

## Strategic Sufficiency Is Not Enough

By

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In an August 23, 2024, [webinar](#), Col. (Ret.) Curtis McGiffin and Adam Lowther, PhD, introduced the concept of “dynamic parity” as nuclear strategy for the next presidential administration. Their approach calls for fielding a nuclear deterrent force structure that is symmetrical in types of delivery platforms and numbers of weapons to the collective nuclear arsenals of China, North Korea, and Russia.

During the webinar, [Lowther](#) briefly touched on the alternative and numerically weaker concept of sizing America’s nuclear triad based upon “strategic sufficiency.” This approach would mean deploying just enough nuclear warheads to launch a counterforce first strike on the deployed nuclear delivery platforms of America’s adversaries. For example, it may be possible to strike eight nuclear-capable bombers, which carry 12 nuclear weapons each, with one intercontinental ballistic missile. Thus, the ratio, in this case, would be one American nuclear weapon for 96 (8x12) adversary nuclear weapons. One is strategically sufficient for 96.

Unfortunately, there are a number of challenges with strategic sufficiency as a concept. Let me explain.

It should first be noted that nuclear weapons do not exercise effective deterrence simply by their existence in the American inventory, nor merely by matching friendly weapons to enemy weapons on paper. American planners need to go much further.

The US needs to base its nuclear deterrent [arsenal size](#), and its [nuclear deterrent strategy](#) and [posture](#), on a realistic evaluation of possible scenarios. Adversaries will certainly perform such [risk analysis](#). If America’s nuclear readiness falls short, in their minds, adversaries may seek openings to attack.

The American nuclear deterrent needs to include [survivable](#), [damage-limiting](#), and [damage-equalizing](#) second-strike capabilities, against both numerous enemy armed forces and extensive enemy [countervailing \(political control\) assets](#). The US should also have the ability to restore intra-war deterrence and to have leverage during post-war armistice talks, a significant further number of warheads and delivery platforms deployed or in [secure stockpiles](#).

### Strategic Sufficiency

In the webinar, Lowther offers as an illustrative case where China’s new missile field deploys three hundred intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), each with eight warheads. In this case, strategic sufficiency may require fifty ICBMs to hold the three hundred Chinese missiles at risk. Dynamic parity, in contrast, would dictate the US should field an arsenal closer in size to China’s, which in this limited example would be 300 missiles with a similar number of warheads.

Admittedly, strategic sufficiency is attractive for a country with a smaller arsenal, but it is also attractive to an adversary with a larger arsenal. The adversary may see strategic sufficiency as a strategy of weakness and built on a lack of will. The approach has a number of flawed assumptions.

*First*, strategic sufficiency assumes that all American nuclear weapons will succeed in striking their targets and destroying them. While American delivery systems are [reliable](#), they have no experience under the harsh conditions of a nuclear conflict. Some weapons may [malfunction](#), others will be destroyed in a first strike, weapons may not hit their target, and some will be destroyed by [enemy defensive systems](#).

This is why targeteers often allocate two or more warheads to one enemy silo, for example, which is [generally considered necessary](#) for a successful counterforce strike. On this count alone, strategic sufficiency underestimates sizing requirements.

*Second*, a more serious flaw is the assumption that the United States can always launch a counterforce first strike. An adversary's remaining weapons will still be in their silos, or in their hangars, when American warheads arrive. This is a foolish assumption. The US is unlikely to initiate a first strike, which means it must be able to absorb a strike and respond. Strategic sufficiency does not allow that.

Making the situation much worse is that China, North Korea, and Russia possess nuclear delivery platforms that are mobile, making them far harder to strike. [Ballistic missile submarines](#) at sea are, for now, hard to strike. [Mobile ICBM launchers](#) move positions constantly, and might also be camouflaged, for example, while inside [shipping containers](#) or [railroad freight cars](#). Strategic bombers can maintain [airborne alert](#). Other ICBM launchers can be hidden inside [caves](#) or [tunnels](#) until the moment they are ready to fire.

*Third*, the US is highly unlikely, as said above, to employ nuclear weapons in a first strike. A number of wargames played by the military and senior government leaders only underscores the cultural aversion to nuclear weapons use. This means the homeland is likely to face a nuclear attack before the president responds with whatever nuclear weapons remain. If the American arsenal is already smaller than the arsenals of adversaries, the US becomes an inviting target for a second strike or a strike from a different adversary.

*Fourth*, strategic sufficiency gives allies the impression that the United States has too few weapons to defend North America and both Europe and Asia. This belief may lead allies to seek their own arsenals.

As McGiffin and Lowther argue, dynamic parity is designed to address these specific challenges. China, North Korea, and Russia are very clearly looking to topple the American-led international system. Should the United States seek to build an arsenal that is too small to effectively deter the Authoritarian triad discussed here, not only will Americans suffer, but so will the free world. Moving from 5 percent of the defense budget to modernize the current arsenal to 8 to 10 percent of the defense budget to build the arsenal needed is not in the "too hard to do" category. It is time to recognize that strategic sufficiency is not sufficient.

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