The Future of Conventional Deterrence: Strategies for Great Power Competition

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Abstract[1]

The return of great power competition as described in the *2018 National Defense Strategy* suggests the need to reconsider the theories and strategies of Cold War conventional deterrence in a world of near-peer competition. The seminal questions become: Does deterrence have a future, and do the tenets of Cold War theory and practice apply to the era of emerging strategic competition? Indeed, deterrence, particularly conventional deterrence, does have a future. However, distinct strategic and force planning implications exist for adapting conventional deterrence to meet the challenges of great power competition.

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Fundamental changes are occurring in the international political system and the future US role in that system. The declared policies enunciated in the recently published national security and defense strategies describe an environment in which global disorder, revisionist ambition, coercive diplomacy, and interstate strategic competition will provide plenty of opportunity and motivation for armed conflict while making threats and planning contingencies difficult to foresee. And although democracies may be unlikely to go to war against each other, the rise of illiberal democratic states, as seen in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, promotes neither domestic nor international tranquility. Within the current environment, the United States retains vital interests, and, despite

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some isolationist sentiments, it will remain fully engaged in pursuit of its foreign policy objectives while deterring threats to its interests.[2]

In deliberating on the role of conventional deterrence within US declared military strategy, the question becomes: Does deterrence have a future? Can we apply the tenets of Cold War theory and practice to this emerging strategic competition? There are some initial issues we must deal with in thinking about the future of conventional deterrence. Indeed, deterrence, particularly conventional deterrence, does have a future—but one very different from the way it was conceptualized and applied during the Cold War. The *2018 National Defense Strategy* states that "the central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the re-emergence of long-term, strategic competition. . . . China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations' economic, diplomatic, and security decisions."[3] This return of great power competition suggests the need to revisit the theories and strategies of Cold War conventional deterrence to this world of near-peer competition. Such an examination requires us to separate conventional deterrence from its Cold War past, when conventional threats of denial and reprisal were coupled with, if not subordinated to, those of theater or strategic nuclear weapons. This article briefly reviews the theoretical foundations of conventional deterrence and questions the application of that theory to US defense policy in consideration of a changed international political system and newly declared strategies. It then suggests the strategic and force planning implications of adapting conventional deterrence to meet the challenges of great power competition.

The Theoretical Foundations of Conventional Deterrence

As the United States encounters near-peer competitors in pursuing its global interests, the theories of deterrence developed as a guide to policy during the Cold War years require reexamination. In addition to the perceived success of those policies, deterrence goes to the heart of the central questions of international politics: How is military force applied to achieve political ends? In wielding the military instrument to influence other actors, how can wars be avoided? Although we have seen neither the end of history's dialectical struggles nor the end of war, it is realistic as well as idealistic to continue to work toward an international system in which armed conflict becomes less probable, less destructive,

and less costly. And although some universal concept of deterrence to render war obsolete—that all parties might calculate negative cost benefit to the use of military force—may appear utopian at the end of mankind's bloodiest century and into the first decades of its successor century, deterrence will remain an important way to exert US influence in the world and to dissuade would-be aggressors from challenging US objectives.

To think about applying concepts of deterrence, we need to define some terms and examine the formulation of classic deterrence theory as it has been applied to conventional deterrence. In its most general form, deterrence is simply the persuasion of one's opponent that the costs and risks of a given course of action outweigh its benefits. The classic focus of deterrence theory has been on creating military capability to prevent taking aggressive military action. Thus, deterrence, for our purpose here, can be defined as "the manipulation of an adversary's estimation of the cost/benefit calculation of taking a given action . . . thereby convincing the opponent to avoid taking that action."[4]

Is this formulation of deterrence, fashioned in the nuclear age, still relevant? There was, as George Quester has described, deterrence before Hiroshima, but conventional deterrence theory as we have most recently known it was strongly influenced by the bipolar, nuclear, and conventional confrontation centered on US-USSR relationships during the Cold War.[5] What can we learn from classic deterrence theory that applies to concepts of conventional deterrence in a very different world? To answer that question, we need to remind ourselves of some of the requirements, components, and critiques of deterrence theory.[6]

Components of Deterrence

The components of deterrence normally include capability, credibility, and communication.

Capability. Capability refers to the acquisition and deployment of military forces able to carry out plausible military threats to retaliate in an unacceptable manner or to deny the enemy's objectives in an unaffordable way.

Credibility. As the declared intent and believable resolve to protect a given interest, credibility can be reinforced by force structure, proximity, and power-projection capability and must be evaluated through comparative analysis.

Communication. Communication involves relaying to the potential aggressor, in an unmistakable manner, the capability and will to carry out the deterrent threat.

