

Global Security in the Post-Cold War Era and the Relevance of Nuclear Weapons

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Abstract:

Are nuclear weapons still relevant to global security? Compared with the nuclear confrontation in the depths of the Cold War, nuclear weapons and deterrence appear to have lost their salience. Considering the conflicts in which the major powers engaged, the focus in strategic studies changed to counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, and sub-conventional conflict.² Only recently, with the conflict in Ukraine and the increasingly confrontational relationship between the United States and China has this narrative come into question. The general perception on international security exhibits a strange paradox. On the one hand the US-led military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and other parts, the conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, the nuclearization of North Korea and the conflict between India and Pakistan among other regional security issues have given rise to a view that the modern world is less secure than ever, and we live in a world of chaos riven by unpredictable patterns of violence. By contrast, Steven Pinker has demonstrated the

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² Adam B. Lowther, *Deterrence: Rising Powers, Rogue Regimes, and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 49; Andrew Fetter, *The Politics of Nuclear Weapons* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2020), 3.

casualties from armed conflict are at their lowest point in human history, and interstate warfare has virtually ceased to exist as a phenomenon.³ The imminence of a global nuclear war in which at a minimum hundreds of millions of people would die appears to have dissipated. In some respects, it appears that war has become almost a phenomenon of the past. Most of the recent literature on nuclear weapons has focused on regional crises areas, such as South Asia (India and Pakistan) or the Korean peninsula.⁴ However, the modernization of arsenals by the nuclear powers, the integration of strategic conventional and nuclear weapons in strategic doctrines and the more confrontational dynamics in Great Power politics is cited as evidence that the risk of nuclear use is increasing. This paper contests the emerging narratives on an increased threat of nuclear conflict and considers the sources of insecurity in the contemporary period and in particular the risks of armed conflict between the United States, Russia, and China in order to assess the role of nuclear weapons in contemporary security.

Keywords: Nuclear Weapons, Global Security, Deterrence, US, China, Russia, Great Power Politics.

³ Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: The Decline of Violence In History And Its Causes* (London: Penguin, 2011), 112.

⁴ Christoph Bluth and Uzma Mumtaz, *India-Pakistan Strategic Relations – The Nuclear Dilemma* (Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2020), 22; Bruce W. Bennett, Kang Choi, Myong-Hyun Go, Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr., Jiyoung Park, Bruce Klingner, Du-Hyeogn Cha, *Countering the Risk of North Korea Nuclear Weapons* (Santa Monica CA: Rand Corporation, 2021), 7.

The transition from the first nuclear age

The development of nuclear weapons which resulted in the acquisition of large strategic nuclear arsenals by the superpowers during the Cold War has resulted in an enormous literature elaborating the nature of nuclear deterrence.⁵ A significant consensus developed that during the Cold War nuclear deterrence was effective in preventing direct military conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, prevented a large war in Europe and reduced military conflict between the “superpowers” to proxy conflicts in what was then called the third world.⁶ One of the most prominent advocates of the war-preventing effect of nuclear arsenals is Kenneth Waltz who has advocated the proliferation of nuclear weapons in order to reduce international conflict.⁷ The end of the Cold War was the beginning of a total transformation of the international system.⁸

The confrontation of the two large armies of NATO and the Warsaw Pact that had been ready for large-scale high intensity warfare at short notice stood down and were to a significant degree dismantled.⁹ The strategic nuclear relationship between Russia and the United States changed dramatically even though the existing capabilities remained in place. As very large numbers of warheads were dismantled the cooperative threat reduction programme provided for US assistance for

⁵ Lawrence Freedman and Jeffery Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2019), 51.

⁶ Michael Howard, “Lessons of the Cold War”, *Survival*, Vol.36, no.4 (1994/95), 61; John Lewis Gaddis, Philip H. Gordon, Ernest R. May and Jonathan Rosenberg, *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb: Nuclear Diplomacy Since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 161.

⁷ Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth L. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons – A Debate Renewed* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2001), 124.

⁸ R.K. and Lebow, R.N, *Ending the Cold War: Interpretations, Causation and the Study of International Relation* (Aldershot: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 27.

⁹ V.Litvov, “Nasha beopasnost’ i parizhskiy dogovor,” *Sovietskaia rossia*, January 9, 1991.

the safe and secure dismantlement of warheads, delivery vehicles (i.e. missiles and missile silos) and the controlled storage of fissile materials (much of the uranium from Russian weapons was down blended and sold to the United States).¹⁰ The key change was that until the end of the Cold War nuclear forces were designed to provide for deterrence against a large-scale conventional attack and to provide for escalation control in the event of the outbreak of conflict.¹¹ As the risk of major war in Europe became vanishingly small and Russia no longer had the capacity to wage such a war, the purpose of nuclear forces changed. They continued to provide a deterrent against a US strategic nuclear attack, but such a scenario likewise had become highly unlikely against a country that lacked the capacity of a large-scale land war, had lost a sizeable chunk of its territory, its Central European allies and had lost its foreign clients that had been involved in proxy wars.¹² The unipolar moment had arrived, with the United States as the world's largest economy with unrivalled military power and global power projection capabilities.¹³ A large strategic nuclear arsenal was the basis of Russia's one remaining claim to be a Great Power, and it also provided a last resort guarantee of protection against foreign aggression as the military-industrial complex stagnated and the armed forces struggled to field any combat-ready units.¹⁴

¹⁰ Christoph Bluth, *The Nuclear Challenge: US-Russian Strategic Relations after the Cold War* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2019), 25.

¹¹ James R. Schlesinger, *The Theater Nuclear Force Posture in Europe. A Report to the United States Congress* (Washington, DC: GPO 1975), 33.

¹² Christoph Bluth, *The Collapse of Soviet Military Power* (Aldershot: Dartmouth Press, 1995), 15.

¹³ John G. Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 24.

¹⁴ Chronology Office of the Historian, *United States Relations with Russia: After the Cold War 1990-91* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2009), 38; Roy Allison and Christoph Bluth, eds., *Security Dilemmas in Russia and Eurasia* (London: RIIA/Brookings, 1998), 67.

Sources of conflict in the contemporary international system

The expectations of the impact of the end of the Cold War on international security differed very substantially. President George H W Bush announced the dawn of a “new world order”.¹⁵ While many commentators decried the “international disorder” after the predictability of the bipolar Cold War order and realists like John Mearsheimer predicted that we would “soon miss the Cold War”,¹⁶ other scholars have argued that the end of the Cold War was a much more substantial transition in international politics and that major war is becoming obsolete.

The most prominent advocate of this thesis is Steven Pinker,¹⁷ but others such as Joshua Goldstein and Christopher Fettweis focused on the dramatic reduction in the frequency of interstate war and the precipitous fall in the number of casualties of armed conflict.¹⁸ Michael Mandelbaum and John Mueller went so far as to claim that major war between the Great Powers had become obsolete as a social phenomenon.¹⁹ The explanations for this phenomenon are varied. For one thing, territorial conquest is no longer the basis of national wealth and access to raw materials is provided by global trade relationships. The creation of the United States established a body of international

¹⁵ Joseph S. Nye, “What New World Order,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 71, no.2(Spring 1992), 87.

