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Deterring without Provoking – And De-Escalating Crises and Conflicts

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

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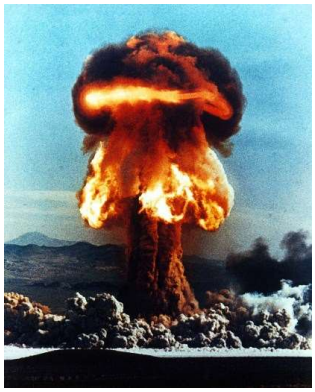
- Bismarck: very dangerous to play chess one move at a time
  - Need to think through plausible adversary responses, what they mean for security
- Example: What the ROK and the United States see as deterrent and defensive, North Korea may see as an offensive threat – provoking a dangerous North Korean 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

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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

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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

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

Source: Reuters

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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…

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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

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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

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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…

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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

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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

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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

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How much does the security dilemma drive outcomes?

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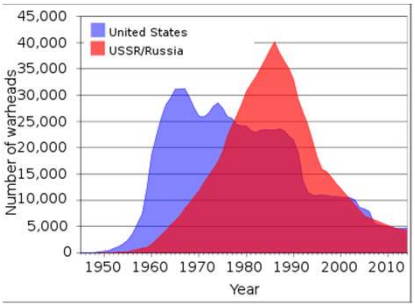
- One view: "apes on a treadmill"
  - Most arms racing behavior driven by reacting to adversary actions
  - Crisis and conflict behavior driven in substantial part by fear created by the other side's actions
- An opposing view:
  - U.S. actions have little effect. Internal drivers – intra-elite politics, 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

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Deterrence and reassurance

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- 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

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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

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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

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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)

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

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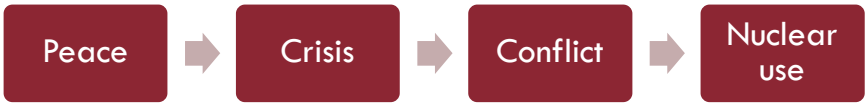

- Key step: preventing crises. Any militarized crisis between nuclear-armed states is dangerous – "fog of crisis" raises risks
  - Avoiding crises is partly deterrence – but mainly foreign policy
  - A more modest foreign policy for a dangerous nuclear era?
- Preventing escalation from crisis to conflict
  - 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?

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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?

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Backup slides if needed…

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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…

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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

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But -- good news about nuclear weapons

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- 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

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