

Deterrence Strategies in a Multilateral World

In response to growing interest among policymakers, the RAND Corporation commissioned a working group to study the issues surrounding nuclear deterrence in the twenty-first century. Our research project, one of the first to receive funding under this initiative, was recently completed, and the members of the working group are in unanimous agreement that a preliminary reporting should be distributed. American defense planning is at a crossroads, and it is essential that the future direction of policy be decided only after a careful review of the facts presented in studies like this one.

Our study was constructed to test whether principles of nuclear deterrence arrived at in a bilateral ($n=2$) world are applicable to a multilateral ($n=3\dots x$) environment. Groups of five to ten individuals participated in scenario driven encounters guided by Rand affiliated researchers. These participants were graduate students drawn primarily from the social sciences, all possessed at least top-secret clearance, and all were self-described as “interested” or “very interested” in international relations. Principal investigators monitored the sessions via one-way mirror, and all exchanges were videotaped in accordance with federal human subject guidelines. Individual interviews were conducted after each session, with participants isolated from one another until completion of the interview. On-site interviews were also conducted one and three months after the initial encounter.

The scenarios explored projected geopolitical crisis points of the next five to fifteen years, emphasizing situations involving American allies and threats to private American interests in excess of US\$1B in potential damages. Each scenario included nuclear and non-nuclear capable actors exhibiting a range of ideologies and degrees of legitimacy, with the scenarios modeled in such a way as to ensure zero sum outcomes. Extraneous factors impacting scenario evolution—bond markets, the Vatican, and such—were gamed by research assistants on loan from the War College. Representative non-classified scenarios included:

Chinese blockade of Taiwan

Rising nationalist sentiment in the PRC, enflamed by a slowing economy and rampant corruption, pushes the Communist Party into seeking immediate Taiwanese reunification. Chinese units armed with advanced force multiplying technologies acquired from the Clinton administration begin enforcing a naval blockade of the island. In response, Taipei activates its lobbyist network in the US, and within hours Congress and the White House are in agreement that America’s national security is threatened. A carrier group is dispatched to break the blockade, which is already threatening world stocks of consumer electronic goods.

Variation: A large percentage of Chinese nationals in the United States prove to be deep-cover infiltrators, and upon activation they begin a surprisingly successful campaign against America’s infrastructure. Especially hard hit are biotechnology firms, university research labs, and institutes of mathematics.

Turkey/Syria conflict over water

Turkey completes its waterworks project at the headwaters of the Euphrates and begins using its control over river flow to advance its regional interests. Syria, led by an increasingly erratic ophthalmologist, responds by calling for a pan-Arabic declaration condemning Turkish unilateralism. Israel announces its willingness to purchase Turkey's surplus fresh water supplies at the prevailing market rate, and in response an outraged Syria begins forward deployment of its nuclear forces: 5 air delivered devices, two vehicle delivered devices, and one suitcase piece. Turkey demands EU sanctioning of the "renegade Syrian state," but EU foreign ministers, busy negotiating their latest condemnation of capital punishment practices in the United States, refuse to intervene.

Variation: Syria's devices are not home grown but were purchased on the international arms market, and only the nation that sold the devices to Syria knows which, if any, will detonate at yield. France's position is further complicated by the need to keep its involvement secret from other EU nations, or face possible censure in Brussels.

Israeli/Arab confrontation over status of Jewish state

Israel's economic growth continues to make the Arab states look like the pathetic, ineptly run dictatorships they are. Arab leaders respond by denouncing Jewish hegemonic intentions, and a mysterious group rumored to have ties to the Saudi royal family begins distributing, "The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion," in the slums of Cairo and Damascus. Israel's dovish prime minister, distracted by a scandal involving the transfer of advanced munitions technologies in exchange for Beijing's support for an Israeli bid to host the Olympic games, dismisses the Arab League statement as, "empty saber-rattling intended only for domestic consumption." Student activists, emboldened by their recent success in pressuring Nike to close its third world operations, invade the Israeli consulates in Detroit and Los Angeles. Yemen announces general conscription. The Israeli military begins relocating the Jewish population into enormous underground bunkers whose existence has been kept secret until this time, while Arab citizens are provided with scooters and canteens.

Variation: The crisis takes place while a UN delegation investigating alleged Israeli war crimes is taking depositions in Jerusalem. UN officials demand that the warring parties observe a cooling off period in order to allow the safe exit of the delegation.

Confrontation between India and a Soviet client state in Pakistan

The Islamic regime in Islamabad, increasingly isolated due to its refusal to recognize international agreements banning child labor, now relies on the recently reconstituted Soviet Union for a large portion of its budget. India, an emerging superpower because of the efforts of returning H1B visa holders, treats the revelation of Soviet advisors in Kashmir as cause for reversing what it believes to be the grossest act of the colonial age: the partitioning of the subcontinent. Upon completion of the Ganesh festival, Indian

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regulars advance into Pakistan which, due to a shortage of spare parts for its American made equipment, is forced to activate its defensive alliance with the Soviets. The Soviet leader, just returned from a successful tour of the Sunday morning talk shows, vows to turn back this counter-revolutionary aggression.

Variation: In the midst of the crisis a once-every-century typhoon, the third in as many years, strikes Bangladesh.

Nuclear capable NGO

A prominent NGO announces that it has acquired a dozen suitcase sized nuclear devices and indicates its willingness to use these devices unless stalled talks on global warming make significant progress. Several island nations, all in danger of disappearing beneath the waters of the Pacific, laud the group's stance. Observers begin to suspect that the NGO has placed a mole in the President's inner circle after a transcript of a conference call between the national security council and the CEO of Exxon appears on the website of a prominent Internet gossip columnist. As the situation deteriorates, the Wall Street Journal publishes an unsigned editorial arguing that events of this sort will continue to occur until the United States returns to the gold standard.

