

# Winning Battles Will Not Be Enough in a Great Power Conflict

Credible deterrence requires more than tactical warfighting concepts  
by Col Thomas C. Greenwood, USMC(Ret)

*“You know you never defeated us on the battlefield,” said the American colonel. The North Vietnamese colonel pondered this remark a moment. “That may be so,” he replied, “but it is also irrelevant.”<sup>1</sup>*

*—Conversation in Hanoi, April 1975*

The on-going debate within each of the Services about how best to re-purpose and, in some cases, significantly re-design Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine combat units to more effectively contribute to a Joint Force that can compete with and, if necessary, fight and prevail against great powers is both necessary and healthy. Necessary because after nearly two decades of conducting Middle East counter-insurgency and nation-building operations, the return of great power competition has significantly altered the global security environment. It requires U.S. forces to re-hone their conventional (and hybrid) warfighting skills to help credibly deter potential adversaries.<sup>2</sup> The debate is also healthy because the concept development process should drive any discussion about how to compete with great power adversaries, which, in turn, informs how military organizations will design, scrutinize, test, adopt, and ultimately implement viable warfighting

approaches to meet tomorrow’s emerging threats.

Yet, much of the discussion to date has focused on the disparate Service approaches’ tactical and operational considerations with scant attention to the broader strategic landscape that shapes military campaigns and imparts purpose to new warfighting concepts being developed by the Services and the Joint Staff.

This article attempts to bridge that gap by suggesting warfighting concepts must do more than promise tactical victory. As reinforced by the Hanoi conversation in the above epigraph, warfighting concepts must also advance

attaining the Nation’s political objectives and promote strategic success as part of a larger joint force design. In the case of China and Russia, this means recognizing and embracing three major imperatives: the need to help the United States avoid a major conventional war with either adversary, finding off-ramps that preserve U.S. national interest should conflict occur, and, most importantly, removing potential catalysts for escalation that increase the likelihood of any great power crossing the nuclear threshold. None of these three imperatives seem to be commanding much attention within the respective services warfighting concepts that are being developed. This must be rectified.

## **Nuclear States Don’t Make War on Each Other**

Nuclear powers generally try to avoid making war on each other because of the risk that conflict could escalate to the point where one or both sides introduces nuclear weapons, potentially triggering an action-reaction response

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that spirals out of control.<sup>3</sup> This “mutual vulnerability” (especially if both sides have a survivable second-strike nuclear capability), where war could produce massive casualties and unprecedented physical destruction, explains why nuclear states have, for the most part, carefully avoided direct confrontation with each other since World War II.<sup>4</sup>

Although the United States devoted significant time and resources to develop and deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Europe during the Cold War for deterrence (war prevention purposes), their warfighting and even strategic utility was constantly questioned. Bernard Brodie, one of the leading U.S. nuclear strategists at that time, was highly skeptical that a *limited* nuclear war would remain *limited* for long. Brodie remarked that it is “difficult to imagine both sides adopting *meaningful limitations* on the use of nuclear weapons, such as would prevent the complete devastation of the Continent.”<sup>5</sup>

This historical context helps rationalize why nuclear states have often focused on carefully using conventional forces or proxies to pursue limited political objectives, manage conflicts toward a viable off-ramp while preserving sufficient political and military maneuver space to secure a negotiated settlement. As Kenneth Payne observed,

Nuclear weapons change the character of warfare. They raise the destructiveness to the point that protagonists cannot realistically use actual force to achieve their goals and struggle to use the *threat* of it coercively. This is radical and, depending on one’s nomenclature, might be considered revolutionary.<sup>6</sup>

### Utility in Non-Use

This does not mean nuclear weapons are irrelevant—quite the contrary. In fact, a central argument of this article is that the Services’ concepts inadequately account for the geo-strategic reality that drives states to shoulder the burden of acquiring, testing, maintaining, and safeguarding nuclear weapons in the first place. Unquestionably, it is to inoculate themselves against regime change and existential defeat. Thus, in



**Throughout the Cold War, the U.S. devoted significant resources to maintaining the Nuclear Triad, including strategic bombers like the B52 Stratofortress.** (Photo by Airman 1st Class Alexa Ann Henderson.)

the context of China and Russia, ongoing unclassified discussions at U.S. war colleges by past and future military planners about how to draft a “theory of victory” fall into the twin categories of surreal and probably unattainable, given that nuclear warfare is not a curriculum priority nor are the connections between conventional and nuclear war well understood.