¹⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, “Why We Will Soon Miss The Cold War,” *The Atlantic Monthly* Vol.266, no.2 (1990), 37.

¹⁷ Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: The Decline of Violence In History And Its Causes* (London: Penguin, 2011), 112.

¹⁸ Joshua S. Goldstein, *Winning the War on War: The Decline of Armed Conflict Worldwide* (London: Dutton 2011), 24, Christopher J. Fettweis, C.J., *Dangerous Times? The International Politics of Great Power Peace* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 31.

¹⁹ John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The obsolescence of modern war* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1989); Michael Mandelbaum, “Is Major War Obsolete” *Survival* Vol.40, No.4 (1998), 20.

law that prohibited the changing of territorial boundaries by military force. Modern economies are based on intellectual property and not the possession of physical resources. At the same time, the norms that govern relations between states have developed substantially.²⁰ War is no longer considered a natural and legitimate activity of states and only permissible under very restricted circumstances. The theory of the “democratic peace” according to which liberal democracies do not go to war with each is a further development of the notion of the impact of norms on the reduction of armed conflict. This concept has been contested, and the interpretation of the empirical evidence depends on the historical time period under consideration and the definition of the term “liberal democracy,” but it embodies the notion that the norms that have been internalized by the political elites in democratic states result in a fundamental restraint regarding the use of force and that liberal democratic states do not threaten each other to the extent that the military balance between them is not a relevant factor in determining their relations.

But the acceptance of norms with respect to the use of force are not the unique property of liberal democratic states, as states with hybrid or authoritarian regimes also claim to adhere to international norms as codified in international law and in particular the UN Charter. Indeed, respect for international norms has become so universal that a special category – that of “rogue states” has been invented for states who are deemed to not generally conform to such norms, although this term and such designations are contested and generally not accepted

²⁰ This is clearly the position of the US government even under the Trump administration, see Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Nuclear Posture Review 2018,” Report-2018, 2; Available at: <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF> (accessed on 2 February 2021). for an academic analysis see; Theo Farrell, *The Norms of War* (New Delhi: Viva Books Private Limited, 2006), 22.

in academic discourse.²¹ In modern economies, wealth no longer stems from the possession of territories, and natural resources can be obtained through trade, obviating the need for territorial conquest as globalization has created world-wide economic interdependencies. The argument according to which war is no longer in the national interest of major powers, is supplemented by a different line of reasoning that explains the change in the role of armed conflict in the international system. The work of Bruce Russett and Zeev Maoz has substantiated the relationship between political participation and normative constraints in liberal democracies and the occurrence of disputes that involve the threat or the use of armed force.²² This means that the sources of insecurity and the risk of conflict in the international system are not imbalances of power as posited by traditional realist theory. Instead, the sources of conflict are based on asymmetries of norms and therefore the higher the normative asymmetry, the greater the risk of armed conflict.

The second nuclear age

The role of nuclear weapons in the international system is evidently closely related to the role of armed force more generally. In the realist perspective on international relations, military power is the principal determinant of state power and the risk of armed conflict is related to the balance of military power. However, as has been explained in the previous section, it is not clear that this explains the contemporary international system in which the risk of armed conflict between states is low except in some specific crisis regions such as South Asia or the

²¹ K. P. O'Reilly, "Perceiving Rogue States: The Use of the "Rogue State" Concept by U.S. Foreign Policy Elites," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 3, no. 4(October 2007), 305.

²² Robert Latham, "Democracy and War-Making: Locating the International Liberal Context," *Millennium*, Vol.22, no.2 (1993), 142; Zeev Maoz and Bruce Russett, "Alliance, contiguity, wealth and political stability: Is the lack of conflict among democracies a statistical artefact?," *International Interactions*, Vol.17, no.3 (1992), 267.

Korean peninsula.²³ During the Cold War, nuclear weapons were central to the conflict between the Soviet Union/Warsaw Pact and the United States/NATO and the dominant factor in the military balance that involved a substantial strategic nuclear arsenal with a triad of international range delivery vehicles, preparations of large-scale conventional conflict in Europe supported by tactical nuclear forces and proxy conflicts out-of-area. Although the United States and Russia still maintain substantial strategic nuclear forces, their role has changed fundamentally. As the prospect of large-scale warfare in Europe retreated, the United States developed effective global power projection capabilities based on conventional weapons while Russia's conventional military capacity shrunk to the point that nuclear weapons were considered essential as a deterrent of last resort, as well as Russia's only claim to be a Great Power.

The first decade after the Cold War seemed to confirm the view that the military contingencies that the nuclear powers are likely to face do not involve nuclear weapons either as a deterrent or as a useful military tool. Indeed, for the first time in their history the countries of Western and Central Europe did not face an external enemy. For example, in the conflicts in the Balkans four nuclear powers were engaged with armed forces, but this had no relevance for their conduct or the course of the conflict. As very few states faced an external threat that would compel them to acquire nuclear weapons, all non-nuclear states joined the NPT albeit some exceptions.²⁴

²³ Brennen T. Fagan, Marina I. Knight, Niall J. MacKay and A. Jamie Wood, "Change point analysis of historical battle deaths," *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (Statistics in Society)* Vol. 183, no.3 (2020), 21; Thomas S. Szayna, Stephen Watts, Angela O'Mahony, Bryan Frederick and Jennifer Kavanagh, *What Are the Trends in Armed Conflicts, and What Do They Mean for U.S. Defense Policy?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), 3.

²⁴ Obvious exceptions are crisis regions such as South Asia and the Korean peninsula, and Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine bowed to pressure from the US and Russia to allow nuclear weapons on their territories to be removed in return for security assurances and financial incentives.

Another significant factor is the development and diffusion of norms which changes the way in which countries view nuclear weapons. In particular international norms in relation to the use of force have changed fundamentally since 1945. The use of force is generally justified either as strict self-defence or more generally on the grounds of national security concerns. Rather, the use of force is only permissible under very specific conditions, such as self-defence, or the enforcement of international law and security as mandated by the UN Security Council (which may include humanitarian intervention).²⁵ Moreover, the use of force is subject to very stringent conditions, among which proportionality and the avoidance of civilian casualties are paramount.

Although this is not necessarily accepted by nuclear states, it could be argued in conformity with the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice that the use of nuclear weapons has to conform to the principles of international humanitarian law, which would mean that the use of nuclear weapons would be illegal in almost all conceivable circumstances.²⁶ Although nuclear weapons states may not accept such restrictions, nevertheless, Nina Tannenwald has demonstrated the emergence of a “nuclear taboo,” a growing and powerful moral restraint on the use of nuclear weapons that has turned “the habit of non-use” into a form of required and expected behavior among states.²⁷ It is true that Nina Tannenwald has more recently claimed that the nuclear taboo may have weakened by various developments.²⁸

²⁵ Simon Chesterman, *Just War or Just Peace? Humanitarian Intervention and International Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 220; Adam Robert, *Humanitarian Action in War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 7.