These three requirements, formulated principally at the level of strategic nuclear deterrence, have also been applied to deterrent confrontations involving conventional forces. Moreover, in addition to these requirements, a considerable amount of theoretical work has been done to define and differentiate among the ways in which that theory might be applied.[7] For example, we realize there is a difference between immediate deterrence (a potential attacker is actively considering the use of force, and the deterrer, aware of that threat, issues a counterthreat to deter) and general deterrence (the possibility of armed conflict is present, but the potential attacker is not actively considering the use of force to threaten the interests of the deterrer).

We understand the difference between basic (or Type I) deterrence (we are eyeball-to-eyeball with the adversary threatening our national survival) and extended (Type II) deterrence (in which the objective is to defend allies and friends from attack and is inherently less credible).

We also know the difference between strategic nuclear deterrence (the level at which the majority of the theorizing has occurred, at which the use of intercontinental thermonuclear weapons has been threatened, and at which deterrence is usually thought to have held) and conventional deterrence (the level that has received considerably less attention, at which, by definition, threats to use unconventional weapons of mass destruction are excluded and at which deterrence, arguably, has been prone to fail). An important distinction drawn during Cold War formulations of this dichotomy is subject to considerable question in the present environment. During the Cold War, the evolution of a "stalwart conventional defense" in Central Europe meant that the US and its allies could lessen their reliance on nuclear weapons to deter conflict. Thus, nuclear weapons became the instrument of deterrence by punishment, while conventional forces shouldered the burden of deterrence by denial. Whether that distinction should continue to hold in an era of long-term great power strategic competition is worthy of consideration.

Criticisms of Deterrence Theory

In either case, however, and despite the richness of this body of theory, classic formulations of deterrence, even in the purest of strategic

nuclear deterrence situations, have encountered considerable criticism.[8] The most significant claims follow.

Uncertainty. Although it can be argued that nuclear deterrence worked during the Cold War, we do not know that for sure. It is very difficult to prove deterrent successes because that would require showing why an event did not occur. There is inherent uncertainty about the antecedent causes one cites in such cases, as other plausible factors can always be suggested.

Rationality. The emphasis on the rational calculation of the cost of a retaliatory response has also been faulted in deterrence theory. Decision makers who start wars may pay more attention to their own domestic needs or to other internal or external factors than to the military capabilities or options of their possible adversaries or to the potential severity of the outcome.

Stability. Deterrence theory has also been criticized for contributing to a spiral of conflict. The threat of retaliation may be so great and so destabilizing that, in times of crisis, it becomes in the aggressor's interest to preempt or escalate.

Failure. Deterrence at conventional levels has tended to "fail." However, proponents of conventional deterrence argue that the use of conventional military force does not necessarily equate to a failure of doctrine. Deterrence failures are not inconsistent with deterrence theory, provided they can be attributed to the absence of a clear commitment or to insufficient capability or credibility. On the other hand, because the risks of conventional conflict could be perceived as relatively modest, the costs of choosing to go to conventional war, even if the likelihood of attaining a military victory is granted little confidence, might be outweighed by perceived political benefits.[9]

Distinctions of Nuclear versus Conventional

The differences between the perceived costs and risks of nuclear versus conventional deterrence are important for our discussion. Bipolar nuclear deterrence has some special properties making its costs and risks relatively easy to calculate: two principal actors, well-defined strike scenarios, a finite number of weapons planned against a transparent target set, calculable losses under any plausible exchange. Calculations of plausible nuclear exchanges suggest that a survivable second-strike capability with assured destruction potential should allow deterrence to hold. However, past

attempts to conduct similar simulations at a conventional level, particularly when conventional deterrent strategies were often underpinned by theater or strategic nuclear weapons, have tended to make analysts and policy makers see conventional deterrence as less rigorous, far more context-dependent, and, ultimately, far more unreliable as a guide to strategy. That situation began to change in the mid-1970s, owing to what was referred to as a revolution in conventional military capabilities (e.g., space reconnaissance, global command and control, precision weapons, and stealth technology). The development and deployment of survivable conventional delivery platforms and very precise munitions suggested that conventional force had become more punishing, more usable, and, therefore, more credible.[10]

Evolution of Conventional Capability

Writing in *Foreign Affairs* after the first Gulf War, former Defense Secretary William Perry pointed to a "new conventional military capability" that "adds a powerful dimension to the ability of the United States to deter war." Key to this new capability were "a new generation of military support systems"—intelligence sensors, defense-suppression systems, precision-guided munitions, and stealth technologies—that gave true and dramatic meaning to the term "force multiplier." To avoid further such foreign entanglements in the future, Perry argued, the United States needs to use this newfound strength to deter future wars, not to fight them.[11]

The continued evolution of US conventional capability since that time, as well as its demonstrated use and capability for long-range precision strike, enhances the theory of conventional deterrence for application in a world of great power competition. Suppose a potentially hostile power were to display an interest and a capability, if not an immediate intent, to encroach on or to directly attack American friends and allies or geographic regions or resources in which the United States has a major or vital interest. Such attacks might be deterred if that state calculates the results from prospective military action to be costly, problematic, and likely not to achieve the objectives sought—that is, if it perceived that the United States has the capability and credibility to defend that state, region, or interest; force the attacker to pay high costs; and deny that aggressor's aims.