As Dr. Hoffman has observed,

Some military strategies may be thought of as a ‘theory of victory,’ obtaining a distinct goal over an opponent or adversarial coalition. The idea of a theory of victory is well established at the Army War College and studied by students at the Air University.<sup>7</sup>

But, Hoffman cites the thoughtful work done on this issue by Eliot Cohen and Jeff Meiser and supports their view that a “theory of success” is a more useful approach given that a strategies purpose is “rarely to defeat an adversary but to develop institutional muscle and apply statecraft to [achieve] desire [sic] strategic ends.”<sup>8</sup>

Long before Beijing or Moscow surrenders to the United States in a major conventional war, they will almost assuredly feel compelled to accept the risks and costs of crossing the nuclear threshold to preserve their regimes

and protect their national sovereignty. Thus, in the realm of peace and war, the vernacular statesmen and generals use assumes unparalleled importance and underpins William Martel’s insightful observation that:

When policy-makers use force to achieve political ends, they use the word “victory”, yet its meaning is frequently left unclear. Policy-makers are using force for many purposes other than unconditional surrender, including peace operations, state-building, democracy promotion, counterinsurgencies and counterterrorism. But the language and thinking necessary to provide practitioners and scholars with explanatorily satisfactory definitions of victory in these new situations has not kept pace. The essential problem is that the term victory is imprecisely described as a concept for guiding decisions about the desired outcome in military intervention.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, military interventions are a means to a greater end and not an end unto themselves. So, Martel is correct that the language being used today to describe the strategic outcome great powers seek from a clash of arms with each other begs for much greater specificity than *victory*, *winning*, *destroying*, or *defeating* another hostile power. Espe-

cially if one's adversary possesses nuclear weapons.<sup>10</sup>

### New Thinking about an Old Problem

Nuclear strategist Matthew Kroenig argues that the nuclear balance of power between states not only matters but was the dominant factor in determining the outcome of the four most important crises in the nuclear era: the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the 1969 Sino-Soviet Border War, the 1973 Arab-Israeli Conflict, and the 1999 Kargil Crisis between Pakistan and India. In each case, Kroenig's research revealed that,

nuclear superior states are ten times more likely than their inferior competitors to achieve their goals in a high-stakes crisis ... policymakers pay attention to the nuclear balance of power and believe that it effects their strategic position; nuclear inferior states are less willing to escalate dangerous crises; and nuclear superior states more often achieve their basic crisis objectives.<sup>11</sup>

Surprisingly, his research also reveals that while the conventional military balance of power may have helped "shape" some of each crisis, it played a subordinate role to nuclear weapons in determining the outcome.<sup>12</sup> Kroenig concludes that these case studies validate his "superiority-brinkmanship theory" by demonstrating the nuclear balance of power accelerates crisis resolution in favor of the dominant state.

However, he is overly dismissive of the "nuclear taboo" that every U.S. administration since President Truman's has considered inviolable.<sup>13</sup> This included the United States accepting defeat in Vietnam for fear that expanding the war to achieve "victory" would have made nuclear war more likely.

### Beware of the Underdog

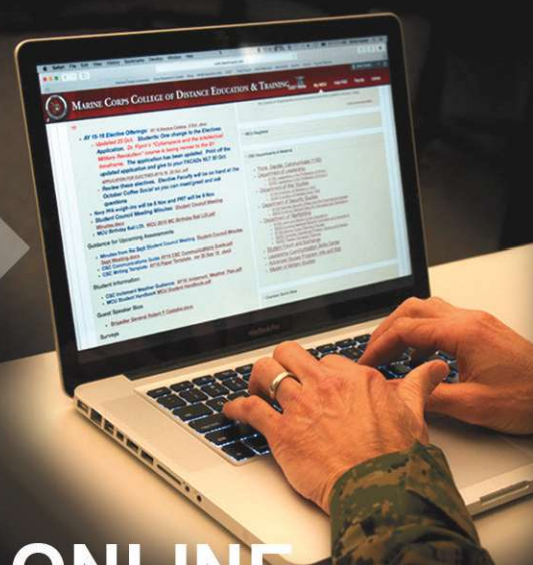
Ironically, in Kroenig's four case studies, the "underdog" state (side with fewer nuclear weapons) initiated each respective crisis but ultimately failed to achieve

