

Understanding Strategic Interaction in the Second Nuclear Age



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CSBA

Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

Why study strategic interaction as part of net assessment?

- **The global nuclear landscape is shaped by more than just arms race or action-reaction dynamics**
 - Internal bureaucracies and inter-service competition also drive state decision making
 - Strategic culture shapes states' perception of their security environment and priorities
- **Effective arms control efforts hinge on understanding and channeling strategic interaction between nuclear powers**
 - A more multipolar nuclear landscape will complicate strategic interaction and future arms control efforts
 - The potential end of bilateral U.S.-Russia arms limitation agreements will create conditions for relatively unconstrained competition

What did we set out to do?

- **Provide a deep-dive into the evolution of nuclear policy in the United States, Russia, and China, including:**
 - How they have historically perceived global nuclear competition
 - How they have conceptualized the purpose of their own nuclear forces
 - The degree to which states' declaratory policy has aligned with state behavior
- **Examine how strategic interaction has shaped national perceptions of nuclear balances and informed each state's approach to the development of nuclear policy**
- **Identify sources of change and continuity in each country that can help us understand how strategic interaction may unfold in a new era of great power competition**

- **Continuities in U.S. nuclear strategy outnumber the changes**
 - Reliance on nuclear use to deter non-nuclear actions
 - Centrality of nuclear nonproliferation to U.S. strategy
 - Mostly bipartisan consensus on the enduring value of the triad
 - Pursuit of flexible options to improve the credibility of the U.S. deterrent, especially related to extended deterrence
- **Post-Cold War changes to U.S. strategy will complicate efforts to manage future nuclear competition**
 - U.S. efforts to de-emphasize the role of nuclear weapons has been a uniquely American trend
 - Balancing the competing imperatives of “sufficiency” and “superiority” will grow more difficult as Russia and China continue to modernize and expand their own arsenals
 - The shift to a global deterrence outlook makes it more difficult to tailor policy responses to specific threats without provoking unwanted third party reactions

- **Russian decision makers have reliably prioritized superiority over sufficiency as a strategic objective**
 - Superior nuclear forces guarantee both strategic stability and security more effectively than efforts to reinforce mutual vulnerability
 - These attitudes mean that Russian leaders rarely perceive adherence to arms control agreements to be a stronger guarantor of Russian security than enhanced nuclear capabilities
- **Russia's post-Cold War elevation of non-strategic nuclear weapons within its nuclear strategy is the country's most consequential change in its nuclear strategy**
 - The historic gulf between Russia's declaratory policy, sabre rattling, and genuine strategic calculus complicates efforts to understand the role that NSNWs might play in Russian plans
 - It is probable that NSNWs play an outsized role in Russia's near- and medium-term strategy to regain regional dominance and recover its great power status

- **Since China conducted its first nuclear test in 1964, Beijing has had a remarkably consistent defensive nuclear policy and strategy**
 - No First Use, opposition to arms races, and a “lean and effective” force structure are enduring themes
- **Yet internal and external pressures to break from the past have multiplied in quantity and intensity**
 - Internal pressures include inter-service rivalries and the growth of bureaucratic actors
 - External pressures include U.S. precision strike and missile defense, and India growing force structure
- **Worries about U.S. intentions and capabilities are real, but other less visible domestic motivations may be at work**
 - Consider how Chinese leaders may leverage nuclear capabilities to proactively shape China’s external environment
- **When taken together, these factors strongly indicates Chinese will develop a more responsive posture and capability**

What does it mean going forward?

- **The shape of strategic interaction is not straightforward, and strategic interaction will likely grow more complicated in the coming decades, not less**
- **Coming decades could strain the tradition of nuclear non-use**
- **Achieving a multilateral arms control regime under these conditions will be an enormous challenge**
 - It is unlikely that any two countries would pursue a new arms limitation agreement that fails to constrain the third
 - New technologies affecting nuclear balances pose major verification challenges, adding additional layers of complexity
- **Given the prognosis for future bilateral arms control, it is necessary to consider options for strengthening deterrence and stability in a comparatively unconstrained strategic environment.**

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Thank you.

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