Therefore, many of those searching for a military strategy in a renewed great power competition might conclude that much of the conventional deterrence theory developed in the past is still relevant; the requirements of capability, credibility, and communication will continue to apply in the future. And while the central focus of contemporary deterrent relationships has become multipolar and less nuclear intensive, these were not relationships left unconsidered in the original development of the theory. It seems clear, therefore, that reinforcing the logic of conventional deterrence on its would-be adversaries should be a central concept of US defense policy over the next decade or so. The principal stumbling block in attempting to apply that deterrence theory to a coherent military strategy appears to be the tendency of conventional deterrence to "fail." If conventional rather than nuclear forces are about to assume a prominent role in deterring great-power conflict, theoretical work now needs to be focused on the use or threatened use of conventional force. How can a policy of conventional deterrence be communicated and a supporting military strategy and force structure be shaped? One proposition, diametrically opposed to nuclear deterrence theory, is that a past "failure" of conventional deterrence may be a reinforcing, rather than a diminishing, factor: to communicate a credible deterrent threat, capable conventional military force must be demonstrated, exercised, and, at times, used.

Applying Deterrence Theory to Conventional Military Strategy

Deterrence theory fashioned during the Cold War may still prove helpful, but the implementation of deterrent strategy is likely to be considerably different. In other words, while the requirements of deterrence may be little changed, past formulations of conventional deterrence objectives, focusing on large ground armies facing each other across a central front, may become increasingly irrelevant (although such a confrontation may yet remain, as in Korea, and might emerge elsewhere, as in the Baltics). There have been important studies of conventional deterrence strategies in the past, but it is not clear that they are easily transferable to the deterrent problems of the future.[12] For example, in the nuclear deterrence studies of the Cold War, conventional deterrence has been seen as:

- an adjunct to containment of the USSR. That is, applied in a bipolar, nuclear setting and not generally applicable to less simple and less polarized crises.

- appropriate only in support of "symmetrical" approaches to containment to match the enemy's moves at the level of provocation, for example, the "flexible response" policies of NATO. Asymmetrical responses (shifting the nature of one's reaction into avenues better suited to one's strengths against the adversary's weaknesses) relied ultimately on threats of nuclear escalation.

- most valuable for its ability to buy time to resolve disagreements diplomatically and to bring hostilities to a halt.

- a defensive application of deterrence strategy. "Flexible response" in NATO Europe implied deterrence at all levels but could not be perceived as weakening the US nuclear deterrent. Conventional forces were politically restricted from preemptive or offensive options.

- deterrence by denial, that is, blocking the enemy's military objectives through the attrition of his attacking forces. Deterrence by punishment, owing to the perceived limitations of conventional weapons in reaching over the battlefield to target the aggressor's leadership and infrastructure, was left for nuclear weapons.

- a method of influencing an opponent's political calculus of the acceptable costs and risks of his potential initiative, rather than threatening overwhelming punishment and societal destruction. Conventional forces did not provide the means to deter by force alone and had to be supplemented by diplomatic, political, and economic instruments.

- a means of extending deterrence to allies and friends, but ultimately dependent on the credibility of a US nuclear commitment. Conventional deterrence in Europe, for example, could not rely solely on the stationing of US troops there. They were only part of a multifaceted deterrent that, in the end, relied on nuclear threats.

Because conventional deterrence during the Cold War relied on its coupling with nuclear capabilities, past military strategies of conventional deterrence, as outlined above, seem less relevant to the new world order than earlier deterrence theory might have promised. For example,

as the theory reminded us, most failures of conventional deterrence have resulted from a lack of credibility in the deterrent threat. Although capability may be evident and an interest communicated, the resolve of the deterrer is arguably the most difficult element of the deterrent equation to structure and to assess. Can the credibility of a conventional deterrent be enhanced for more effective application in the future? The requirements and applications of deterrence theory developed in the previous section suggest three areas of emphasis: (1) the visibility of the military force, (2) a documented record of willingness to use force in the past, and (3) the rationality of the use of force once deterrence has failed.

Visibility of Military Force

One of the critical requirements for deterrence has been substantial US forces deployed overseas, not merely as a symbol or a tripwire but as a significant military force to be reckoned with. If deterrence is to be extended, it must be seen to exist. The presence of US conventional forces probably acted as a restraint on the spread of nuclear weapons to our allies, unless they found our assurances incredible (France) or we lacked the in-place treaties and troops (Israel). A new military strategy based on conventional deterrence must pose a "virtual presence," even in a period of US military retrenchment and overseas base closures. For future US conventional forces to deter, they must maintain some form of visibility to be perceived as credible and capable. To this end, small-scale exercises with rapid-reacting forces to Europe, as well as the European Defense Initiative stationing US troops in Eastern Europe could be helpful.

