

## The US Military's Unwinnable War

By

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The post–Cold War period's absence of nuclear competition led the American military to believe that the only way to win a nuclear war was to never fight one. This belief is challenged by Russia and China who do not share that view. For both nations, nuclear weapons are tools that can affect the outcome of battle and do not necessarily lead to Armageddon.

In the United States, however, participants in recent wargames where nuclear weapons enter the scenario demonstrate an unwillingness to employ them, even after facing a limited nuclear attack. This results from either shortsightedness or a lack of understanding of strategic warfighting.

The US does not seek a full-scale nuclear exchange. Yet it is critically important that the civilian and military leadership consider all possible scenarios. It is imperative to impress upon warfighters and their political leaders that, while unwanted, nuclear exchange may be a reality the United States faces.

The expanding arsenals of China and Russia deploy advanced and varied delivery vehicles and warheads and are a direct challenge to the American-led international order. The move from a bi-polar to a tri-polar world is driving instability and creating new challenges that the US military is not prepared to face.

If military commanders fail to understand the critical role of nuclear weapons or lack a willingness to use them, when necessary, national security objectives will not be met. China and Russia see their nuclear weapons as an extension of their warfighting capabilities and are prepared to use them.

American leaders cannot wish away events unfolding around them. The Congressional Research Service's (CRS) report on the *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) identified the contradiction in direction and understanding of American warfighters. According to the report, "The NPR reiterates a January 2022 statement by China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States stipulating that 'a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought,' and that 'nuclear weapons should serve defensive purposes, deter aggression, and prevent war.'"

Later the report explains, "The NPR lists three roles for nuclear weapons: deter strategic attacks, assure allies and partners, and achieve US objectives if deterrence fails." This is indeed the cornerstone of national policy and ensures the United States effectively operates under a non-first-strike policy.

However, the military seems to interpret this message to mean that the United States will never fight a nuclear conflict and does not need to plan to fight one. A clear example of this is the fact that no American president has participated in a US Strategic Command national nuclear exercise since President George W. Bush. Warfighters and planners from Air Force Global Strike Command and US Strategic Command who do, in fact, plan and think about possible nuclear options every day, may disagree because they do think about nuclear conflict. Unfortunately, these issues are rarely discussed or examined by leaders within the major commands or combatant commands that are primarily tasked with a conventional mission.

The focus on conventional warfare pushes aside any discussion of conventional-nuclear integration in a future fight. Too often, a response becomes focused on a comparable

conventional response instead of all available options for the president to choose from. This becomes self-limiting even after nuclear attacks on the United States or its forces abroad. Limiting the response to adversary's nuclear attack to conventional options very likely has the opposite of the desired effect.

It is time to refocus attention on how to fight and win a conflict where nuclear weapons are employed and teach warfighters that deterrence holds when Russia and China understand the United States can and will fight and win a nuclear conflict. The military, unfortunately, has experienced a precipitous decline in nuclear expertise and strategic thought.

The future focus should be to increase the level of understanding across all levels within the total force. This is critical as the nation presses into uncharted waters in a new nuclear world. Recent developments and growth among the Russian, Chinese, and even North Korean nuclear arsenals create serious concern because none of these adversaries are only building strategic nuclear weapons for the sole purpose of strategic deterrence. They are building low-yield, shorter range, tactical nuclear weapons that serve no purpose other than battlefield use.

## **Time for a New Deterrence Theory?**

Three significant deterrence thinkers play an outsized role in shaping theory and policy. Thomas Schelling, Herman Kahn, and, in the post-Cold War era, Keith Payne were, and remain, influential in driving national policy. Deterrence theory served the nation for many years and ensured that the Soviet Union understood the ultimate risk of nuclear conflict with the United States.

The tri-polar world emerging may change the probability for limited nuclear exchange—increasing the threat by emboldening Russia and China to challenge the United States. The smaller nuclear-armed states, when added to the mix, create additional volatility. Understanding that an adversary may believe they can overcome an overmatch of their conventional forces with the use of low-yield weapons is a new factor in the deterrence equation. While keeping any fight conventional is clearly the United States' preference, Russia and China are demonstrating that they intend to use nuclear weapons to backstop conventional forces.

It is worth keeping in mind that any fight between the United States and Russia or China will take place in their backyard. This means the asymmetry of interests at stake may leave either adversary to see nuclear weapons as a logical option to ensure victory.

This change should drive new thought and deeper understanding of nuclear strategy and deterrence. Political and military leaders will have to rethink the time-tested deterrence methods of the past and see how they may or may not apply with this new and challenging nuclear world. Increasing nuclear expertise and strategic exploration will open new and varied thoughts on how to apply an updated and possibly more flexible nuclear strategy.

## **Conclusion**

Political and military leaders must understand the dynamics discussed and ensure warfighters understand the battlefield on which they may fight. They must articulate the difference between nuclear deterrence and nuclear warfighting and mentor leaders on its critical importance.

Warfighters need to organize, train, and equip to fight and win in conflicts that include nuclear weapons use. Future leaders cannot fear nuclear weapons and must understand how to



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fight after their employment by either side. This may very well be the difference between American victory or defeat.

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