

The Geopolitical Dimensions of Nuclear War

When devising strategies to avert the use of nuclear weapons, we must consider not only the weaponry involved but also the geopolitical environment in which a *decision* to employ nuclear weapons might be made.

Thankfully, at present, it is highly unlikely that any of the nuclear-armed nations will employ nuclear weapons in a deliberate, unprovoked fashion – as a “bolt out of the blue,” in military-speak.

However, in the current geopolitical environment, all of the nuclear-armed states are prepared to employ nuclear weapons once a conflict has begun and reaches a point where their non-nuclear (“conventional”) forces are deemed to be at risk of defeat.

The First Use of Nuclear Weapons in Warfare

The first (and only) use of atomic weapons occurred in a geopolitical environment characterized by an epochal struggle among the major powers of the time – the U.S., Germany, and Japan – for control of Europe and Asia, the global “heartland.”

In conducting their battle operations, all the major combatants of WWII believed it was legitimate and necessary to destroy the war-making capacity and political will of their opponents, mainly by the massive bombing of cities and industrial centers. Hiroshima and Nagasaki occurred within this context.



Top : Dresden
Left: Hiroshima

Geopolitical Contestation During the Cold War

During the Cold War, the major powers of the time – the U.S. and the USSR – again engaged in an unremitting geopolitical struggle for control of the Eurasian heartland.

As during WWII, moreover, both sides assumed that any war between them would eventually involve strikes on each other's cities and industrial centers – this time, fought entirely with nuclear weapons.

To ensure that their adversary would not seek a swift victory through massive conventional assaults, both sides also armed their conventional forces with so-called “tactical” or “battlefield” nuclear weapons.



U.S. Pershing-II nuclear missile of the type deployed in Europe in the 1980s



Soviet SS-20 nuclear missile of the type deployed in the western USSR in the 1970s

Anti-Nuclear Demonstrations & the INF Treaty

The deployment of battlefield nuclear weapons in Europe sparked a massive anti-nuclear movement around the world, helping to impel the U.S. and Russia to sign the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty of 1987.

The INF Treaty outlawed land-based missiles with a range of between 500 and 5,500 km, effectively separating conventional from nuclear warfare.

From that point on, nuclear weapons were assumed to be reserved for retaliatory use only (“mutual assured destruction,” or MAD).



Above: anti-nuclear protest in Italy, 1980; left: Presidents Gorbachev and Reagan sign the INF Treaty, Dec. 8, 1987

The New Geopolitical Environment

Today, after a hiatus of nearly 30 years, the major world powers – the U.S., Russia, and China – are again contending for geopolitical advantage on both sides of the Eurasian heartland, and all three are preparing for major conventional engagements that could easily escalate to the nuclear level.

This new strategic environment, called **“great-power competition”** by the U.S. military, was first described by Secy. of Defense Jim Mattis in 2018.



“Although the Department continues to prosecute the campaign against terrorists, long-term strategic competition – not terrorism – is now the primary focus of U.S. national security.”
--James Mattis, before the Senate Armed Services Committee, April 26, 2018

America's Strategic Blueprint

National Defense Strategy (NDS)

The 2018 National Defense Strategy identifies China and Russia as America's principal adversaries and calls on the U.S. military to prepare for full-scale, high-intensity combat with the main-force units of those two countries. Such conflict is assumed to entail the use of the most advanced conventional weapons available.

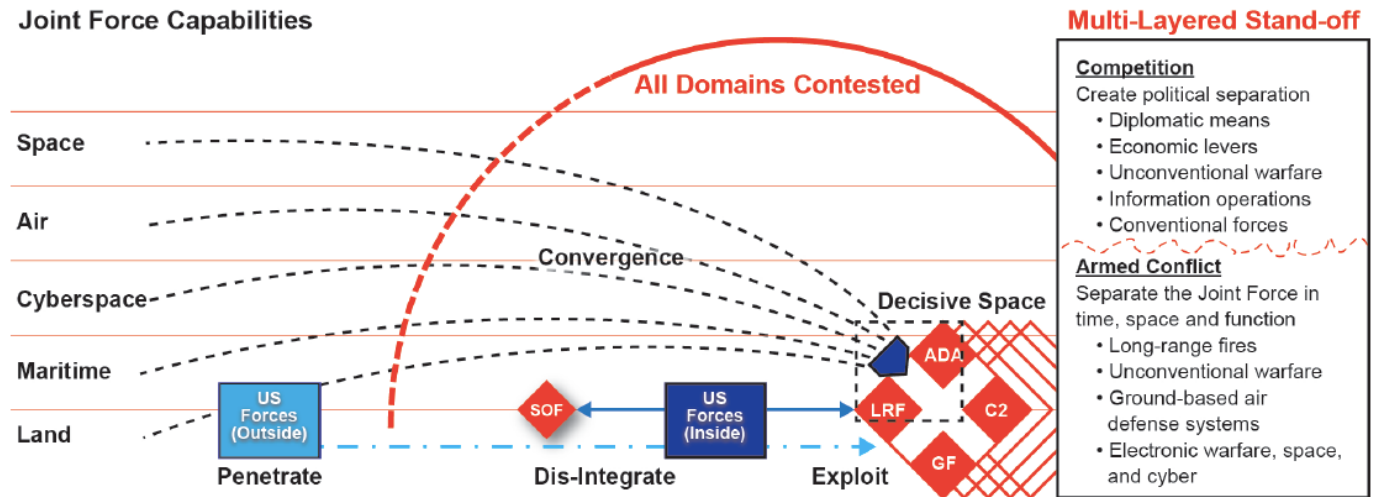
Nuclear Posture Review (NPR)

