

Managing Risks of Nuclear Escalation

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ENCLOSURE

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Introduction

The Conference Report (House Report 116-120) accompanying H.R. 2500, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2020, requests the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy to provide a report “detailing the Department’s efforts to develop and implement guidance to ensure that the risks of inadvertent escalation to nuclear war are considered within the decision-making process” and to “identify the capabilities and factors taken into account in developing such guidance.”

Avoiding miscalculation and misunderstanding in all contexts and at all times is a steady-state activity on the part of the United States and the Department of Defense (DoD). This report outlines an overall approach and describes ongoing actions that the United States takes to avoid inadvertent escalation that could lead to a nuclear conflict. Prior DoD submissions to Congress have broadly articulated steps DoD takes to reduce risks of escalation in such contexts.

For example, in 2018, the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) and the Joint Staff submitted a report titled, “Reducing the Risks of Miscalculation and Unintended Consequences That Could Precipitate a Nuclear War,” which discussed U.S. messaging, posture, and dialogue regarding Russia, China, and North Korea.¹ And, in 2019, DoD submitted a report drafted by the Institute for Defense Analyses titled, “Presidential Decision Time Regarding Nuclear Weapons Employment: An Assessment and Options,” which described U.S. decision-making processes and options to reduce time pressure in U.S. nuclear weapons employment decision-making.²

Overall Approach

The United States sizes and postures its nuclear forces to achieve credible deterrence and mitigate the risk of inadvertent nuclear escalation. Actions in this area are proactive as U.S. civilian and military officials promote tailored deterrence messages to potential adversaries armed with nuclear weapons. These tailored deterrence messages are designed to clearly communicate U.S. intentions and capabilities, thus lowering the risks of misperception and miscalculation that could lead to inadvertent nuclear escalation.

Expanding on our prior submissions to Congress, there are two broad circumstances that could potentially lead to inadvertent escalation: when military forces are vulnerable to strategic attack and when decision-makers lack situational awareness. The United States recognizes these risks and takes steps to mitigate them through: 1) Messaging; 2) Posture; and 3) Strategic Dialogue and Crisis Communications. Messaging consists of national declaratory policy (both internal and external), public statements, and military exercises. U.S. military posture, both nuclear and non-nuclear, reinforces U.S. messaging as concrete and credible, and further demonstrates U.S. intentions and resolve. Dialogue and crisis communications involve

¹ This report responded to the Conference Report (House Report 115-404) accompanying H.R. 2810, the NDAA for FY2018.

² This report responded Section 1669 of NDAA for FY2019.

government officials, military personnel, and subject matter experts engaging in official and unofficial exchanges to ensure clarity of message.

U.S. messaging, force posture, and strategic dialogue and crisis communications collectively reduce the risks of potential adversaries miscalculating or misperceiving U.S. intentions and that the risks of nuclear escalation outweigh any possible benefit. As stated in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), “Effective U.S. deterrence of nuclear attack and non-nuclear strategic attack requires ensuring that potential adversaries do not miscalculate regarding the consequences of nuclear first use, either regionally or against the United States itself. They must understand that there are no possible benefits from non-nuclear aggression or nuclear escalation. Correcting any such misperceptions is now critical to maintaining strategic stability in Europe and Asia.”

As it relates to deterrence, the NPR states that the adversary’s perception is what matters most – not what the United States believes would best deter itself. That is why the NPR articulates “tailored deterrence strategies” for Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran – “tailored” because they aim to influence the unique perceptions and values of each state’s leadership across a range of scenarios.

In the nuclear context, should deterrence fail and conflict begin, the United States must have options to respond in a way that signals both restraint and resolve. This is why the NPR’s tailored deterrence strategies must be, and are, enabled by flexible options. At its core, U.S. nuclear policy accounts for an adversary’s perceptions at all stages along the spectrum of peace, crisis, and conflict, thereby contributing to stability and reducing the likelihood of adversary misperceptions and miscalculation.