²⁶ International Court of Justice, “Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons,” *ICJ*, Report-1996, Available at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/95/095-19960708-ADV-01-00-EN.pdf> (accessed on 6 March 2021).

²⁷ Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 29.

²⁸ Nina Tannenwald and James M. Acton, *Meeting the Challenges of the New Nuclear Age: Emerging Risks and Declining Norms in the Age of Technological Innovation and Changing Nuclear Doctrines* (Cambridge, MA: Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2018), 6.

These include nuclear modernization which threatens the second strike capabilities of nuclear powers, the development of conventional global strike capabilities, the increase deployment by Russia of sub strategic nuclear forces, the development of low yield nuclear weapons that allegedly lower the nuclear threshold, the emergence of small “undeterrable” nuclear states (so far only one, North Korea), the decline of arms control and the increasing emphasis on nuclear weapons in military doctrines of the Great Powers. This study argues that the opposite is the case and that these developments are misinterpreted. First of all, there is no evidence at all that the second-strike capabilities of the major nuclear powers are weakening.

The opposite is the case as the number of land-based missiles has been reduced and their capabilities are supplemented by much less vulnerable sea-based forces. The “window of vulnerability” is an even less plausible concept than it was in the time of Reagan. The increasing significance of conventional global strike capabilities, despite the confusion in the formal US nuclear posture, shows that there is a shift from nuclear to conventional capabilities for deterrence. Their purpose is not to facilitate the use of nuclear weapons, but to render it unnecessary. Nuclear doctrines and force postures are out of line with the actual military contingencies nuclear powers are facing. Low yield weapons have existed for decades, and even the new low-yield warhead for Trident would be a weapon of mass destruction killing in excess of 100,000 people in any urban area. Although Russia has increased its reliance on non-strategic forces for deterrence, it is remarkable that the United States has not followed suit. It is the argument developed in this study that the assertion that the risks of nuclear war are increasing is not supported by the evidence. It remains the case that in contrast to nuclear deterrence, the option of actual nuclear use is reserved for the highest level of escalation in a conflict in a situation where all other efforts at escalation control have failed. In other words, it would assume a massive high intensity conventional conflict that puts the

national survival of the nuclear power at risk. However, there is no theatre of conflict in which such a scenario is even a remote prospect in terms of relations between the Great Powers. It is true that relations between the Great Powers have become more conflictual and that military threats have re-emerged in Eastern Europe and the Far East. These will be discussed in more detail subsequently. Nuclear deterrence is a function of the credibility of a threat and the capability to carry it out. The latter remains, but the former has clearly diminished in terms of regional conflict involving the Great Powers. The only explanation for this phenomenon is that the Great Powers consider the use of nuclear weapons less likely and that the role of nuclear weapons in international security has diminished. This argument will be considered in more detail in the succeeding discussion.

Although one may question how strictly international norms are being adhered to, they demonstrably restrain the use of force by states. Indeed, Theo Farrell in his path-breaking study of the norms of war, stated: "Most of the time states obey international law, and they do so for any one of a number of reasons: because they think it is advantageous, appropriate, and/or fair to do so. Crucially, in terms of showing the autonomous causal effect of legal norms, states will obey international law even when it goes against their self-interests."²⁹ Many former practices in the conduct of warfare are no longer acceptable, such as the annexation of foreign territories or the execution of prisoners of war, and there is generally condemnation of military actions that are not precisely targeted to avoid civilian casualties.³⁰

²⁹ Theo Farrell, *The Norms of War* (New Delhi: Viva Books Private Limited, 2006), 163.

³⁰ Christoph Bluth, *Britain, Germany and Western Nuclear Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 30; Christoph Bluth, *Shadows of War* (London: Global Research Publications, 2020), 21.

The changes in the European security environment after the collapse of the Cold War system manifested itself in the steady decline of defence spending as a proportion of GDP by the NATO countries for example.³¹ The major risk to international security in the time following the post-Cold war period appeared to reside in the so-called new wars, sub-state conflicts that arise from ethnic disputes, or failed states in regions of low development.³² For the vast majority of states, there is no significant risk of war. This is a situation unprecedented in human history since the advent of the Westphalian system of states.

The US-Russian strategic relationship and the role of nuclear deterrence

The early period in US-Russian relations after the Cold War were characterized by an effort to develop a non-adversarial relationship in which the United States and Russia were partners to manage the transition to cooperative security in Europe and a new stable nuclear order.³³ The dissolution of the Soviet Union had precipitated a collapse of Soviet military power and the withdrawal of troops from Eastern and Central Europe was in progress, with the last Russian troops leaving Germany in 1994.³⁴ Just at the end of the Soviet period the START 1 Treaty had been concluded which envisaged a reduction of deployed warheads by about 37% on both sides. The United States and Russia used the START Treaty as an instrument of non-proliferation to

³¹ "Financial and Economic Data Relating to NATO Defence," *NATO OTAN*, February 24, 2014, Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_107359.htm (accessed on 10 March 2021); Javier Solana, "NATO and European Security into the 21st Century," *NATO OTAN*, May 13, 1998, Speech, published 13 May 1998, Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-85AC8871-OCFB0FBA/natolive/opinions_26116.htm (accessed on 24 March 2021).

³² Mary Kaldor, *Old Wars and New War: Organised Violence in a New Era* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 2.

³³ Sergei A. Karaganov, *Russia: The New Foreign Policy and Security Agenda* (London: Brassey's, 1992), 42.

³⁴ Pavel K. Baev, *The Russian Army In a Time of Troubles* (London: Sage, 1996), 103.

persuade Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus to give up the strategic nuclear forces based on their territories.³⁵ After the 1993 coup which was put down with an attack on the White House in Moscow where the Duma was held Yeltsin had to contend with the conservative forces in Russia that continued to perceive the relationship between Russia and the West as adversarial. In this context the continued existence of NATO was interpreted to mean that the West continued to threaten Russia, while the Western attitude was that as Russia and the West were no longer adversaries NATO should not be perceived as threatening.

The enlargement of NATO was motivated by a desire to integrate the Central European states politically into the West rather than develop a military threat to Russia. Although such integration would have made more sense through EU membership, the Central European states were not politically or economically ready for EU membership then and West European leaders did not consider it prudent to wait until they could join the EU which did not occur before 2004. NATO enlargement was vigorously opposed by Russia as a violation of previous commitments given by the G.H.W. Bush administration that it had “no need, no plans, no intention” to expand NATO membership to former WTO States and taken as evidence of the West’s hostility.³⁶ The NATO-Russia Founding Act created a new consultative mechanism to allay Russian fears, but in time Russia’s focus on NATO as a threat

³⁵ “The START Treaty,” *The Library of Congress*, 1992, Available at: https://www.loc.gov/law/find/nominations/gates/0001242677a_excerpt.pdf (accessed on 12 March 2021).