The Nuclear Posture Review of 2018 calls for the replacement of all existing U.S. nuclear delivery systems with more modern and capable systems along with the acquisition of "low-yield" nuclear munitions to deter the use of such weapons by an adversary or, in the case of such use, to provide the president with the option of a "tailored" and "flexible" nuclear response.

Eroding the Nuclear Firebreak

In accordance with the NDS, the U.S. military is preparing to fight and defeat Russian and Chinese forces on or near *their own territory*.

This means developing and deploying advanced conventional forces – ships, planes, missiles, long-range artillery – capable of striking and destroying Russia's and China's vital self-defense (A2AD) capabilities.



This diagram, from the Army's 2018 document "The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028," shows how Pentagon strategists envision a future war with Russia, with U.S. Forces (Outside) firing advanced munitions at vital Russian defense capabilities and eventually moving "inside" to disintegrate and crush Russian forces.

Post-INF Missiles

To enhance its ability to strike vital targets inside Russian and Chinese territory, the U.S. has:

- Withdrawn from the INF Treaty, allowing the deployment of missiles with ranges banned by that accord
- Accelerated the development of conventionally-armed hypersonic (traveling more than 5 times the speed of sound) missiles with INF-prohibited ranges



U.S. conducts first successful test of a hypersonic ballistic missile, March 2020

“Low-Yield” Nuclear Weapons

Also, in accordance with the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, the U.S. has commenced installation of a so-called “low-yield” nuclear warhead, the W76-2, upon submarine-launched ballistic missiles now on operational deployments.

The Navy has also just announced that it will begin development of a nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) in 2022.



The USS *Tennessee*, the first U.S. ballistic missile submarine to be armed with missiles carrying the W76-2 “low-yield” nuclear warhead

Increasing the Risk of Nuclear Weapons Use

The combination of a geopolitical stance emphasizing intense competition with Russia/China and a military doctrine favoring attacks with advanced conventional weapons on vital targets inside Russian/Chinese territory is increasing the likelihood of nuclear weapons use by:

- **Multiplying the risks of a military clash near Russia or China with severe escalatory consequences**
- Eroding the distinction between conventional and nuclear attacks

The U.S. regularly deploys nuclear-capable aircraft and major warships into the airspace and seas adjoining Russia and China in a highly threatening manner



Above: U.S. B-52 bombers in practice bomb run over the Baltic Sea near Russian territory, Oct. 2019.
Left: USS Nimitz in naval exercises near Chinese-claimed islands in the South China Sea, Feb. 2021



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- **Eroding the distinction between conventional and nuclear attacks**, increasing the risk that one side or another will respond to conventional attacks on vital homeland targets with tactical nuclear weapons.

Artist's rendering of a
proposed U.S.
hypersonic missile



“I should note that our military doctrine says Russia reserves the right to use nuclear weapons solely in response to a nuclear attack...*or an act of aggression against us with the use of conventional weapons that threatens the very existence of the state.*” –Vladimir Putin, March 1, 2018.



Decreasing the Risk of Nuclear Weapons Use

Ultimately, the *only* way to prevent the use of nuclear weapons is to ***eliminate nuclear weapons altogether***, so that must be our ultimate objective.

However, so long as nuclear weapons exist, we must do everything we can to ***prevent them from being used***.

This entails, first of all, systematically reducing the size of nuclear arsenals and preventing their proliferation.

At the same time, we must **oppose the geopolitical policies and military doctrines that make nuclear weapons use more likely**.

Specifically, we should call on the Biden administration to:

- Repudiate the strategy of “great-power competition” embedded in the National Defense Strategy and to replace it with a strategy of “common security” in which the major powers cooperate to overcome global challenges
- Repudiate the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review and its call for “low-yield” nuclear munitions, and halt deployment of the W76-2 and SLCM-N.
- Repudiate military strategies and weapons plans intended for conventional attacks on Russian and Chinese territory, and to cease provocative air and naval maneuvers on Russia’s and China’s borders
- Initiate high-level talks with Russia and China to minimize threats from hypersonic weapons and other emerging technologies and to negotiate a new, tripartite INF Treaty