its objectives. This was most pronounced in the 1999 Kargil Crisis when Pakistan badly miscalculated that India would not respond militarily to its illegal seizure of abandoned Indian outposts on the Indian side of the Line of Control in disputed Kashmir. In fact, Pakistan thought its small nuclear arsenal would constrain the more powerful India from responding:

neither the conventional military imbalance with India nor the existence of offsetting nuclear capabilities dissuaded Pakistani planners from launching the Kargil infiltration because they (Pakistan) believed that the combination of surprise, military *fait accompli* on superior terrain, and a well-considered denial and deception strategy would impede India from dislodging the troops occupying Indian territory before the onset of winter, which would freeze military posts and thus enable Pakistan to restock its forward military posts and make permanent its territorial gains across the LOC [Line of Control].<sup>14</sup>

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India did respond conventionally by deploying two divisions and aircraft to the disputed sector. Some scholars believe Pakistan's limited nuclear arsenal may have kept New Delhi from escalating horizontally and attacking Pakistani forces elsewhere along the border.<sup>15</sup> But any hopes that Pakistan harbored about its small nuclear arsenal deterring India so it could continue its asymmetric support to the Kashmir insurgency were short-lived.<sup>16</sup>

While nuclear war was ultimately averted between India and Pakistan, a limited conventional war under the "nuclear umbrella" did occur. And Pakistan's excessive risk taking in the crisis prompted a number of scholars to apply the "stability-instability paradox" to the Kargil crisis: nuclear states may achieve a degree of stability in knowing their nuclear adversary is mutually deterred from escalating to employing nuclear weapons. However, this same restraint may foster instability by making lower levels of violence appear more attractive and less risky.<sup>17</sup> In short, Kargil demonstrated that nuclear weapons do not necessarily prevent all forms of war and that escalation, while certainly possible and maybe even likely, is not inevitable.<sup>18</sup> Yet, Kargil also reaffirmed how difficult crisis management and escalation control can be between rival

nuclear powers.<sup>19</sup> Not surprisingly, a new norm emerged after Kargil: nuclear powers might squabble over relatively minor differences, but they almost never fight each other when their vital interests are at stake.<sup>20</sup>

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**Neighborhood Squabbles Gone Deadly**

Today, China's strategic arsenal is inferior to that of the United States and other nuclear states in the West. The imbalance is significant: China has approximately 300 nuclear weapons compared with an estimated 2500+ warheads in the U.S. arsenal, to say nothing of the modes of delivery available to the two sides.<sup>21</sup> Experts believe China will attempt to close this gap in coming decades as it seeks quantitative parity with the United States.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Chinese leaders believe their nuclear weapons are intended to prevent nuclear coercion and deter nuclear attack:<sup>23</sup> being able to execute *assured retaliation* to "survive a first strike and then launch

a retaliatory counterstrike."<sup>24</sup> Importantly, China's leaders do not appear to seriously contemplate engaging in nuclear warfighting (with lower yield tactical/theater level nuclear weapons) or using nuclear weapons to try to deter or defeat conventional threats.<sup>25</sup>

But China's nuclear underdog status should not make the United States complacent. In 1969, 30 years before the Kargil Crisis discussed previously, a major imbalance in nuclear forces did not stop Chinese troops (similar to Pakistani forces at Kargil) from ambushing Soviet forces on the disputed Zhenbao Island in the Ussuri River. The crisis quickly spiraled into a conventional conflict that China could not win; nevertheless, it recklessly signaled that it might use nuclear weapons:<sup>26</sup>

China started a war in which it believed nuclear weapons would be irrelevant, even though the Soviet arsenal was several orders of magnitude larger than China's, just as the U.S. arsenal dwarfs China's today. Once the conventional war did not go as planned, the Chinese reversed their assessment of the possibility of a nuclear attack to a degree bordering on paranoia ... ambiguous wartime information and worst-case thinking led it to take nuclear risks it would have considered unthinkable only months earlier. This pattern could unfold again today.<sup>27</sup>

So much for low-level neighborhood squabbles between nuclear states being non-threatening to global peace and security.