Variation: Efforts to disarm the NGO are complicated by alleged ties between the First Lady and the NGO's reclusive leader, a former child actor.

Our study found that much of the conventional wisdom arrived at under a bilateral nuclear regime is inapplicable to the multilateral age. Some of the more surprising insights include:

Conventional wisdom: Any nuclear exchange is bad.

New wisdom: Not all exchanges are created equal.

Our findings demonstrate that the preference for non-exchange returns few, if any, benefits in situations with $n > 2$ actors. Nuclear devices administered under conventional strategic theory have the effect of freezing existing borders and policy positions, and in a bipolar world dominated by elites with a vested interest in perpetuating a state of conflict this has the effect of promoting a steady state solution. In a multilateral world characterized by asymmetrical resource allocation, however, such a freeze fuels rising tensions and results in more extensive conflict than might otherwise have taken place. In scenarios involving the Kashmir, for example, it was observed that a limited exchange between India and Pakistan, one on the order of three to five devices each, total casualties not more than one hundred million, had the effect of bringing about an overall reduction in tension between the two sides, and an increased commitment on the part of the players to finding an equitable settlement. Reluctance to pursue such a course led, in every case, to a much larger exchange, with almost complete depletion of stockpiles and losses on the order of five hundred million.

Conventional wisdom: Open inspection regimes promote mutual security.

New wisdom: There aren't enough inspectors to survey all of Brazil.

The research suggests that agreements guaranteeing independent inspection and monitoring only increase the rewards to be gained from pursuing a strategy based on concealment and deceit. Treaties of this sort only lulled trusting actors—particularly those representing democratic states—into a false sense of security. This held true for large and small players, and was particularly noteworthy in those scenarios in which one or more participants lacked satellite surveillance systems. The research also suggests that arms control schemes return only negative benefits to actors choosing to adopt a policy of compliance. In fact, participants who evidenced a commitment to control schemes were frequently identified as “suckers” by other actors, with encounter results being generally supportive of such an interpretation.

Conventional wisdom: Strong command and control is vital to ensuring survivability and security.

New wisdom: Lots of footfalls, lots of keys.

The results indicate that strong C&C is counterproductive in an environment where numerically limited strikes—not superpower scale war-gasms—are the rule. Weak, decentralized structures reduce the possibility of beheading through localized attack, a real threat to regional powers. Players gaming Israel repeatedly learned this lesson: more than once a car bomb eliminated much of the IDF general staff, and other actors exploited the resulting crisis in control by launching a decisive strike. Similar results were even evidenced in some scenarios involving the United States, especially those which sought to realistically portray the possibility that the highest levels of the American government had been infiltrated by a secret cadre committed to a restoration of the Southern Confederacy.

Conventional wisdom: A counterstrike capability with high survivability must be the cornerstone of a nation's nuclear forces.

New wisdom: It's all about the first punch.

The data demonstrates that a first strike capability can be decisive, particularly in the case of regional powers with limited arsenals. Counterstrike theory, evidenced most clearly in the MAD doctrine, demands a significant commitment of resources to ensuring the survival of a counterstrike force, but this may not be an economically viable option for small actors. Instead, the study found that small states maximized their returns by exhibiting a willingness to quickly use their nuclear devices. Though this had the effect, at times, of spurring nuclear exchange sooner than it might otherwise have transpired, the advantage gained from a successful first strike was large enough that most actors found the risk of early escalation to be acceptable.

In addition to demonstrating the failings of conventional deterrence theory, our study has immediate implications for the ongoing debate over the deployment of a missile defense system. In particular, our research highlights the pressing need for the United States to develop a broad set of

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nuclear countermeasures. A space-based defense system, coupled with sea-launched interceptors and lasers deployed on commercial class 747s, was found to provide American players with significant benefits in a range of scenario variations, so much so that even the supervising researchers were surprised. Though a defensive technology, a missile shield facilitated the projection of American strategic influence, and the advantages gained were so great that other participants complained that the technology caused American actors to pursue policies far more aggressive than was warranted. In one memorable incident, an American player announced that he had, "already won," and that everyone might as well go home. When prompted by the referee to expand upon this statement, the player declared his intention to, "nuke anybody who doesn't do what I tell them." Further investigation is clearly warranted in order to determine whether this behavior is an understandable consequence of the presence of the defensive shield, or simply an artifact of the scenario method of research, one revealing the inherent difficulty in modeling domestic public opinion.

In light of the overwhelming benefits that America accrued as a result of the missile shield, other actors found it necessary to fund initiatives aimed at circumventing these measures, thereby provoking an escalating exchange of measures and counter-measures. Smaller players, unable to compete at these stratospheric levels of expense and deployment, quickly shifted their resources to the development of low-tech delivery systems like suitcases, shipping containers, and NAFTA-licensed trucking firms. This shift in behavior suggests that US efforts to deploy a space based shield are not enough to secure the homeland, and that there also exists a need to allocate resources to the development of defensive technologies aimed at deterring the possibility of land and sea based strikes. In fact, the evidence demonstrating this need is so strong that the RAND Corporation, in conjunction with DOD, has begun assembling a task force to examine the matter in greater depth. Funding levels remain undetermined, but the initial response suggests that there exist significant Congressional support for such an undertaking.