

## The Operational Logic of Nuclear Weapons Use by an Adversary

By

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The employment of nuclear weapons by adversaries of the United States is, logically, not only a possibility, but a likelihood. Americans want deterrence to hold. Decision-makers are obligated to seek ways to sustain stability without the employment of strategic weapons. Yet, malevolent powers are a fact and given the presence of nuclear weapons, it is only prudent that American decision-makers think as creatively as any adversary about how nuclear weapons may be employed by those who are hostile to peace and the interests of the United States and its allies.

It is straightforward to see that beyond the deterrent or “last defense” aspect of possessing a nuclear arsenal these weapons are one tool among other strategic options. It is the duty of a military planner to plan for outcomes with the instruments that adversaries possess, however distasteful those weapons (nuclear weapons). It does not require reams of classified intelligence nor deep policy experience to recognize the appeal of a nuclear weapon to achieve winning outcomes. Even the technical specifications of specific weapons, their delivery method, and the effects achieved by their use can take a second seat to the appealing utility of their use in the mind of a foe.

A brief look at two kinds of adversary is instructive. First, there is the ideologically driven actor who seeks to remake the international state system and its associated norms, behaviors, and morals. Second, there is a leader or state-party that seeks to climb politically, economically, and cultural-informationally within the extant Western-built international system.

For the antagonist motivated by an ideology whose primary ambition is the destruction of contemporary norms or who desires to trigger a millenarian kind of resorting, whether secular or religious, a nuclear weapon heralds to fellow adherents the breaking of the status quo by the offer of a new, radicalized future. To achieve such an outcome a nuclear weapon targeted at a populated area, especially a political capital or major religious center, would offer the radical damage and chaos sought.

The size of the nuclear device need not be large. The purpose is to tear down a targeted society by inflicting as many casualties as possible and to wreck the symbols and sinews that symbolized the victims’ way of life and station in the international order. There is no doubt many terrorist organizations that would leap at the chance to exploit a nuclear weapon in this fashion. And there are state challengers who no doubt see the same appeal. The only risk to such leaders is the repercussions they may face. But to the radicalized actor, the repercussions are just another aspect of martyrdom—religious or ideological. One imagines that such a scenario has not occurred more due to lack of opportunity than to a lack of desire.

A nuclear weapon fired by a state’s armed forces is even more likely to occur if for no other reason than governments possess the world’s nuclear arms. State arsenals and their delivery systems continue to proliferate in both number and capability, thus expanding the scenarios for weapons use. The danger of the “mutually assured destruction” problem that occupied many deterrence thinkers during the Cold War is still a threat, but the logic of employment success points towards battlefield use.

A nuclear weapon that struck a key military target could decisively alter the course of a battle and a campaign by inflicting damage at a scale that conventional weapons can only achieve over much longer periods of time. The historical record informs us that winning quickly is a tremendous advantage for an adversary.

The one sure way to suffer a military defeat by the US and any American-led coalition is to wait for American joint and combined forces to deploy, assemble, and wage a maneuver campaign. If the Normandy landings of World War II are too distant, then the overwhelming success of the United States in the Gulf War (1991) is a more recent reminder of the fate of any adversary that simply waits for the United States to come to them. The war in Ukraine is an ongoing example of the grinding, almost interminable, result of fighting when early wins do not occur. Despite the many technological advances that modern armed forces possess, speed in multi-domain operations is still decisive, and elusive.

America's adversaries are certainly aware that speed matters. Alongside the imperatives of increasing range and the convergence of lethal effects, the rapid way a nuclear weapon can alter battlefield geometries and the correlation of forces gives so called "battlefield nukes" tremendous appeal. There are many creative ways to benefit from a nuclear weapon, not just on land, but also in the maritime and air domains. Sealing an area off from maneuver; denying communications, targeting, and surveillance systems; destroying logistical nodes and stockpiles; damaging vehicles and equipment; and inflicting casualties on the adversary are all additional ways nuclear weapons are useful. This is not to mention the escalatory advantage of skipping rungs on the escalation ladder, thereby intimidating America's partners and neutral states—foreclosing incremental steps from American policymakers.

Simply put, nuclear weapons present an urgent operational challenge to the joint force of the United States and its military partners. Whether the scenario is in Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, or globally, the United States must imagine that adversaries are thinking about, and at least gaming if not planning, nuclear weapons use to achieve their objectives.

Americans must admit that there is a problem and stop hiding behind sincere wishes that nuclear weapons are never used again. The logic of their employment demands that the nation act on the facts as they are. Nuclear weapons are present. They are plentiful. It is also almost certainly only a matter of time before an adversary exploits American reticence to prepare for their use. It is time to prepare for that day.

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