Willingness to Use Force

As noted above, conventional deterrence failures have not been inconsistent with deterrence theory, if failing could be attributed to the absence of a clear commitment or to insufficient credibility. Therefore, just as force visibility can be enhanced, so can force credibility through measures such as communicating a commitment, demonstrating resolve, and pointing to past uses of force. It may be that, owing in part to a past declaratory policy and practice of preferring diplomatic or economic instruments to the use of military force, or, even worse, backing away from a declared redline, potential aggressors may not be persuaded that the United States will readily respond with force when its interests are threatened. To strengthen credibility, the use of force may be necessary in some cases for deterrence

to hold in other crises. In nuclear strategist Tom Schelling's words, "what one does today in a crisis affects what one can be expected to do tomorrow."[13] Deterrence theory stressed that not being tough enough in a situation may bring peace only at the expense of one's image of resolve and, therefore, at the cost of long-term deterrence and stability.[14]

Rationality of the Use of Force

Somewhat ironically, despite its failures, conventional deterrence is theoretically more credible in terms of carrying out deterrent threats than is nuclear deterrence. That's because once nuclear deterrence fails, it may be irrational for the deterrer to respond to the challenge owing to the enormous destruction to his own society that may result. In the words of Paul Nitze, he may be "self-deterred."[15] A conventional deterrent, however, can be made to appear more certain and, therefore, more credible: Rationality does not have to fail; the nation does not have to threaten to stumble into war to respond; doomsday forecasts do not have to be considered. In practice as well as in theory, there are more likely to be greater risks and uncertainties resulting from not carrying out a conventional deterrent threat than in acting to support declared policy. The operational implication of that theoretical principle is a strategy of conventional deterrence that allows for the likely use of military force—a plausible threat "that leaves something to chance."[16]

A central point of these arguments overlooked in past conventional deterrence theory is that the use of conventional force, presumed in the past to be a failure of conventional deterrence, can in the future be a major contributor to the deterrence of conventional conflict. If that is so, the problem now is that much on which the United States previously constructed its conventional deterrent is going away. US base structure overseas has been rapidly drawn down, and the United States is moving toward a smaller military relying on forward presence or small footprints rather than forward deployment, with attendant power projection shortfalls. The Army is no longer sized to conduct large-scale, sustained stability operations (let alone to confront a force-on-force scenario) but rather to carry out small-scale expeditionary missions against unconventional foes. This brings into serious question the ability of US strategy and forces to meet the requirements of capability, credibility, and communication. What military strategies are suited to match an

objective of conventional deterrence with fewer forces stationed abroad in fewer regions of interest and concern?

Strategies of Conventional Deterrence

When we consider the strategies of conventional deterrence dominating the Cold War years, we find them inadequate to meet the challenges of great power competition. For example, John Mearsheimer and others argued that the essence of conventional deterrence was being able to halt an enemy breakthrough that might lead to a successful blitzkrieg and military occupation of friendly territory. As military analysts focused on the European Central Front, however, there was considerable debate regarding which military strategy could best meet that deterrent requirement.[17] These strategies included a conventional "tripwire" to demonstrate commitment but designed to fail quickly and rely on vertical escalation to deter; horizontal escalation (assuming direct conventional defense was beyond America's reach, but deterrence could be strengthened by threatening the adversary's other interests); or conventional direct defense (many defense analysts characterized as optimists or reformers argued that a direct conventional defense [and, therefore, deterrence] was possible with reforms or improvements in troop deployment, employment, strategy, and doctrine).

From several perspectives, none of these approaches appear particularly attractive when facing long-term competition with near-peer powers. Tripwire theories encourage nuclear threats and, perhaps, nuclear proliferation and fall into the same credibility traps of the past. Strategies of horizontal escalation are subject to the "spiral of conflict" critiques of deterrence as well as to the argument that other regions might not be nearly as valuable as the focus of primary conflict. The objective of conventional deterrence is to contain the conflict, not escalate it to a more global confrontation. Structuring a direct conventional defense, in the past considered the most reliable of deterrent strategies, is less plausible in the future owing to the retrenchment of US general purpose forces and the uncertain nature of the threat. Which, then, appear to be the components of a military doctrine, strategy, and force structure that will support the requirements of conventional deterrence with respect to new, powerful adversaries?

Simply put and based on the theoretical requirements that continue to hold, a conventional deterrent strategy must be both capable and

credible. If we delve more deeply into the requirements developed in the previous section and apply them to the problem of confronting great power competition, a theory of conventional deterrence should be constructed to possess the following characteristics.

General as opposed to immediate. Although the capability to invoke an immediate deterrent threat against a specific adversary must remain, the policy must be geared to a long-term strategic competition.

