

The State Department Assessment of American Nuclear Deterrence

By

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In October 2023 the International Security Advisory Board (ISAB) of the US Department of State (DoS) issued the “[Report on Deterrence in a World of Nuclear Multipolarity](#).” The ISAB report was overshadowed by the report from the bipartisan Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United State’s issuing their final report [America’s Strategic Posture](#). Both of these reports are responses to the [2022 National Defense Strategy](#) (inclusive of the *Nuclear Posture Review*) issued by the Department of Defense (DoD).

The ISAB report was also issued by a bipartisan group, comprised of strategic policy experts from both professional and academic backgrounds. The ISAB report recommends a DoS-led response in several areas of nuclear deterrence strategy and is unsurprisingly heavily focused on diplomacy and arms control efforts. The ISAB report also unsurprisingly continues the DoS clarion call for lowering the overall American inventory of nuclear weapons while recognizing the increased nuclear threat created in a multipolar environment. The ISAB report contains little that would be unexpected in such reports, but a few problematic items emerge in the report.

The ISAB report notes that the nature of deterrence is unchanged by moving into a multipolar environment. The report concludes:

Fundamentally, deterrence is about convincing an actor not to take specific actions for fear of not achieving its planned objective, or of being forced to absorb unacceptable levels of punishment. Deterrence by both denial and punishment relies on the capability to deliver an effective response to an enemy action, the credibility of threats to follow through with that response, and effective communication of the promised response. Extended deterrence threatens retaliation on behalf of allies and partners, and assurance signals US commitment to their security.

The argument offered is that deterrence is about convincing an actor not to act because they will fail or suffer unacceptable levels of punishment.

The DoS is the primary diplomacy arm of the US government. The DoS’ role is, therefore, to pass along the correct information regarding American policy, to assure both competitors and allies alike of American capability, and to take a leading role in developing foreign policy that forces our nuclear competitors to choose between costly arms build-ups and more peaceful paths to achieving international respect for their legitimate interests. A report that advocates only for arms control and ignores the role of assuring denial is problematic.

Assuring allies of American capabilities and intentions is good. Better is assuring them of American understanding of enduring mutual interests and how the United States can work with them to strengthen deterrence. The United States must convince its allies that working together makes the world safer. A Center for Strategic and International

Studies (CSIS) report issued in May 2023 offers, as a conclusion, that the United States must commit to signaling a bipartisan commitment to alliances as this may “[assuage concerns about abandonment](#).”

One key element of assurance and alliance management is showing that the US is a responsible nuclear actor committed to nuclear arms control. Commitment to alliances and nuclear arms control is an important element in alliance management. But this commitment also requires the US to show it will respond quickly to put pressure on adversaries and competitors who engage in irresponsible behaviors. Commitment to nuclear arms control is how the DoS operationalizes “taking steps to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our strategy as well as the risks of nuclear war, while also ensuring our strategic deterrent remains safe, secure, and effective, and our extended deterrence commitments remain strong and credible.”

The biggest role that the DoS should play is in assurance of allies. [South Korea](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#) are expressing interest in acquiring nuclear arms and uranium enrichment. The DoS must lead the way in assuring these key allies of American commitment to their security from opponents such as North Korea and Iran. The DoS will need not just to assure these governments of American support, but other populations as well. “Frequent polls show a strong majority of South Koreans—between [70 and 80 percent in some surveys](#)—support their nation acquiring atomic weapons or urging Washington to bring back the tactical nuclear weapons it removed from the South in the early 1990s.”

The ISAB report states that making extended deterrence and assurance credible requires making allies understand the “[indispensable nature of our co-dependencies](#).” What are the economic and cultural dependencies of South Korea or Saudi Arabia and the US? Additionally, the ISAB report says that assurance strategies must be tailored to the allies’ situation and requires continuous efforts in coordinating and consultation. The report points to intelligence and information sharing with European allies before Russia invaded Ukraine as an example of how the US can effectively create assurance among key allies.

The ISAB report states, “It is also [far from certain that the United States or our allies have a full and accurate picture](#) of what PRC and Russian leaders value, and how to effectively influence their nuclear and strategic decision-making.” A major responsibility of the DoS is collecting information about other governments and their populations. In fact, the United States does understand Russian and Chinese leaders’ goals and objectives. Reports issued by the [German Institute for International and Security Affairs](#) (2022) and the [Federation of American Scientists](#) (2022) both outline Russian nuclear doctrine in detail. [Reports](#) such as “Understanding the Risks and Realities of China’s Nuclear Forces” also exist. A large volume of research exists concerning the very subjects that the ISAB says we do not know much about.

The DoS is the largest information-gathering agency in the US government, so how do they not know or understand Chinese and Russian nuclear doctrine or what Russian and Chinese leaders value? If the ISAB report wants to make the point that DoS reports come up short in the area of understanding foreign leaders’ goals and foreign governments’ nuclear postures, the ISAB report should advocate for increased information analysis and better sharing of information between US government agencies.

The DoS needs to perform their most fundamental duty of interpreting the actions and assessing the intentions of the most important American adversaries by clearly and succinctly stating the nation's competitor's broad expectations for the mid-term. For instance, the report misses the opportunity to urge the DoS to work on assuring allies in Asia that the United States understands the strategic goals of China and understands how these goals negatively impact allies. The DoS needs to assure allies that working together is the best way to prevent China from acting hegemonically and threatening their security. The United States needs to make sure that allies in Europe know America understands their concerns about Russian aggression and engages with them in countering Putin's behavior.

Both Russia and China are improving the quality and quantity of their nuclear forces to improve coercive nuclear threats. The DoS needs to take a leading role in assuring allies that the US understands this threat to their security. If the DoS is interested in arms control, it must figure out what pressures are needed to bring Russia and China to the arms control table.

Had the ISAB report spent more time focusing on denial of success and assurance strategies for the DoS, perhaps this report would not have been as overlooked. Instead, the report came up short. What the report really needed to offer was suggestions for ways to properly engage allies in joint efforts to deny success to nuclear challenges. The report also undermined effective assurance by intimating that the US government, represented by the DoS, does not understand the goals and strategies of nuclear competitors. In short, the ISAB report was largely a failure and will rightly find a home in the ash heap of history.

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