³⁶ James B. Steinberg and Philip H. Gordon, “NATO Enlargement: Moving Forward; Expanding the Alliance and Completing Europe’s Integration by Thursday,” *Brookings Institution*, November 15, 2001, Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/nato-enlargement-moving-forward-expanding-the-alliance-and-completing-europes-integration/> (accessed on 15 March 2021).

resumed.³⁷ The START II Treaty had the purpose of dramatically reducing the nuclear arsenals of the United States and Russia. By banning land-based ICBMs with multiple warheads, it would stabilise the strategic relationship as the threat of a first strike would now be considerably reduced, as well as ending Russia's dependence on missile factories based in Ukraine. START II was ratified by the US Senate on 26 January 1996 with a vote of 87–4.

However, the treaty became a victim of the internal battle in Russia over policy towards the West and was not ratified until Putin assumed the presidency. Even then it was not implemented, but was instead replaced by the Moscow Treaty (SORT) that permitted three warheads to be carried by each ICBM, but abandoned the verification measures that had been in place for START.³⁸ The Obama administration returned to more traditional strategic arms control negotiations that resulted in the New START Treaty which was recently renewed by the Biden administration.³⁹ The Trump administration's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) followed the general outlines of the Obama administration to modernize the nuclear weapons arsenal. But, as the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists reported, "it includes several important changes. The most significant change is a recommendation to increase the types and role of US nuclear weapons. The Trump NPR takes a confrontational tone, presenting an assertive posture that embraces

³⁷ Roy Allison and Christoph Bluth, eds., *Security Dilemmas in Russia and Eurasia* (London: RIIA/Brookings, 1998), 301.

³⁸ "The Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) At a Glance," *Armscontrol.org*, September 2017, Available at: <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/sort-glance> (accessed on 15 March 2021).

³⁹ "Treaty Between The United States Of America And The Russian Federation On Measures For The Further Reduction And Limitation Of Strategic Offensive Arms," *NTI*, February 25, 2021, Available at: <https://www.nti.org/learn/treaties-and-regimes/treaty-between-the-united-states-of-america-and-the-russian-federation-on-measures-for-the-further-reduction-and-limitation-of-strategic-offensive-arms/> (accessed on 26 March 2021); "United States extends nuclear treaty with Russia for five years," *Washington Post*, February 3, 2021.

“Great Power competition,” and includes plans to develop new nuclear weapons and modify others. The report backs away from the goal of seeking to limit the role of nuclear weapons to the sole purpose of deterring nuclear attacks, and instead emphasizes “expanding” US nuclear options to deter, and, if deterrence fails, to prevail against both nuclear and “non-nuclear strategic attacks.” To be clear, any use of a nuclear weapon to respond to a non-nuclear strategic attack would constitute nuclear first use.

Thus, the NPR states that “non-nuclear strategic attacks include, but are not limited to, attacks on the US, allied, or partner civilian population or infrastructure, and attacks on the US or allied nuclear forces, their command and control, or warning and attack assessment capabilities.”⁴⁰ The purpose of nuclear forces will be to “hedge against the potential rapid growth or emergence of nuclear and non-nuclear strategic threats, including chemical, biological, cyber, and large-scale conventional aggression”⁴¹ “The United States will enhance the flexibility and range of its tailored deterrence options. ... Expanding flexible US nuclear options now, to include low-yield options, is important for the preservation of credible deterrence against regional aggression....”⁴² These statements in the NPR cover a full range of possible threat scenarios and have been taken to extend the role of nuclear deterrence and potentially the use of US nuclear forces. The ambiguous attitude of the Trump administration to arms control fits in with its nuclear policy. Russian violations of the INF Treaty were used to abandon the treaty regime altogether and right to the end the

⁴⁰ Office of Secretary of Defence, “Nuclear Posture Review 2018,” *US Department of Defence*, Report-2018, Available at: <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF> (accessed on 20 March 2021).

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 38.

⁴² *Ibid*, 34.

Trump administration remained hesitant about renewing or renegotiating the START Treaty that Trump always said he disliked.

There are three important reasons to believe that the statements in the NPR are overinterpreted. The first is that US nuclear weapons are not deterring chemical, biological or cyber aggression, nor are they appropriate instruments to deter or respond to it. In fact, the NPR itself affirms that “The United States would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interest of the United States, its allies, and partners.”⁴³ The basis of nuclear deterrence is the credible threat to use nuclear weapons, and it is simply not credible to use nuclear weapons against anything other than existential threats. The second is that while the Trump administration put great store in maintaining and building military capabilities, issued various military threats and resisted Congressional efforts to institute constraints based on the War Powers Act, it was exceedingly reluctant to actually use them. Trump increased the troop levels in Afghanistan but then moved towards complete withdrawal despite a deteriorating security situation and now the Biden administration has announced that the United States will withdraw. The Trump administration continued that campaign against ISIS initiated by the Obama administration, but withdrew most forces from Syria as soon as all territory was recovered, abandoning its Kurdish allies in the process. When faced with the prospect of launching military strikes against Iran, Trump demurred and decided not to act.⁴⁴ Moreover, Trump persistently challenged the existing alliance security structures in Europe and the Far East. Despite his rhetoric, Trump appeared to be unwilling to initiate military action against North Korea or defend

⁴³ Ibid, 21.

⁴⁴ Katrina Mansion and James Politi, “Donald Trump backs away from military action against Iran,” *Financial Times*, January 8, 2020.

Taiwan in the event of a conflict.⁴⁵ Indeed, prior to leaving office Trump initiated action to withdraw all US forces from all its overseas bases, an action which he was unable to complete.⁴⁶ But the reluctance to deploy and use US forces abroad is increasing after Trump, while the risks of a large-scale conventional attack on US territory are extremely low. Another way of expressing this is that the major powers are deterred from escalating any military conflict beyond a sub-conventional level. The actual use of nuclear weapons remains extremely unlikely because the hierarchy of military conflict has not changed, and nuclear weapons remain at the upper level of escalation. The third reason is that it is to be expected that the Biden administration will revise US nuclear doctrine again and move away from the more contentious aspects of NPR 2018 as it moved quickly to renew START for another five years.

Russian strategic arms policy has been characterized by substantial overall reductions as codified in arms control agreements with the United States (albeit still maintaining a very substantial force) and incremental modernization. The primary purpose of Russia's strategic nuclear forces remains the maintenance of an effective counter to US strategic forces as Russia, contrary to some of the rhetoric, is not likely to be involved in any armed conflict in which it is necessary to deter the threat of large-scale military attacks with nuclear forces. Thus, the official US government threat assessment focuses on Russian "influence campaigns, intelligence and counterterrorism cooperation, military aid and combined exercises, mercenary operations, assassinations, and arms sales—to advance its interests or undermine

⁴⁵ Josh Rogin, *Chaos – Trump, Xi and the Battle for the 21st Century* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021), 44.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Swan and Zachary Basu, "Episode 9: Trump's war with his generals," *Axios*, May 16, 2021, Available at: <https://www.axios.com/off-the-rails-trump-military-withdraw-afghanistan-5717012a-d55d-4819-a79f-805d5eb3c6e2.html> (accessed on 27 March 2021).

the interests of the United States and its allies” and accepts that the purpose of nuclear forces is to deter attacks on Russia itself. It also considers large-scale military operations far outside Russia to be unlikely.⁴⁷ It states: “We expect Moscow to insert itself into crises when Russian interests are at stake, it can turn a power vacuum into an opportunity, or the anticipated costs of action are low.” The nuclear strategic relationship between Russia and the United States is stable, and despite the controversies over the issue of ballistic missile defence neither side can credibly destroy the second-strike capability of the other sufficiently. Although Russia was explicitly excluded as a target of national missile defence on the grounds (as articulated by President GW Bush) that Russia was no longer an enemy, Russian military planners have remained nervous about new capabilities that might degrade their offensive strike capabilities.