Extended as opposed to basic. This property has two components. First, the United States is not in danger of conventional attack on its homeland but is seeking a way to extend deterrence and defense to vital regions, resources, and interests. Extended conventional deterrence is far more credible, given current capability, than is extended nuclear deterrence, because it obviates the "trading Boston for Bonn" question. And although the United States will wish to maintain both strategic nuclear forces and theater nuclear power projection capability to deter nuclear powers and potential proliferators, it appears that limited strategic and theater missile defenses will gradually replace some of the assured destruction deterrence theories enshrined in the antiballistic missile treaty. Second, we need to differentiate a new conventional deterrent from Cold War strategy that was focused on a single region coupled with a flexible, nuclear response. In other words, although specific plausible contingencies must be considered in general purpose force planning, we are seeking a conventional capability that is strategic rather than theater-oriented. To be credible, that force must have prompt global reach and power projection capability.

Overwhelming, as opposed to gradual. Although we may wish to eschew the term massive conventional retaliation, this formulation of deterrence strategy is the antithesis of the graduated escalatory response characterizing the Cold War strategy of flexible response in which sudden and massive escalation (fearful of the next, nuclear step) was avoided at all costs. The purpose here is to terminate conflict rapidly and to do so by adding the element of punishment to conventional deterrence rather than relying on denial.[18]

Conventional as opposed to nuclear. It is in the interest of the United States to deemphasize nuclear weapons and systems, particularly as new confrontations with near-peer adversaries possessing strategic nuclear capabilities arise. Conventional deterrence in crises less than national survival can be more effective than nuclear deterrence, as its capa-

bility is enhanced by the certainty (therefore, credibility) of a response. One of the striking differences regarding the future of conventional deterrence, at least in the near term, is that the United States enjoys an enormous margin of global reach and power projection capability over any emerging conventional rival. Thus, the United States should not be self-deterred in a crisis, and the threat of use of conventional force, to include preemption, becomes more credible.[19]

Conventional deterrence in the post–Cold War world, then, requires supporting a military strategy and force structure that can be extended credibly to distant regions, quick in response, and decisive in application. Against near-peer adversaries, relatively small but very powerful, precise, intense, and survivable forces may be able to meet the theoretical requirements and strategic needs of extended conventional deterrence. If so, the properties that will characterize conventional deterrent strategy will be very different from those that defined it during the Cold War. A strategy of effective conventional deterrence must be decoupled from nuclear threats, asymmetrical in threat and application, intense and overwhelming in its threat, offensive with a capability for punishment as well as denial, and extended globally through advanced technologies and weapons systems.

Based on this analysis, the United States is faced with developing a military strategy of conventional use that can be extended to interests abroad and can be generally applied. The United States now requires the military strategy and forces to underwrite a theory of "general extended conventional deterrence." Can it be done?

How to Get General Extended Conventional Deterrence

According to national strategies of security and defense, the United States is entering a new period of great power competition and is facing that confrontation following a time of strategic atrophy. Unfortunately, as defense resources have been compressed over the past decade, the list of US national security goals has not been reduced. The goals most relevant to the study of future conventional deterrence are as follows:

- Sustaining joint force military advantages, both globally and in key regions;

- Deterring adversaries from aggression against our vital interests;

- Maintaining favorable regional balances of power in the Indo-Pacific, Europe, the Middle East, and the Western Hemisphere;

- Defending allies from military aggression, bolstering partners against coercion, and fairly sharing responsibilities for common defense; and

- Dissuading, preventing, or deterring state adversaries and nonstate actors from acquiring, proliferating, or using weapons of mass destruction.[20]

These national security objectives, although familiar, have been restructured to match a time of emerging great power competition. To that end, military planners are now receiving guidance that approximates the following:

- Plan an effective military campaign in a distant region (the Indo-Pacific, Europe, or the Middle East) to deter a sophisticated, near-peer adversary. That adversary may possess precision conventional weapons as well as unconventional (nuclear, biological, chemical) weapons and the capability to deliver those weapons within the region, adding to his anti-access, area denial capability.

- Plan to deploy continental US (CONUS)–based forces on very short notice. Although US forces may be present in the region, they will not be there in numbers enough to conduct a stalwart defense or successful counterattack without rapid CONUS reinforcement.

- Defeat the enemy quickly by denying his objectives and, as required, by punishing his war-making infrastructure. Do this with as few friendly casualties as possible, while minimizing collateral damage.

- Plan to do all this as quickly as possible, before public support dissolves or allied resolve weakens. Significant allied military contributions, except for indigenous forces in some contingencies, may not be available until later in the war.

- Hedge against the possibility of a second, simultaneous regional contingency by deterring opportunistic aggression elsewhere.

Can a strategy of general extended conventional deterrence, coupled with advanced military capabilities and technologies demonstrated during the Gulf War, the Iraq War, and the continuing counterterror/

counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan and elsewhere, meet such demanding guidance? That demonstrated resolve and capability, as Secretary Perry previously argued, suggests that the use of conventional force should be judged as an important element of establishing the credibility of a general extended conventional deterrent in future crises. A discrete yet overwhelming use of conventional force, narrowly seen as a deterrent failure if one focuses on a single crisis, can also be an important first step in the structuring of a new strategy of general extended conventional deterrence that may influence international relations and deter great power conflict in the future. There is plenty of work to be done if US military forces are to develop and sustain the capability of acting quickly and decisively in future contingencies to underwrite conventional deterrence. What kinds of capabilities and what sorts of forces are needed to underwrite a strategy of extended general conventional deterrence in a world of interstate strategic competition?

