Part I

Deterrence Policy

Peter Frank

Deterrence is a dynamic process involving power instruments, such as strategic action to reassure allies (show resolve) and communication. During the Cold War, mutual vulnerability on the strategic level prevented a major conventional war, since both sides were unwilling to risk a major nuclear war. However, below a certain threshold, the main actors pursued strategic competition and power politics, which resulted in arms races and proxy wars and the exploitation of an adversary’s weaknesses. Today the central issue of deterrence remains the same as it was in the Cold War: how to maintain the credibility of the U.S. threat to employ nuclear weapons in the defense of allies—extended deterrence as an instrument of war prevention, reassurance, and nuclear non-proliferation—in the face of adversaries that can retaliate with devastating nuclear attacks against the U.S. itself.

Challenges

The Trump administration views international relations through the prism of national interest, great power competition, its own military power, and strength. According to the National Security Strategy, both the United States, as the world’s sole superpower, and the current rule-based, liberal democratic and multilateral global order framed by western-created institutions, such as the UN, EU, NATO, the OSCE, the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO, are challenged by a plethora of state and non-state illicit power structures, not least: revisionist states (China and the Russian Federation, the latter explicitly named as “the most significant existential threat” to the U.S.), rogue states (Iran and North Korea), and threats posed by transnational terrorist groups. Rather than cultivating gradual democratization, China has expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of other countries, most notably littoral states in the South China Sea. The National Security Strategy suggests that rivals will abandon aggression as the U.S. builds its power, based ultimately on the strength of U.S. military capabilities and the vitality of U.S. allies. U.S. deterrence is not limited to nuclear power, but must be extended across the cyber, land, air, maritime, and space domains. Germany recognizes that the U.S. has been the guarantor of security and stability in Europe since 1945 and acknowledges, “our security is based on a strong and resolute North Atlantic alliance and a united and resilient European Union.” In addition, “only together with the United States can Europe effectively defend itself...and guarantee a credible form of deterrence,” and “NATO will continue to rely primarily on deterrence to counter external threats.”

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7 “White Paper,” 64.
Approaches

The National Security Strategy of the U.S. references allies and partners in the context of the “extension of the U.S. nuclear deterrence … to assure their security, and reduce their need to possess their own nuclear capabilities.”

Germany seeks to protect its national security without itself possessing nuclear capabilities while preventing nuclear proliferation and, if possible, promoting and achieving a world without nuclear weapons. The U.S. approach therefore aligns well with German national interests. German nuclear cooperation with the U.S. is institutionalized via bilateral agreements within the NATO framework. To achieve credible deterrence, U.S. theater nuclear capabilities are deployed abroad. For Germany, strategic influence in nuclear decision-making processes, operational deployment, and tactical procedures are critical: “As long as nuclear weapons have to play a role as an instrument of deterrence as part of the strategic concept of NATO, Germany is interested in participating in discussions and planning processes.” At the same time, Germany stresses that “successful disarmament talks create the basis for a withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons” and, to that end, they support “regional WMD-free zone initiatives and [use] the OSCE for a structured dialogue to discuss threat perception, security cooperation, and arms control.”

Goals and Outcomes

The common goal of both countries is to protect their citizens, their territorial integrity, and their sovereignty. To prevent aggression against its vital interests, the U.S. has developed a nuclear capability triad that deters adversaries and, through its extension to over thirty allies and partners, reduces their need to possess their own nuclear capabilities. The U.S. does not need to match the nuclear arsenals of other powers, but intends to sustain a stockpile that can deter adversaries, assure allies and partners, and achieve U.S. objectives if deterrence fails. The aim is to prevent adversaries from using the threat of nuclear escalation to coerce the United States and its allies and partners. Moreover, if deterrence fails, the United States, along with its friends and allies, aims to restore the security and integrity of NATO territory and the sovereignty of NATO nations.
**Desired Actions and Policies**