This has manifested itself in Russian opposition to European based missile defence installations directed against a possible missile attack from Iran.⁴⁸ The European Phased Adapted Approach includes the deployment of the Aegis Ashore Missile Defence System whose purpose is to defend European states against long-range missile attacks from smaller states such as Iran and the United States has stated that the Russian Federation cannot be targeted by the system deployed in Romania. The Russians have claimed that the MK-41 VLS system enables Aegis Ashore to launch ground-based cruise missiles in the contravention of the INF Treaty. The Russian stance to portray the Aegis off-shore and onshore systems as offensive threats was

⁴⁷ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, Report-2021, 9.

⁴⁸ Keir Giles and Andrew Monaghan, *European Missile Defense and Russia* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2014), 2.

vigorously rejected by the United States.⁴⁹ The competing claims regarding offensive capabilities that allegedly violated the INF Treaty resulted in the decision by the Trump administration to withdraw from the treaty in response to the SSC-8 cruise missile, which according to the US has a range of 3,000 km and violates the INF Treaty although this claim is rejected by Russia. However, the United States has no plans for new INF deployments in Europe despite the end of the INF Treaty.⁵⁰ The deployment of US missile defences in Europe is given as the rationale for the deployment of strategic bombers in Crimea and the introduction of hypersonic missiles. Although hypersonic missiles which contrary to various declarations cannot yet be deemed to be operational are an important new technical development, do not fundamentally alter the strategic balance between the United States and Russia as missiles armed with the new re-entry vehicle are included in the START limits.⁵¹ Although Russia has substantially modernized its strategic nuclear forces to ensure a substantial strike capability by all legs of its strategic triad and has narrowed the technological gap with the United States, neither side has the capacity to execute a first strike that would prevent the other side from launching a massive counterstrike and so a very high degree of mutual vulnerability persists.⁵²

⁴⁹ David Axe, "Why Russia Is Angry at America's Missile Defense Systems (Blog)," *The National Interest*, October 22, 2019, Available at:

<https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/why-russia-angry-americas-missile-defense-systems-90111> (accessed on 3 March 2021); CSIS Missile Defense Project, *Aegis Ashore* (Washington, DC: CSIS 2021)

⁵⁰ Shannon Bugos, "US Completes INF Treaty Withdrawal", *Arms Control Today*, September 2019, Available at: <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2019-09/news/us-completes-inf-treaty-withdrawal> (accessed on 14 April, 2021).

⁵¹ Amy F. Woolf, *Russia's Nuclear Weapons: Doctrine, Forces and Modernization* (Washington, DC: CRS, 2020), 20.

⁵² Vladimir Dvorkin, *Preserving Strategic Stability Amid U.S.-Russian Confrontation* (Moscow: Carnegie Center, 2019), 6.

While the nuclear strategic relationship remains stable, Russia has over the last decade revitalized its conventional capabilities and has more recently exhibited a more assertive posture with respect to the use of force.⁵³ In particular, Russia has now become very assertive in terms of reasserting its dominance in the former Soviet space.⁵⁴ The recent Russian military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea is viewed by some scholars as the beginning of a revival of the nuclear threat in global security as Russia has hinted that the in the event of a NATO military intervention the use of tactical nuclear weapons might be possible. This is underscored by the risks taken by Russia in its “hybrid warfare” to support its sphere of influence despite its relative weakness in conventional capabilities vis-à-vis NATO.⁵⁵

However, the conclusions drawn from these cases may be exaggerated. The Georgia case is complex with evidence that Georgia itself provoked Russian retaliation so that Tbilisi could push for NATO membership and that then-President Mikheil Saakashvili played his cards badly. How significant the nuclear threat is, remains to be seen however given that NATO also has nuclear capabilities, and the US has strategic nuclear capabilities that are more than a match for those of Russia. So far, a revival of the military confrontation in Europe or the strategic nuclear stand-off between the US and Russia is not on the

⁵³ Bettina Renz, *Russia's Military Revival* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 122.

⁵⁴ This has given rise to the; “S.1221 - Countering Russian Influence in Europe and Eurasia Act of 2017,” *Congress.Gov*, 2017, Available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/1221/text?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22russia%22%5D%7D&r=65> (accessed on 1 April 2021).

⁵⁵ Polina Sinovets, “The Nuclear Element in Russia’s Asymmetric Warfare Strategies,” *Ponars Eurasia*, December 4, 2015, Available at: <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/the-nuclear-element-in-russia-s-asymmetric-warfare-strategies/> (accessed on 1 April 2021).

horizon.⁵⁶ Although Russia and the US have been engaging in dangerous military activities that increase the risk of accidental interaction between military forces in the air and on the sea, the forces for a large-scale conventional conflict are not in place nor would the strategic objectives of such a conflict be apparent. Moreover, this situation has not significantly affected the pattern of global security. It is not clear whether “hybrid warfare,” which is a sub conventional conflict that uses low levels of disguised forces as well as non-military means such as cyber-attacks and information warfare, relies on nuclear deterrence or not. As with hybrid warfare, Russia has been using subversion rather than a conventional military engagement against potential targets in Eastern Europe,⁵⁷ the means to combat it also need to be “hybrid” by countering information warfare as well as support for sub conventional combat. It is highly unlikely that the US would become militarily involved in the conflict in Ukraine even if Russia had no nuclear weapons.

Indeed, Ukraine is using weapons provided by the United States to combat Russian forces and proxies without any regard to Russia’s nuclear weapons. For now, it seems that nuclear deterrence is not a significant factor in the conflict itself, even though Ukraine is now regretting giving up the nuclear forces on its territory (even though it was unable to manage a nuclear weapons complex at that time) and is contemplating a nuclear revival. However, from a strategic perspective it seems clear that Russia has become much less risk-averse since 2014.⁵⁸ Despite the improvements in Russian conventional military

⁵⁶ See the statement by Jessica Cox, Director of Nuclear Policy at NATO: Jessica Cox, “Nuclear deterrence today”, *NATO Review*, June 8, 2020, Available at: <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/06/08/nuclear-deterrence-today/index.html> (accessed on 1 April 2021).