Strategic concepts and military planning guidance must be translated into force size and structure. There has been no effective substitute, during the Cold War and after, for sizing and shaping US military forces than the use of plausible, hypothetical contingencies to test the effectiveness and efficiency of those forces to deter and defeat an adversary. And because force planners tend to be a conservative lot, they generally choose to contemplate a worst-case scenario, under the assumption that forces sized for that contingency should be able to deal with less-intense conflicts as lesser-included cases. What, then, are the plausible contingencies featuring potential great power conflict to which force planners should turn their attention? In his consideration of the future of land warfare, Brookings analyst Michael O'Hanlon suggests two.[21]

In the case of Russia, an invasion threat to the Baltic States seems a reasonable place to start force planning for potential great power conflict. Although some opposed the expansion of NATO to states formerly included in the Soviet empire, the Article 5 mutual defense pledge of the NATO treaty requires the US and its allies to come to the defense of these frontline states. Although O'Hanlon notes that a Russian intervention in the Baltics could pursue several avenues, including tactics employed in Crimea and Ukraine, the most stressful scenario to plan against is the classic land invasion—reminiscent of planning contingencies employed during the Cold War. Notably, O'Hanlon starts from the premise that the US and NATO should not rely solely on nuclear deterrence here, as

Russian objectives may be limited. That premise results in the consideration of conventional force options to deter and, if necessary, defeat the invading land forces. Because NATO's rapid reaction force is likely to serve as only a tripwire, O'Hanlon develops a methodology, following Cold War conventional deterrence models, suggesting the need to deploy from 150,000 to up to 225,000 US troops to deter and defend against a Russian force that might approach 300,000. As in the Cold War, deterring conflict in Central Europe will depend heavily on the contributions of the allies. The strongest deterrent might be formed by the permanent stationing of large NATO air and land forces in the Baltics or by demonstrating an effective capability of rapid reinforcement.

In China's case, if we can put aside a reenactment of the Korean War in which Republic of Korea military forces act as a robust deterrent and Chinese intervention is questionable, a stressful contingency demanding different American force planning is a South China Sea scenario that spills over into Chinese threats to blockade Taiwan or seize islands in the Philippine archipelago. Here the militarization by China of islands in the South China Sea is particularly worrisome, as is the growing power projection capability of the People's Liberation Army and its increasing ability to deny US forces access and freedom of movement in the region. Deterrence in this case is likely to rely more on air- and sea-based forces rather than on land power. But if the US and its allies were to develop a containment strategy to deter potential Chinese adventurism in the region, a new network of bases might be established in the Philippines to enable air and sea superiority with attendant ground forces to defend these bases. As US forces are unlikely to be deployed to bases in Taiwan, this forward-deployed and carefully exercised force could also add to American pledges to defend Taiwan.

In postulating great power confrontation, the *2018 National Defense Strategy* has posed for the US military a task more difficult than the previous force planning construct of deterring and defeating two smaller regional adversaries nearly simultaneously. In addition to the planning factors noted above, a premium will be placed on the following roles and missions necessary to communicate a conventional deterrent capability.

Show of Force

With fewer US forces stationed abroad, the need to project forces quickly to demonstrate US commitment and resolve will remain im-

portant. Depending on the contingency, that force should be more than just the shadow of power; it will need robust, sustainable firepower.

Punitive Raids

To make a conventional deterrence credible, the United States must be able to strike multiple targets (200 or so to attack weapons sites, suppress enemy defenses, and take out command and control capabilities) simultaneously, across great distances, without seeking overflight, basing rights, or access to facilities from any foreign state and to conduct that raid with impunity.

Rapid Reaction

The need is for the rapid deployment of air, sea, and light ground forces with adequate air cover in support of commitment to allies faced with potential great power aggression.

Air Superiority

Air Force doctrine has long held that establishing air superiority is essential to allowing air-to-surface and surface warfare to be conducted successfully. This includes targeting key military facilities and command/control/communication infrastructure to blind the enemy and disrupt his ability to use and control his forces.

Halting, Delaying, or Disrupting a Cross-Border Invasion

In the early days of a potential great power conflict it may be necessary to bring in long-range airpower to deter the onrush of enemy ground forces and buy time for the arrival of ground and naval forces or for other diplomatic and military actions.

Parallel (or Simultaneous) Warfare

The ability to execute parallel warfare—that is, concurrently executing multiple operations at every level of an enemy's target set—will prove effective in both deterring and bringing the conflict to a rapid and decisive close while minimizing friendly casualties. Parallel warfare implies the ability to employ the overwhelming but precise use of military force needed to underwrite a strategy of general extended conventional deterrence.

