

## The Mayhem Brothers: Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran

By

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Central to the international order, which was created out of the destruction wrought in World War II, is deterrence. It is derived from the collective power found in economic, political, and military capability to cause restraint in the minds of bad actors who would otherwise engage in bad behavior.

Today, international order is breaking down. Essays by [Walter Russell Mead](#), [Victor Davis Hanson](#), and [Nadya Schadow](#), for example, detail this breakdown, and all reference China and Russia as top culprits. The October 2023 [report](#) from the Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States likewise weighs in with an acute warning that China, Russia, North Korea (DPRK), (and soon Iran) are now in the business of using nuclear weapons as a coercive tool with which to secure their objectives—raising the danger of nuclear conflict to the highest level since the 1945 dawn of the nuclear age.

American nuclear [deterrent strategy](#) is part of the international order and prevented direct military conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States. Throughout the Cold War, American extended deterrence over NATO and allies in the Pacific prevented, respectively, a Soviet invasion of Western Europe and a repeat of the DPRK invasion of the Republic of Korea (ROK).

During the Cold War's nearly five-decade-long struggle, the US faced one nuclear-armed peer adversary. In 2022 as the head of US Strategic Command [warned](#), the US will soon face not one but two nuclear-armed peer competitors and do so for the first time in its history.

The unique dangers of this environment are reflected by the manner with which Russia and China see deterrence. Their goals are not designed to prevent war, but to embolden both nations to successfully engage in aggression—such as against Ukraine and potentially against Taiwan. Their nuclear capability acts as an umbrella under which they succeed in preventing the United States from defending the rules-based order. If the US stands down, military aggression succeeds and is not deterred.

Today's emerging strategic environment contains a change that is not fully appreciated. American conventional military superiority, for example, is believed to help guarantee American and allied security. The US kicked Iraq out of Kuwait in 1991, defeated the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 and Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, and decimated ISIS a decade later—all through conventional military superiority. American strategy, then and now, relies on superior technology and precision weapons, all backed by the nation's nuclear arsenal.

However, when President Yeltsin [decreed in](#) April 1999 that the Russian military would develop highly accurate and very low-yield battlefield nuclear weapons, [he set Russia on a path](#) that now enables President Vladimir Putin to dominate warfare in Europe. China is in the process of [adopting a strategy](#) that threatens to introduce limited nuclear strikes into the conventional battlefield mix—"escalate to win"—leading the former commander of US Strategic Command to conclude that American conventional battlefield superiority ["cannot hold."](#)

Without a robust and credible nuclear deterrent to restrain adversaries from using nuclear weapons, American plans to prevail on the conventional battlefield will no longer hold. And

equally invalid is the Global Zero [assumption](#) that the US can prevail on the battlefield if the United States relies on conventional forces in a conflict that goes nuclear.

What then can the US make of the push by to rewrite the rules of international behavior? That is, what should Americans make of what Russia describes as the [unfair unipolar](#) agenda and Iran describes as the great [“global arrogance”](#)? Americans should certainly worry that the nation is unprepared for the years ahead.

China’s growing nuclear arsenal emboldens President Xi Jinping to run roughshod over [the South China Sea](#) and its [Philippine](#) neighbors—flying military aircraft and steaming naval vessels [recklessly](#) in international waters. China may also be assisting Venezuela’s effort to grab oil-rich areas of [Guyana](#). This is all taking place at a time when China is seeking bases on the Persian Gulf and near Gibraltar.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and regular threats to use nuclear weapons need little description. This is at a time when Russia maintains at least a 10 to 1 advantage in tactical nuclear weapons over the United States.

[Nearly nuclear-armed](#) Iran, partially under the protection of Moscow and Beijing, wages war through Hamas, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, and the Houthis. The Iranians and their allies are killing thousands, [grabbing](#) commercial vessels in the Persian Gulf, assassinating regime opponents, and ransoming hostages. The [American response](#) is, at best, muted.

North Korea recklessly and with impunity [fires](#) hundreds of missiles over Japanese and ROK territory and manages a [vast international criminal complex](#) of drug running, human trafficking, and weapons transfers, all while imprisoning millions of its own people in the world’s worse gulag. This is all made possible by China. It is [through Chinese banks](#) that North Korea avoids sanctions and finances its ongoing mayhem, including its nuclear program.

In short, the United States faces a daunting challenge that it must manage if the American-led international order has any hope of surviving the growing challenges the mayhem brothers present. The time to act is now.