⁵⁷ Lanoszka, A, “Russian hybrid warfare and extended deterrence in Eastern Europe,” *International Affairs*, Vol.92, no.1 (2016), 175.

⁵⁸ Lawrence Freedman, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,2019), 65.

capabilities since their low point in the 1990s, Russian forces are, if the claims of Russian analysts are to be believed, still relatively weak and technologically inferior to NATO forces especially if one takes into account potential reinforcements from the United States to the existing peace-time deployments, despite efforts in recent year to modernize and upgrade capabilities.⁵⁹ The likely explanation that is the continued reliance of Russia's large nuclear capabilities which include substantial non-strategic assets as well as calculations about the reluctance of NATO to commit forces to the defence of non-member.

Contemporary security challenges in Northeast Asia

In Northeast Asia, China's position at the end of the Cold War was undergoing dramatic change since it had opened up to international trade and focused on economic development and modernization. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the withdrawal of Russia from its previous global commitments resulted in a fundamental transformation of Sino-Russian relations from an adversarial relationship to a strategic partnership. With the disappearance of the Soviet threat, Russia's role in the security of Northeast Asia diminished significantly. China was improving its relations not only with Russia, but South East Asian countries and it initiated diplomatic relations with the Republic of Korea. Even relations between the PRC and Taiwan became less belligerent. The main countervailing trend was on the Korean peninsula, where the end of the Cold War and the loss of the lifelines from Russia and to some extent China precipitated an existential crisis in North Korea that resulted in the collapse of the planned economy, a famine that killed over a million people and almost ended the Kim regime. At the same time the North Korean nuclear program precipitated a major crisis that very nearly resulted in a military conflict with the United States. The crisis on the Korean peninsula, alongside

⁵⁹ Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, "Russian nuclear strategy and conventional inferiority," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol.44, no.1 (2021), 35.

with the enduring US-Japanese alliance and the security assurances to Taiwan perpetuated the American military presence in the Asia-Pacific region.

The continuing economic growth and modernization of China as well as rise of regionalism in East Asia, the persistent conflict with the DPRK redefined the geopolitics of the region. With the slogan of the “peaceful rise of China,” the accession to the NPT and the cessation of nuclear testing, its efforts to come in line with concerns about the exports of dual-use nuclear and missile technology China made an effort to appear as a “good international citizen” and allay the fears in the United States and in the region about its growing political and economic power.⁶⁰ Although China as one of the P5 on the UN Security Council has a major voice in global security, Beijing has been reluctant to assume any wider international responsibilities and has so far exercised its influence through occasional vetoes, while mostly abstaining on controversial resolutions.

Under Xi Jinping China clearly perceives itself as a major power in the region and increasingly as a global power on a par with the United States, set to eclipse the United States by 2049. However, although there is a dense network of trade and economic relations involving China, other regional players are not prepared to accept China as a leader in regional security. Indeed, China’s aggressive pursuit of territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the Sea of Japan has tarnished its image and generated serious concerns about the future rise of China and the impact on the geopolitics of the region.⁶¹

⁶⁰ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10.

⁶¹ Ronald O’Rourke, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 2021), 8.

Although China has shown signs of moderating its approach to this issue it remains a major source of tension in the region.⁶²

From the US perspective, the sources of tension in East Asia are not only about divergent national interests. As James Steinberg, Obama's former Deputy Secretary of State has pointed out, they are also about values. Steinberg and O'Hanlon describe the view of those who see values as central to relations with China as follows: "The values debate is not wholly independent from security concerns...the autocratic nature of the Communist Party means that China's policy will necessarily be hostile to the United States... From this perspective, actively supporting democratic change and human rights not only is consistent with US values but also can bring about the 'peaceful evolution' of the Chinese political system that would make China's rise less threatening."⁶³ In 2011 the then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton published an article in *Foreign Policy* entitled "The Pacific Century" that set out some of the thinking underlying what came to be known as the "US pivot" to the Asia Pacific region.⁶⁴ It was based on the recognition that in economic, political and security terms East Asia is becoming the most important region in the world. The pivot was based on six pillars. The first priority was to strengthen the alliances of the US in the region. Although the alliance with Japan has come under strain it is fundamentally intact after the resolution of the issue of the American bases on Okinawa and in other parts of Japan. The alliance transcends party politics in Japan and in the view of the White House works well on day-to-day issues. The alliance with the Republic of

⁶² Anders Corr, *Great Powers, Grand Strategies – The New Game in the South China Sea* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017), 247; David Shambaugh, *Where Great Powers Meet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 22.

⁶³ James Steinberg and Michael O'Hanlon, *Reassurance and Resolve* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 68.

⁶⁴ Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century (Feature)," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/> (accessed on 4 March 2021).

Korea remains strong as the disagreements that marked the Roh administration have been resolved and the Moon administration worked closely with the US government to coordinate policy towards North Korea.⁶⁵

The pivot is also articulated as an act of “economic statecraft.” The objective is to put in place a political and international regulatory environment that will enable the development of closer business ties across the Pacific. The focus has been on promoting Asia-Pacific economic integration and free trade agreements such as the US-Korea FTA and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, although the latter was abandoned by President Trump. The second pillar of the pivot is deepening working relationships with emerging powers, including China, and the third pillar of the pivot is US engagement with multilateral institutions, in particular ASEAN and the East Asia Summit. The fourth pillar is expanding trade and investment, the fifth pillar forging a broad-based military presence and the sixth pillar is the support of universal values which include human rights.⁶⁶ This issue is a particular source of friction in US-China relations and Chinese policymakers see diplomatic engagement on human rights as interference in China’s internal affairs, while interpreting US political and military actions is based on US strategic interests rather than the promotion of values and the international order. The effort to downplay the significance of the military element of the pivot has had the opposite of the intended effect. On the one hand both allies and others in the region were underwhelmed by the apparent weakness of

⁶⁵ “DCPD-201800361 - Remarks Prior to a Meeting With President Moon Jae-in of South Korea and an Exchange With Reporters in New York city,” *govinfo*, May 22, 2018, Available at: <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/DCPD-201900650> (accessed on 2 March 2021); “100 Policy Tasks Five-year Plan of the Moon Jae-in Administration,” *Korean Culture and Information Service*, August 17, 2017, Available at: <https://english1.president.go.kr/dn/5af107425ff0d> (accessed on 14 March 2021).

⁶⁶ David J. Bertau, Michael J. Green, Zack Cooper, *Assessing the Asia-Pacific Rebalance* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2014), 4.

the military aspect of the pivot. On the other hand, it has provoked a much more assertive stance by China, which is precisely what the Obama administration intended to avoid.