In summary, to make viable a theory of conventional deterrence that can be extended to great power threats to US global interests, the United States will need to construct a coherent military strategy to defend those interests, ensure stability, and deter would-be aggressors from adventurism. It can be declared softly—if a big stick is nearby. Without the extensive forward deployment of US military forces that characterized the Cold War years, however, there will be a need for increased exercises and displays of power projection capability to demonstrate US global reach.

To that end, it is important to recall the boost to US conventional capabilities and deterrence brought about by the revolution in military affairs touted by Secretary Perry as an offset strategy—a conventional version of the first such strategy that wielded US nuclear prowess to offset perceived Soviet conventional superiority in Europe at the beginning of the Cold War. Although the Pentagon seems lately to have eschewed the phrase "third offset," the components of that conventional strategy—advanced computing, big data analytics, artificial intelligence, autonomous unmanned systems, robotics, directed energy, hypersonics, and biotechnology—are specifically enumerated in the *2018 National Defense Strategy*.[22]

Most importantly, the greatest departure from Cold War formulations of conventional deterrence theory is the idea that it will be necessary to use force to create deterrence. In that regard, the continued deployment and employment of US conventional forces overseas in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere in the prosecution of terrorists and insurgents well document that capability and credibility. But an unwillingness to use force, or to shy away from supporting US interests over concern of riling a would-be peer-competitor, will quickly squander any opportunity to dissuade. What needs to be avoided, as Professor Richard Betts argues, is "ambivalent deterrence: rhetorical bobbing and weaving rather than strategic planning."[23] Conventional deterrence may break down on occasion, but such events can demonstrate the price of failure, rejuvenate its credibility, and contribute to a new period of stability. Declared and resourced appropriately, conventional deterrence can produce long cycles of stability instead of constant, overlapping intervals of conflict—something to be sought in a new era of great power competition.

Put in place, an accepted policy of general extended conventional deterrence is offered not only as a component of military strategy in a new security environment but also as a guide to planning the general-

purpose forces and capabilities the United States and its allies will need to underwrite that strategy. At the macro level, the implications for force planning for general extended conventional deterrence appear to be as follows:

For US Ground Forces

Under current guidance, the US Army (and Marine forces) are directed to develop and maintain the capacity for deterring and defeating aggression by a major power in a single large-scale operation while deterring opportunistic aggression elsewhere. In either case, a rapidly deployable, flexible contingency force with an emphasis on airborne, air assault, and light infantry forces will be required. Heavy mechanized forces can hedge against larger contingencies, but they may be diminished in role and size owing to the time it takes to deploy them from CONUS. Therefore, returning a heavy brigade to Europe seems a reasonable way of strengthening conventional deterrence in Central Europe. Prepositioning can be used to lessen deployment time to Eastern Europe, and strategic airlift will remain important to get the troops to the war on time.[24]

For US Naval and Marine Forces

Power projection, rather than sea lane protection and control, will become the mainstay of US naval forces in underwriting conventional deterrence, and its geographic focus will increasingly become the Indo-Pacific region. The instruments of that task will remain the carrier battle groups and amphibious ready groups, augmented by attack submarines. As advanced by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Analysis, "these naval assets are mobile, can defend and sustain themselves in proximity to an adversary, and have the offensive capabilities to deny and punish aggression immediately."[25] A deterrence force composed of surface combatants, submarines, amphibious forces, and associated aircraft and unmanned systems would be capable of interdicting enemy naval forces, attacking coastal targets supporting aggression, or destroying valuable coastal targets to punish the enemy.

For US Air Forces

Just as strategic air forces were the centerpiece of the strategy of "massive retaliation" in the 1950s, so will they be in underwriting extended

conventional deterrence in the future. Long-range strategic bombers, particularly stealthy ones, will play an ever more important role in deterring great power conflict because they are stabilizing; can carry large, varied, precise payloads; can project heavy firepower on short-notice from US bases; and are both flexible and survivable. A proposed expansion in the number of Air Force squadrons from 312 today to 386 in the future would be a major contribution to conventional deterrence—particularly if the emphasis is placed on "bombers, tankers and command/control/communications/intelligence systems."[26]

The United States has a major role to play in ensuring stability and security in a new world order and possesses unique military capabilities to deter acts of aggression that would threaten that order. However, the conventional deterrence theories and strategies of the past that were subordinated to a bipolar strategic nuclear competition are neither relevant nor welcome. As Richard Betts warns, the concept of deterrence "has almost vanished from the vocabulary of strategic debate. U.S. policymakers need to relearn the basics of deterrence and rediscover its promise as a strategy."[27] A coherent concept of general extended conventional deterrence can guide US military strategy in pursuit of a more stable and secure future international order and can guide prudent force planning in a time of great power confrontation. **SSQ**

Notes

1. For an introduction to post–Cold War US grand strategy choices, see Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (Winter 1996/97): 5–53, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.21.3.5. For a more recent analysis, see Robert P. Haffa, "Defense Decisions for the Trump Administration," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 25–48, https://www.airuniversity.af.mil/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-11_Issue-1/Haffa.pdf. For an historical look at grand strategy, see John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018).