**China's Intermingling of Full Spectrum Capabilities**

Few articles about China's growing military capabilities today discuss the implications of Beijing intermingling its conventional and nuclear forces. This is a major oversight. Beijing could perceive U.S. mainland attacks against China's conventional forces—air defense systems, command and control (C2) networks, and rocket forces, to name only a few—as a preemptive U.S. attack to decapitate communist regime leadership or to destroy China's second-strike nuclear capability.<sup>28</sup> As one scholar has noted, it is a big problem when "nuclear and conventional C2 centers are not



**The sheer mass of China's conventional forces cannot be taken lightly.** (Photo by PO 2nd Class Dominique Pineiro.)



**There has been little written about China's intermingling of conventional and nuclear forces.**  
 (Photo by PO 2nd Class Dominique Pineiro.)

separated but function under the same command. In this case, the escalatory, transitional levels from conventional conflict to a nuclear, inadvertent escalation are blurred. Put differently, nuclear strategy becomes part of conventional fighting through the notion of inadvertent escalation.”<sup>29</sup>

Irrespective of the exact motive Beijing might ascribe to U.S. offensive actions against the Chinese homeland, it would be prudent to assume there would be significant escalatory pressure on China to employ its inferior nuclear arsenal before it had been significantly attrited and Beijing had lost its safeguard against existential defeat.

### Why Fight?

Today, China would likely hesitate to start a shooting war with the United States given that its adroit use of political, economic, and informational power (and coercion) has enabled it to achieve many of its policy goals at a fairly low cost. Remarkably, China has achieved, and is likely to sustain, its asymmetric advantage without “firing the first shot”—a provocative act it knows would earn it international condemnation as an aggressor, and likely serve as a *casus belli* (legal justification) under international law—prompting U.S. and Allied forces to respond in kind. For example,

China has already undermined and penetrated the U.S. treaty alliances with both the Philippines and Thailand. A possible wild card, of course, could be Taiwan if China resorts to force to resolve this long-standing question. While some argue that the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act serves as a defacto Mutual Defense Treaty between Washington

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and Taipei—not to mention the shared democratic, human rights, and rule of law values—it is not pre-ordained that the United States will be willing to escalate toward the conventional-nuclear precipice, even if Taiwan’s fate were in question, given the risks and costs of miscalculation. This is especially true if China uses information, political, and economic warfare vice attempting a cross-channel amphibious assault.

**Game on! But Go Slower, Not Faster**  
 Should a *casus belli* occur and a con-

ventional U.S.-China or U.S.-Russia war begin, a new set of variables related to decision making and the use of force will likely be introduced. First, the White House (along with NATO in the case of Russia) will involve itself in virtually every significant use of force decision: finding an off-ramp and preventing escalation will have become the existential U.S. national security imperative. The singular strategic focus will be ensuring that state-of-the-art, U.S. long-range hypersonic missiles (that can reach deep into an adversaries’ homeland) do not inadvertently trigger unwanted escalation:

Targeting C2 centers was one of the weapons’ first mission during the [G.W.] Bush Administration. The counternuclear mission was directed against rogue states’ nuclear weapons, but those same weapons can also be used against states’ C2 centers that manage conventional weapons systems. In other words, in A2/AD operational environments, long-range weapons that can be fired from outside the enemy’s envelope will acquire further strategic value.<sup>30</sup>

As strategist John Warden astutely observed, this is why such a conventional crisis would quickly become a “competition over the limits on violence” between both sides, as they intentionally impose competing restrictions on the use of conventional force.<sup>31</sup> These limits would be self-imposed as both sides race toward an off-ramp that requires them to demonstrate their commitment to avoiding escalation.

Thus, decision-making authority will likely migrate quickly up the U.S. chain of command—not downward as current military thinking espouses. Civilian leaders will want to carefully calibrate the movement of U.S. ships, planes, and troops as painstakingly as they did during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

Not surprisingly, the U.S. President and his closest advisors were personally involved in *all* four of the case studies (analyzed by Dr. Kroenig) previously discussed in this article. What evidence do we have that the process will be any different in 2030 under similar circumstances?





**U.S. and allied forces are required to contest China's de facto control of the South China Sea region. (PLAN Photo.)**

Critically, decision makers will want to slow things down—not speed them up—so they have time to deliberate over a range of possible off-ramps, bargaining chips, and ways to expand their decision space in order to engage in meaningful negotiations with the other side. This all but guarantees that new rules of engagement will be promulgated across the joint force that are best described as “weapons tight.” Meaning, except in cases of self-defense, the use of deadly force will require positive approval from senior command echelons.