In addition to the continuing pursuit of territorial claims in the maritime regions, China has effectively abolished the special status of Hong Kong in a firm response to political protests and continues to signal the preparedness to use force against Taiwan. As a consequence, South Korea and Japan have become even more reliant on the United States to counterbalance China's growing power. The "one belt one road" initiative developed by President Xi Jinping as an ambitious economic development and commercial project designed to improve connectivity and cooperation among many countries across Asia, Africa, and Europe has become the platform for China to take a leading role in the ordering of the international system as a leading power in a multipolar world.⁶⁷

The emerging challenge of the Chinese navy is part of a longer-term effort to displace the United States as the dominant military power in the Pacific.⁶⁸ Despite various speculations to the contrary, the immediate challenge is not one of direct military conflict as such a conflict (say over Taiwan or the maritime territorial claims). Although China's naval patrols, the declarations of air control zones extended far beyond China's territorial boundaries and the penetration of Taiwan's air space with advanced aircraft have been viewed as a greater willingness to deploy and threaten military power, this does not mean that China intends to initiate armed hostilities and China is not alone in

⁶⁷ Eyck Freymann, *One Belt One Road* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021); Jonathan Fulton, ed., *Regions in the Belt and Road Initiative* (London: Routledge, 2020), 98.

⁶⁸ Office of Secretary of Defence, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020," *US Department of Defence, Report-2020*, Available at: <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF> (accessed on 3 April 2021).

defining an expansive Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) which can extend to 200 km or more. Such a conflict would have serious consequences for both sides, especially in view of China's dependence on continuing economic growth and the economic interdependence of China and the United States. The strategic concerns arise from the way in which the perception of China's military capabilities both in Washington and in the region will alter the behavior of political actors and impact on the evolution of the geopolitics of the region. The ongoing conflict involving China and South East Asian countries over the maritime and exclusive economic zone claims have resulted in inconsistent responses from South East Asian countries due to their economic interests in harmonious relations with China and their military weakness. Efforts to get a coherent response from ASEAN has failed for this reason.⁶⁹ If tensions over these issues rise, there is the other possibility that the United States could become drawn into a serious conflict between China and another country in the region. The United States has sent patrols into the disputed areas in order to reassert the principle of freedom of navigation, which elicited sharp protests from China, but there remains a level of restraint on both sides. But the strategic risk is that China will be able to change the status quo in the region incrementally without provoking a war. Not only would China be rewarded for an aggressive expansion of its control over the maritime region, but this has the potential of creating a new strategic status quo in which China has created a maritime buffer zone from which the US navy is excluded. The Trump administration focused on trade relations with China and had little interest in regional security (except for North Korea) or support for

⁶⁹ Huang, Jing and Andrew Bill, eds., *In the South China Sea. Navigating Through Rough Waters* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 82; David Shambaugh, *Where Great Powers Meet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 15.

human rights despite various statements critical of China's human rights record, especially in Hong Kong.⁷⁰

China's military modernization is designed to enable China to support what it has defined to be its core interests.⁷¹ The larger geopolitical goals are to support China's role as a major power in the region and the displacement of American influence. In strategic terms, the highest priority are relations with Taiwan. Although China is pursuing its relations with Taiwan in anticipation of a peaceful reunification at some time in the future, it reserves the military option in case it is deemed necessary. A similarly high priority is defense/denial of access to the American navy to Chinese controlled waters. This includes the capacity to support China's territorial claims in the East China Sea and the South China Sea and its claim (not accepted by the international community) that it can regulate foreign military activities in what it claims to be its 200-mile maritime exclusive economic zone.

The United States remains the dominant military power in the region. Although eventually China's military capabilities could approach those of the United States, this is unlikely to occur for several decades given the advantages the United States has in military technology, global power projection capabilities and together with its allies the United States currently accounts for 70% of global defense. The Trump administration strongly committed to expanding US military capabilities at all levels including the wholesale modernization of strategic nuclear forces (although casting doubt on its commitment to actually honor its commitments to allies) and the Biden administration

⁷⁰ Josh Rogin, *Chaos Under Heaven – Trump, Xi and the Battle for the 21st Century* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021), 10.

⁷¹ Office of Secretary of Defence, "Military and Security Developments involving the People's Republic of China 2020," *US Department of Defence, Report-2020*, Available at: <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF> (accessed on 3 April 2021).

is likewise proposing continued high levels of defense spending. The United States is not only significantly ahead of China in military technology but given the continuing disparity in military spending and the unrivalled R&D infrastructure, the technological dynamism of the US and the existing stock of high-technology military hardware, a significant gap between the US and China remains for now despite Department of Defense concerns about Chinese growing capabilities.⁷²

There are some specific issues that have been raised in relation to the concerns about the reduction in the qualitative edge of US military superiority. One is the prospect that China might use intermediate range ballistic missiles to target US aircraft carriers. The missile in question is the DF-21D, a variant of the road mobile DF-21 with a solid propellant motor armed with a 250 kt nuclear warhead. The DF-21D is to be used with conventional warheads, launched against surface ships from land. US estimates give the missile a range from 1,550 to 2,000 km (Chinese reports claim a range of 2,700 km). The accuracy of the missile is estimated at 700 m (circular error probable).⁷³ The extent to which it represents a realistic threat is doubtful, especially given that an attack by such missiles against a US carrier group would represent a very significant escalation that would raise the armed conflict to a wholly different level. The United States has very significant defensive capabilities for attacks against ships as well as tactical ballistic missile defenses. Military planners would assume that they only come into play once some level of direct hostilities had already been initiated.⁷⁴ Another issue that has been debated in the literature is the

⁷² James Steinberg and Michael O'Hanlon, *Reassurance and Resolve* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 22.

⁷³ *Jane's Weapons Strategic Yearbook 2021-22* (Couldson: Jane's, 2021), 15.

⁷⁴ Harry J. Kaziani, "Is China's 'Carrier Killer' Really a Threat to the U.S. Navy (Blog)," *The National Interest*, September 2, 2015, Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/chinas-carrier-killer-really-threat-the-us-navy-13765> (accessed on 14 March 2021).

quantitative advantage China has in attack submarines in the region and the China is now deploying more ships overall than the US navy, although these metrics are not defining the military balance per se and are rightly considered to be misleading.⁷⁵

Discussions of the regional military balance need to consider the fact that both the United States and China are nuclear powers. Neither China nor the United States have made explicit statements about nuclear deterrence in a potential conflict over Taiwan or the South China Sea.⁷⁶ Estimates of China's nuclear capabilities vary to some extent, but it is generally agreed that China's stockpile includes about 270 operational warheads and is going to increase in the foreseeable future to about 350 warheads. Even if the stockpile increases further over the next ten years it will remain substantially smaller than that of Russia or the United States. One important indicator in any confrontation with the United States would be the capability of Chinese ICBMs to target the continental United States. The US Department of Defense estimates that China has deployed about 100 Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs). Independent experts suggests that there are currently about 78 launchers deployed of the three (Dongfeng) DF-31 versions which can reach parts of Alaska and the Western continental United States. In addition, there are 10 each of the more modern DF-5A and DF-5B, while the new DF-41 ICBM is believed to be not yet operational.

⁷⁵ Michael A. McDevitt, *China As A Twenty First Century Naval Power* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 23.