2. US Department of Defense (DOD), *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: DOD, 2018).

3. DOD, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 4.

4. Austin Long, *Deterrence from Cold War to Long War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009), 7, https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG636.html.

5. George H. Quester, *Deterrence Before Hiroshima* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Inc., 1986).

6. Classical deterrence theory was developed in the 1950s and 1960s by a group of "first wave" deterrence theorists including Bernard Brodie, William Kaufmann, Herman Kahn, Thomas Schelling, and Jack Snyder, who assumed that states could be treated as unitary

rational actors. *See* Paul Stern, Robert Axelrod, Robert Jervis, and Roy Radner, "Deterrence in the Nuclear Age: The Search for Evidence," in *Perspectives on Deterrence*, ed. Stern, Axelrod, Jervis, and Radner (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). See also Long, *Deterrence from Cold War to Long War*; and Fred Kaplan, *Wizards of Armageddon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983). For an excellent research survey of conventional defense literature, see Charles T. Allan, "Extended Conventional Deterrence: In from the Cold and Out of the Nuclear Fire," *Washington Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 203–33, https://doi .org/10.1080/01636609409443417.

7. Patrick Morgan has called deterrence "the subject of one of the more elaborate attempts at rigorous theory in the social sciences." *See* Morgan, *Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1977), 26. The following also relies on Paul K. Huth's definitions in *Extended Deterrence and the Prevention of War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

8. Among the more prominent of deterrence critics, from which this list is taken, are Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein. See their work, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

9. *See* Alexander George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974); and John Orme, "Deterrence Failures: A Second Look," *International Security* 11, no. 4 (Spring 1987): 96–104, https://www.jstor.org /stable/2538838.

10. *See* Barry Watts, *Six Decades of Guided Munitions and Battle Networks: Progress and Prospects* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, March 2007).

11. William J. Perry, "Desert Storm and Deterrence," *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 4 (Fall 1991): 66–82, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20044914.

12. *See* John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 211. The difficulty of separating conventional deterrence from its theater and strategic nuclear linkages is demonstrated in works such as those by Thomas Boyd-Carpenter, *Conventional Deterrence into the 1990s* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989); and Gary Guertner, *Deterrence and Defense in a Post-Nuclear World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

13. Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 63.

14. *See* Robert Jervis, "Deterrence Theory Revisited," *World Politics* 31, no. 2 (January 1979), 289–94, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2009945?seq=2#metadata_info_tab_contents.

15. Paul Nitze, "Deterring Our Deterrent," *Foreign Policy*, no. 25 (Winter 1976–77): 195–210, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1148029. Nitze argued that it would not be rational for the United States to respond with a countervalue nuclear strike after the USSR had launched an effective counterforce first strike on the United States, because of an assumed countervalue retaliation by the Soviet Union.

16. Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1981).

17. *See* Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*; and Joshua Epstein, *Strategy and Force Planning* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1987), 6–7.

18. Perhaps practitioners of a new conventional deterrent should reread Henry Kissinger: "In my view, what appears balanced and safe in a crisis is often the most risky. Gradual escalation tempts the opponent to match every move; what is intended as a show of moderation may be interpreted as irresolution. . . . A leader . . . must be prepared to escalate rapidly and brutally." Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979), 621.

19. Caution applies when declaring an American ability to project power against near-peer competitors owing to what have been termed the anti-access/area denial capabilities of potential adversaries. *See* Andrew Krepinevich, Barry Watts, and Robert Work, *Meeting the*

Anti-Access and Area Denial Challenge (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2003).

20. *See* DOD, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 4.

21. Michael O'Hanlon, *The Future of Land Warfare* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 82–90 and 104–8.

22. DOD, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 3. For the "third offset," see Robert Martinage, *Toward a New Offset Strategy: Exploiting U.S. Long-Term Advantages to Restore U.S. Global Power Projection Capability* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2014).

23. Richard K. Betts, "The Lost Logic of Deterrence," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 2 (March/April 2013): 97, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2013-02-11/lost-logic -deterrence.

24. Michael O'Hanlon, *The $650 Billion Bargain* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 46–48.

25. Bryan Clark, Peter Haynes, Jesse Sloman, Timothy Walton, *Restoring American Seapower: A New Fleet Architecture for The United States Navy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017).

26. Michael O'Hanlon, "What We Can Learn from—and Add to—the New Air Force Vision," *Order from Chaos* (blog), 17 September 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order -from-chaos/2018/09/17/what-we-can-learn-from-and-add-to-the-new-air-force-vision/.

27. Betts, "Lost Logic of Deterrence," 99.