### Early War Termination is Success (and Victory)

A key component in any conventional conflict between rival nuclear states is that both parties must be confident they can achieve an acceptable outcome without resorting to nuclear war.<sup>32</sup> The less favorable the outcome to one party, the more it will be motivated to cross the nuclear threshold.<sup>33</sup> As Jeremiah Rozman notes:

Competition between nuclear powers is like a game of chicken. The side that can convince the other that it cares more is likely to achieve its aims. The adversary's aggression in its own region does not threaten U.S. vital interests, while a U.S. led response would require penetrating and destroying the adver-

sary's defenses that it extends from its homeland to create the A2/AD bubble over the territory that it captured. The adversary would likely see this as a threat to its vital interests.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, the central question for U.S. leadership today is: *Should our conventional warfighting concepts seek the destruction or defeat of U.S. nuclear rivals, when America's grand strategy since the end of World War II has been and remains terminating limited conventional wars before they can escalate and go nuclear?*

The answer is *Yes*. Adversaries must believe the United States has both the military capabilities and political will to use force to prevent a *fait accompli* or serious threats to its vital interests and those of U.S. allies. And, contrary to what Dr. Rozman asserts, these threats will sometimes occur far away from the U.S. homeland in its rivals' backyards. On the other hand, the amount of conventional force applied must be reasonable to achieving the stated political objectives, which—when going against another nuclear armed state—will always be fixated on how to terminate conflict soonest without paying too high a price.

Threading the needle to effectively manage this strategic conundrum will not be easy; however, two near-term actions can potentially help advance this

effort. First, we should take a page out of the Cold War playbook and invest much more in peacetime exercises, operations, and warfighting experiments that not only will build readiness but crucially signal U.S. adversaries. These global events should be DOD-wide, institutional priorities that message just how ready U.S. and Allied forces are to effectively operate across all domains—air, land, sea, space, and cyberspace. Moreover, these peacetime events should be accompanied with aggressive information operations campaigns that highlight U.S. warfighting competence and showcase how we are helping bolster allies and friends in contested regions.<sup>35</sup>

Second, when military planners consider the assumptions and range of options available to the United States should it go to war against China and Russia, they should reflect on how nuclear powers have historically behaved with each other since 1945. Finding ways to impose costs on any adversary that elects to initiate hostilities is necessary and prudent. Over the top rhetoric about defeat mechanisms, victory (in the traditional sense that one side is going to surrender to the other), and regime change inhibits sober strategic thinking about less apocalyptic approaches to achieving a successful outcome and sustaining the peace.

We now live in a world where deterrence portends to be more difficult than winning battles. As Cathal Nolan instructs:

War evolves. Total war seems for now to have slipped back in history, ushered off the stage of policy choices by strategic ICBMs that can deliver complete annihilation even of the mightiest of the Great Powers in under an hour. The balance of terror, of mutual nuclear threat, waits in silos and under arctic ice in silent submarines, however little unwary publics are conscious of that fact since the end of the Cold War lessened their worry but not the capabilities of nuclear states. Tactical even more than strategic nuclear weapons appear to make all-out war by immense conscript armies unnecessary and unwinnable, robbing conventional war as it developed to 1945 among the major states of the power of decision.<sup>36</sup>

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## Notes

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13. See Nina Tannenwald, “The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use,” *International Organization*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, Summer 1999).
14. Peter R. Lavoy, “Introduction: The Importance of the Kargil Conflict,” in *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequences of the Kargil Conflict*, Peter R. Lavoy, ed., (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
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17. Ibid. The originator of the “stability-instability paradox” was Glenn Snyder, “The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror,” in *The Balance of Power*, Paul Seabury, ed., (San Francisco, CA: Chandler, 1964).
18. “Kargil, Deterrence and International Relations Theory.”
19. A similar experience in crisis management occurred during the Cold War with Exercise ABLE ARCHER. In 1983, ABLE ARCHER was thought to have stimulated a war scare inside the Kremlin, resulting in an unprecedented array of Soviet military activities that some parts of the U.S. intelligence community interpreted as escalatory. A 1984 Special National Intelligence Estimate concluded the over-reaction was part of a Soviet propaganda campaign to deter NATO, though a 1990 President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board report deemed the response “a genuine belief on the part of Soviet leaders that [the] U.S. was planning a nuclear first strike.” Although ABLE ARCHER caused a diplomatic kaffuffle, NATO judged the exercises’ strategic lessons as invaluable.
20. “Introduction: the Importance of the Kargil Conflict.”
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