⁷⁶ Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Military and Security Developments involving the People's Republic of China," *US Department of Defense*, Report 2020, Available at <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF> (accessed on 3 April 2021); David Logan, "Dangerous Myths on China's Nuclear Weapons (Commentary)," *War on the Rocks*, September 18, 2020, Available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2020/09/the-dangerous-myths-about-chinas-nuclear-weapons/> (accessed on 22 April 2021).

The DF-5B may have multiple independently-retargetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs) with five warheads each. China is developing and deploying precision strike nuclear delivery systems which may mean that China is moving to the adoption of a limited “high alert duty” strategy to permit some launch-on warning. Overall, China has a modest capability to strike the United States and most of its nuclear weapons are based on medium range ballistic missile that can strike parts of Russia or other regional targets. The PLA is developing precision strike nuclear delivery systems such as the dual use DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) and survivable road-mobile ICBMs with the CSS-10 mod 2 (DF-31A) class missile capable of striking locations within the continental United States. There has been some discussion that suggests China has moved a portion of its nuclear force to a Launch on Warning (LOW) posture and is adopting a limited “high alert duty” strategy. However, the requirements for a true LOW strategy are extremely demanding in terms of reconnaissance, early warning and command and control systems and is problematic in the context of an asymmetry of capabilities because LOW may invite further retaliatory strikes against China. The evidence so far suggests that there are discussions on this in the PLA and so far, there is no implementation of an LOW posture.⁷⁷ There is clearly a substantial imbalance, as the United States has a stockpile of 3,800 nuclear warheads (not counting those slated for dismantlement), fields 404 Minuteman ICBMs with three warheads each and together with submarine launched missiles and heavy bombers has deployed an intercontinental strategic arsenal of 1,365 nuclear warheads.⁷⁸

Any possible theatre of war between China and the United States differs from the Cold War example of Central Europe in so far as there

⁷⁷ Samanvya Hooda, *Launch-on-warning and China’s Nuclear Posture*, (New Delhi: Institute for Chinese Studies 202), 12.

⁷⁸ Hans M. Kristensen & Matt Korda, “Chinese nuclear forces, 2020,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* Vol.76, no.6 (2020), 443.

is no actual territory for the deployment of large-scale conventional forces. Any military operations would be carried out by naval forces unless China invaded Taiwan. Using nuclear weapons against naval targets is not appropriate to the targets and involves an unnecessary risk of escalation. Likewise, the use of nuclear weapons against Taiwan would be problematic because China considers the population of Taiwan to be their own citizens and therefore would essentially kill millions of their own people. Although the United States is committed to the security of Taiwan, there is no nuclear guarantee, and the United States has not deployed nuclear weapons anywhere on land in the region. Moreover, the United States has not deployed on ground forces in Taiwan. This means that the use of tactical nuclear forces is not plausible from a military perspective. Overall, the analysis of regional security does not indicate that nuclear deterrence is sufficient to prevent low-level military conflict, although it would limit escalation to attacks on Chinese territory. For China and the United States, nuclear weapons are deterrents of last resort. Given the strategic balance, China could not contemplate nuclear escalation unless there is a major attack on the Chinese mainland which is highly unlikely. Likewise, the United States is protecting strategic interests that are far from the homeland, which puts a limit on the risks it may be willing to take in their defence.⁷⁹

Conclusion

The dominant discourse in Russia and China about relations between the Great Powers in the contemporary system of global security is of a “multipolar order” defined by the UN Charter and international law. By

⁷⁹ Michael O’Hanlon, “Russia, China, and the risks of war: My conversation with General Mark Milley,” *Brookings*, December 23, 2020, Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/12/23/russia-china-and-the-risks-of-war-my-conversation-with-general-mark-milley/> (accessed on 27 April 2021).

contrast the United States government in the time of Biden administration has focused on a norm based international order, in which the United States would engage with other countries to stabilize the global economy and defend democracy against authoritarianism but without the use of military interventions. China and Russia reject this formulation and champion international law and the principles of the UN Charter, using these principles to defend national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs. The principal sources of conflict that could give rise to armed conflict are US opposition to China's efforts to extend control over its neighborhood with the use of political, economic, and military instruments, in particular in relation to the maritime territories adjacent to China and Taiwan. In the case of Russia, it is the effort to extend hegemony over the former Soviet space that is the main source of conflict which involves the use of force in campaigns of hybrid warfare. From the US perspective, and contrary to the classic realist approach which sees the asymmetry of power as the primary source of armed conflict, it is the asymmetry of norms that gives rise to threats of armed conflict. In this framework of a norms based international system, the concept of "multipolarity" has no place because it involves by definition the exercise of power by states over other states which violates the basic principles of a norms based international system.⁸⁰ These competing interpretations of the structure of the international system and the sources of armed conflict are not going to be resolved very soon, because in all three cases they form part of the defining identity and the core interests as defined by the current power elites. However, this does not mean that the world

⁸⁰ This is notwithstanding the fact that the language of multipolarity has found its way into the rhetoric of the US Department of Defense, see Cheryl Pellerin, "Stratcom Commander Describes Challenges of 21st-Century Deterrence," *US Dept of Defense*, August 17, 2017, Available at: <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/1281946/stratcom-commander-describes-challenges-of-21st-century-deterrence/> (accessed on 18 March 2021).

is returning to a strategic nuclear confrontation or the imminent threat of a high-intensity armed conflict between the Great Powers.

The literature is currently dominated by the contrary view, namely that the risk of nuclear war is increasing. This is based on the observation that political relations among the major powers have become more confrontational, that nuclear weapons have been “re-legitimized” and that new technologies could impact on strategic stability and deterrence. This study has argued that while the first of these contentions is undoubtedly true, the conclusions drawn are unwarranted. Even if all of the novel technologies to deliver nuclear weapons realize their potential, none of the major nuclear powers will acquire the capacity to eliminate substantial second-strike capabilities of the other parties. The threats to strategic stability are exaggerated. The increasing capacity to conduct precision nuclear strikes has not increased the likelihood of nuclear use because it is also being acquired by the adversaries of the United States, thereby increasing the risks associated with nuclear strikes for all involved. Although the rhetoric of political and military establishments has re-emphasized nuclear capabilities, this does not mean nuclear weapons have become more “legitimate,” as evidenced by the support for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (rejected by the nuclear powers). More important even for this argument is that despite the rhetoric, nuclear weapons have not acquired greater military utility. Missions previously assigned to nuclear weapons can now be performed by conventional weapons. This study has emphasized that even high intensity conventional warfare on a large scale remains a very unlikely scenario and the forces for such a confrontation are not in place either in Europe or the Far East. The changed security environment may mean that nuclear weapons are insufficient to deter sub conventional war. This is another indicator that their use has become less rather than more plausible. However, the behavior of nuclear powers leads to

the conclusion that they can still deter major conventional war that could escalate to nuclear war. Nuclear weapons are used for deterrence or as a weapon of last resort to defend against an overwhelming threat to national survival. In the absence of a realistic conventional threat to the national survival of either Russia, China, or the United States, deterrence remains the only plausible role for nuclear arsenals.