Stop or I’ll shoot” only deters if it includes “if you stop, I won’t shoot”
 - ⌘ Hence, *reassurance* is fundamental to successful deterrence
- ❑ How to reassure an adversary it’s in no real danger unless it attacks?
 - ⌘ Statements not likely to be enough
 - ⌘ Need reassuring behavior as well – e.g., forces, exercises structured only for defense
- ❑ How to send credibly reassuring messages in crisis or conflict?



Source: KCNA

The difficulties of de-escalation

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- ❑ Clausewitz: Conflict tends to escalate
 - ⌘ Winning: victories create new opportunities, can lead a party to escalate
 - ⌘ Losing: Defeats may lead a party to escalate to defend its interests
 - ⌘ Stalemate: This may also lead a party to escalate to break the deadlock
- ❑ Offering reassurance, compromise may be seen as a sign of weakness
 - ⌘ Adversaries may exploit, escalate their demands or their steadfastness
 - ⌘ Domestic audiences may oppose
 - ⌘ Allies and others may adjust view of a country's strength, determination
- ❑ De-escalation efforts will happen in an environment of fear, hatred, misperception, disinformation, time pressure...
 - ⌘ And in democracies, there will be many voices calling for blood

The difficulties of de-escalation (II)

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- ❑ How to credibly reassure – signal that you do not intend to challenge an adversary's vital interests
 - ⌘ Hostility, mistrust, vulnerability to attack, pace of events, environment of disinformation, make it difficult for reassurance to be believed
- ❑ How to reach credible accords that permit an end to fighting?
- ❑ Between nuclear-armed states with survivable forces:
 - ⌘ Total victory – one path to war termination – is not an option
 - ⌘ Greater fear of catastrophe may intensify search for ways out
- ❑ Despite the obstacles to de-escalation, many militarized crises end without war, many wars end with some form of compromise
- ❑ What approaches can maximize the chance of de-escalation?
What preparatory steps in peacetime are important? Can “peace games” – exercises to explore de-escalation – help?
 - ⌘ Rich area for research – understudied

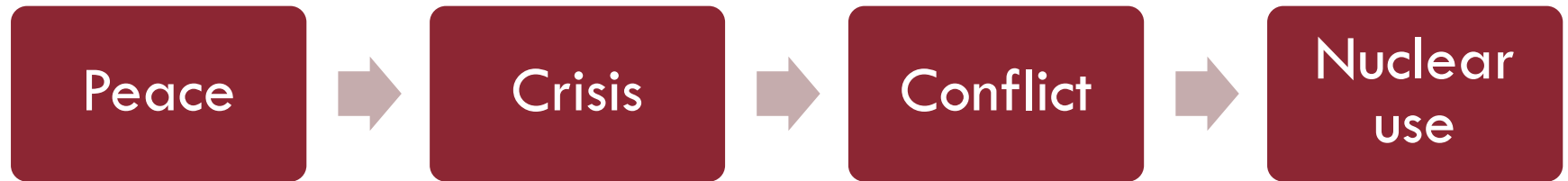
Reducing the risks of both deliberate and inadvertent escalation

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- ❑ Deliberate escalation: “a combatant deliberately increases the intensity or scope of an operation to achieve advantage or avoid defeat” (RAND 2008)
 - ⌘ Deter (by threat of punishment, by denial)
 - ⌘ Reassure: Seek to reduce the perceived cost of not escalating
- ❑ Inadvertent escalation: “a combatant deliberately takes actions that it does not perceive to be escalatory but are interpreted that way by an enemy.” (RAND 2008)
 - ⌘ Limit provocation: By considering provocation/escalation risks of each proposed military action, can decrease the chance U.S. will unintentionally take actions that lead adversaries to escalate
 - ⌘ Clarify U.S. red lines: communicate what steps U.S. would consider to be major escalations
 - ⌘ Deter (by threat of punishment, by denial)

We need risk-reduction action on each step on the pathway to nuclear war

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- ❑ Key step: preventing crises. Any militarized crisis between nuclear-armed states is dangerous – “fog of crisis” raises risks
 - ⌘ Avoiding crises is partly deterrence – but mainly foreign policy
 - ⌘ A more modest foreign policy for a dangerous nuclear era?
- ❑ Preventing escalation from crisis to conflict
 - ⌘ Partly deterrence – partly de-escalation, reassurance
- ❑ Preventing escalation to nuclear use
 - ⌘ Similar issues – but heavier emphasis on deterrence
- ❑ How to reassure, reach resolutions, in the midst of crisis or conflict?

Steps to mitigate the dilemmas

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❑ Reducing the temperature

- ⌘ Are there ways to reduce current intense hostility?
- ⌘ Are there offers that would convince China, Russia, or the DPRK it was in THEIR interest to resume serious talks?

❑ Systematically include provocation risk in planning

- ⌘ Set up focused group to ask: “How will others in the region react to this?”
- ⌘ Apply to foreign policy initiatives, weapons purchases, military plans, actions in crisis or conflict

❑ Confidence-building measures

- ⌘ Can some past measures (e.g., limits on, transparency for, major military exercises, mil-mil contacts, real use of hotlines) be rebuilt?

❑ Nuclear restraints

- ⌘ Can we find ways to convince adversaries to begin discussions on next steps in some form of nuclear arms control?

Backup slides if needed...

Nuclear dangers are changing...

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❑ Geopolitics:

- ⌘ Radically increased U.S.-Russian and U.S.-Chinese hostility
- ⌘ Dramatic worsening from the war in Ukraine
- ⌘ Substantially increased Chinese power – including nuclear forces
- ⌘ Increased doubts over U.S. leadership, constancy → increased allied anxiety
- ⌘ Weakened arms control regime, uncertain future prospects
- ⌘ Dramatic expansions of North Korean nuclear, missile capabilities
- ⌘ Expanded Iranian nuclear bomb material production capacity

❑ Technology:

- ⌘ Missile defense, precision conventional, cyber, counter-space, hypersonics, artificial intelligence, disinformation, weapons autonomy...

Russia's war on Ukraine has upended much of the international order

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- ❑ A UNSC member – charged with ensuring international peace and security – is waging large-scale aggressive war
 - ⌘ Russia using nuclear threats to protect its offensive war
 - ⌘ Weakened conventional forces likely to increase Russia's nuclear reliance
- ❑ A state that gave up the nuclear weapons on its soil in return for security assurances is being torn apart
- ❑ Impacts on security, food, energy are reverberating around the world



Source: Reuters

But -- good news about nuclear weapons

- ❑ No nuclear attacks for 77 years – remarkable success
 - ⌘ In war games, few reach for the nuclear button
- ❑ ~80% of the world's nuclear weapons have been dismantled
- ❑ <5% of world's states have nuclear weapons – same as 35 years ago
 - ⌘ No net increase in 3.5 turbulent decades – amazing success
- ❑ >50% of the states that started nuclear weapons programs gave them up
 - ⌘ Efforts to prevent proliferation succeed more often than they fail
- ❑ >50% of the states that once had potential nuclear bomb material on their soil have eliminated it
- ❑ Nuclear material around the world is far more secure than it was 25 years ago
 - ⌘ Most egregious weaknesses fixed – but more to be done