The basic logic of preventing a war through deterrence is grounded in military strength, which involves military modernization; improved readiness; common threat assessments (shared by elites and societies); and formulas for sharing burdens and responsibility, as well as the political will to use the capabilities developed to deter an adversary.\(^5\) To avoid miscalculation, the U.S. intends to conduct discussions with other states to build predictable relationships and reduce nuclear risks. The U.S. will consider new arms control arrangements if they contribute to strategic stability and if they are verifiable. Fear of escalation will not prevent the U.S. from defending its vital interests and those of its allies and partners.\(^6\)

Political will in democratic states is a function of the outcome of periodic elections (which reflect the perceptions of society about their political elite) and the composition of parliaments, whose members (notably in Germany) determine final decisions concerning the use of force, as well as resource allocation and military spending. Perceived threats and conclusions determine national military spending, the formulation of NATO’s relevant strategic documents, and deterrence procedures and resultant military actions, not least the U.S. reassurance initiative for Europe, now called the European Deterrence Initiative, and most importantly, U.S. forward deployment. German national identity is values-oriented (moral power) and based on “Western” views of liberal democracy, the rule of law, restraint by multilateral cooperation, and the refusal of the German population to use even civil nuclear capabilities. There is a divergence or communication gap between German political elites and society about threat perception and the nuclear component of NATO’s nuclear deterrence posture, including U.S. extended deterrence.


**Part II**

**Managing German-American Approaches to Deterrence Policy: The Nuclear Dimension**

Andreas Lutsch

U.S. extended nuclear deterrence is necessary for maintaining strategic stability, sufficient to obviate the need for allies other than Britain and France to supplement their reliance on the United States’ extended nuclear deterrence by acquiring national nuclear capabilities. It also allows for the “tailored” involvement of non-nuclear allies in “nuclear arrangements” within the alliance that are compatible with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), such as nuclear sharing and consultation in frameworks like the NATO Nuclear Planning Group.

However, given the above-noted communication gap between German political elites and society about threat perception and U.S. extended nuclear deterrence, policy questions arise concerning the extent to which information policies by NATO governments, including that of Germany, should seek to raise public awareness of potential nuclear danger emanating from Russia. A good example of such sensitivities is the challenge to NATO’s deterrence apparatus posed by the 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, which trenchantly highlighted that Moscow threatens and exercises limited nuclear first use, suggesting a mistaken expectation that coercive nuclear threats or limited first use could paralyze the United States and NATO and thereby end a conflict on terms favorable to Russia. Some in the United States
This opens up a dilemma. On the one hand, one may seek to close the “communication gap” by raising public awareness. This may elicit greater public resolve to defend NATO territory even in the face of nuclear risk, increase resilience, and enhance deterrence. But it may come at the cost of jeopardizing domestic tranquility and widening the attack surface for Russian disinformation campaigns and efforts to court and intimidate European states in order to split the alliance as a whole, while NATO’s deterrence apparatus can be enhanced, but at the expense of tempting of Russia to misperceive American allies in Europe, particularly non-nuclear allies, as “sources of restraint” (Brad Roberts) on NATO’s resolve and to expect that Russia will prevail in a test of will.

Whatever the preferences may be, it seems advisable to base them on an accurate threat assessment on the governmental level. This, in turn, prompts a suggestion to work towards a comparable assessment of the Russian nuclear threat within NATO. Much of the debate on specifics like Russia’s nuclear doctrine will likely be shaped by assumptions on core questions, for example: To what degree does Russia pursue a “revisionist” agenda against NATO? Can we rely on the general assumption that mutual vulnerability on the strategic-nuclear level makes even determined revisionist states behave cautiously? Or may a competitor who is determined to change the status quo (mis-)understand mutual vulnerability as a reality that enables him to pursue policies of nuclear coercion, blackmail, and brinkmanship under a thermonuclear shadow in order to prevail in a “competition in risk-taking” (Thomas Schelling) with NATO?

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