

Reciprocity in Deterrence, Not Just Trade

By
Joseph H. Lyons

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On December 23, 2025, the Pentagon released its annual [2025 China Military Power Report](#) to Congress—a reminder that America is still trying to deter tomorrow with yesterday’s force. The report assesses China’s stockpile stayed in the low 600s through 2024 but remains on track to have over 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030, while Russia continues to brandish tactical (non-strategic) nuclear weapons to shield conventional aggression. Yet U.S. deterrence planning still assumes that sufficiency against one peer will scale to two.

Within the bomber community, personnel are trained to operate and make decisions amid uncertainty. Deterrence cannot rely on idealized scenarios. Washington, however, continues to plan and budget as if deterring one peer at a time is adequate to maintain peace. Since the Nixon administration elevated “strategic sufficiency,” the U.S. has preferred a survivable second-strike posture over matching adversary numbers, even as U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM) Commander Adm. Charles Richard [testified in 2020](#), “We do not seek parity.”

That posture of sufficiency made sense when the U.S. faced one major nuclear superpower at a time. It makes less sense when the U.S. must deter two nuclear peers, potentially in overlapping crises while also accounting for a third in North Korea. The [2023 Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States](#) warned the nation is “ill-prepared” for a future where China and Russia can coordinate, or opportunistically exploit dual crises.

The issue is not that U.S. modernization appears timid on paper. Instead, it is optimized for a single adversary. A survivable second strike against one major nuclear opponent is not enough as a credible deterrent against two, especially if one adversary believes the other will absorb U.S. attention. Deterrence developed for one enemy breaks down when facing multiple opponents.

Modernization is also colliding with the same budget dysfunction that has battered conventional readiness for years. Continuing resolutions and shutdown threats do not just delay programs; they advertise doubt about U.S. resolve. In deterrence, doubt about political will can be just as harmful as uncertainty about capability.

Enter the logic of reciprocity. The White House’s February 2025 memorandum on [Reciprocal Trade and Tariffs](#) argues that reciprocal measures are not punishment; they are a way to restore balance when competitors exploit unequal terms. Reciprocity is a framework for fairness, and fairness is what makes commitments believable.

Deterrence needs [a similar framework](#). Strategic fairness demands a posture calibrated to the combined capabilities of the adversaries the U.S. must deter, not an accounting trick that treats them sequentially. [Dynamic Parity](#) offers that calibration: match the aggregate nuclear threat, go no further, and use that ceiling to avoid both arms racing and strategic vulnerability.

Dynamic Parity is “parity without superiority.” It rebuffs a race for numerical dominance, but it also rejects minimalist postures that assume an adversary will politely wait its turn. It restores equilibrium as the foundation of deterrence in a multipolar era.

Skeptics argue that “parity” invites an arms race or abandons arms control. Dynamic Parity does the opposite: it clearly separates what is required from what is excess, with the numerical arsenals determined by the adversary and then matched by America. This establishes a disciplined standard for force planning. That discipline also enhances the U.S. position in future risk-reduction negotiations by making the baseline requirements explicit instead of improvised during a crisis.

Strategy, however, is not self-executing. If Dynamic Parity is the strategic logic, Congress needs a budgeting structure that can deliver it. The National Sea-Based Deterrence Fund provided the Columbia-class ballistic missile submarine program with authorities that support long-lead procurement and multiyear contracting.

Congress should implement that approach throughout the nuclear enterprise via a National Strategic Deterrence Fund. The goal is not to escape oversight; it is to safeguard the core of deterrence from annual budget brinkmanship and start-stop inefficiency. If the fund is protected as non-discretionary spending with multiyear authority, modernization timelines become actual plans rather than mere hopes.

Here is what that would look like in practice:

- Direct the next Nuclear Posture Review to adopt a concurrency standard and use Dynamic Parity as the force-planning logic.
- Create a National Strategic Deterrence Fund with multi-year and long-lead authorities across delivery systems, warheads, infrastructure, and nuclear command, control, and communications.
- Require annual execution reporting, i.e., schedule, industrial capacity, and funding stability, so Congress can measure delivery and not intent.

This is about credibility, not bookkeeping. The State Department’s International Security Advisory Board warned in 2023 that extended deterrence hinges on the perception of sustained capability and resolve. Allies and adversaries do not parse budget documents; they watch whether the U.S. executes what it promises.

Execution is the signal. Russia’s 2024 Fundamentals of Nuclear Deterrence establishes clear redlines for potential nuclear use while deliberately preserving threshold ambiguity. China is building the force structure for nuclear coercion alongside conventional power projection. If Washington cannot modernize on schedule and at scale, because budgets lurch from continuing resolution to shutdown threat, adversaries will read that as strategic hesitation, not fiscal noise.

Reciprocity works only when it is enforced. In nuclear deterrence, enforcement means a posture designed for concurrency and a budget mechanism that delivers it. Dynamic Parity provides the

standard; a National Strategic Deterrence Fund provides the spine. In a multipolar nuclear world, balance against combined nuclear threats is not a theory, it is the price of credibility.

Reciprocity works only when it is enforced. In nuclear deterrence, enforcement requires a posture built for strategic nuclear concurrency and a budget mechanism to deliver it. Dynamic Parity defines intent and posture; a National Strategic Deterrence Fund makes it achievable and plausible. In a multipolar nuclear world, balancing against combined nuclear threats is not theoretical, it is the price of credibility.

Joseph H. Lyons is a career bomber aviator and a doctoral candidate at Missouri State University's School of Defense and Strategic Studies. The opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Air Force, the Department of Defense, any other U.S. government agency, or Missouri State University.