Messaging

The United States reduces the risk of nuclear escalation through consistent credible messaging to potential adversaries starting with the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) and 2017 National Defense Strategy (NDS). The NSS and NDS identify fundamental changes in the overall threat environment – i.e., the shift to great power competition. These documents message both internal and external audiences, clarify U.S. intentions, identify adversary actions we deem threatening, and explain U.S. strategies to counter the threats.

The 2018 NPR builds on the NSS and NDS by laying out U.S. nuclear strategy, posture, and policy. In particular, the NPR states U.S. nuclear declaratory policy:

The United States would only consider the employment of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States, its allies, and partners. Extreme circumstances could include significant non-nuclear strategic attacks. Significant non-nuclear strategic attacks include, but are not limited to, attacks on the U.S., allied, or partner civilian population or infrastructure, and attacks on the U.S. or allied nuclear forces, their command and control, or warning and attack assessment capabilities.

The United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the NPT and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations.

Given the potential of significant non-nuclear strategic attacks, the United States reserves the right to make any adjustment in the assurance that may be warranted by the evolution and proliferation of non-nuclear strategic attack technologies and U.S. capabilities to counter that threat.

By clearly stating U.S. policy goals, as well as posturing its deterrence forces to reflect policy (as discussed in the next section), the United States demonstrates its intentions clearly to adversaries and reduces the possibility of misperception and miscalculation that could lead to an adversary's inadvertent escalation.

Deterrence Posture

The United States also reduces the risk of inadvertent escalation by reinforcing its messaging via training, equipping, and fielding credible military forces able to deter and deny adversary aggression at every level of conflict. The United States postures its forces to best meet deterrence and assurance requirements against the full spectrum of threats. Credible conventional forces, allies and partners, associated plans and guidance all contribute to meeting these deterrence and assurance requirements. The U.S. nuclear deterrent underwrites every U.S. military operation around the world and is the foundation and backstop of our national defense. Although nuclear deterrence strategies cannot deter all conflict, they are essential to deter nuclear attack, non-nuclear strategic attacks, and large-scale conventional aggression. Nuclear forces underpin non-nuclear forces and, combined with conventional forces, make U.S. policy and strategy credible in the eyes of adversaries.

United States nuclear capabilities make essential contributions to the deterrence of nuclear and non-nuclear aggression. The deterrence effects they provide are unique and essential to preventing adversary nuclear attacks and correcting any misperceptions or miscalculations. Thus, the United States maintains the range of flexible nuclear capabilities needed to ensure that nuclear or non-nuclear aggression against the United States and its allies and partners will not achieve the adversary's objectives and instead result in intolerable consequences.

The United States maintains a Triad of nuclear forces, including bombers, submarines, and land-based missiles that ensure survivability – even against a first strike. By having a survivable second-strike capability, U.S. decision-makers maintain full options for a response.

Mitigating the vulnerability of military forces is one aspect of managing escalation. Another aspect is maintaining a robust and survivable nuclear, command, control, and communications (NC3) system. The 2018 NPR addressed this by clearly laying out some of the circumstances that could lead to the United States considering nuclear employment, including an attack on U.S. NC3.³ Additionally, DoD has made modernization of U.S. NC3 systems a high

³ The specific language in the NPR is: "To correct any Russian misperceptions of advantage and credibly deter Russian nuclear or non-nuclear strategic attacks – which could now include attacks against U.S. NC3 – the President must have a range of limited and graduated options, including a variety of delivery systems and explosive yields. These requirements put a premium on the survivability, flexibility, and readiness of Western nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities to hold diverse types of Russian targets at risk throughout a crisis or conflict, and point to the continuing value of the flexibility inherent in the combination of the U.S. nuclear triad, U.S. and other NATO non-strategic nuclear forces deployed in Europe, and the nuclear forces of our British and French allies."

priority. A secure and reliable communications system reduces the risk of misperception and miscalculation.

The United States also employs missile defenses to protect the homeland from rogue state attack and against unauthorized or accidental nuclear launches that could lead to inadvertent escalation.

Finally, DoD has a rigorous plans review process that involves senior leadership across regional and functional areas. This process includes reviewing contingency plans against countries that could employ nuclear weapons against the United States or its allies and partners. The reviews ensure that scenarios in which the adversaries could escalate to nuclear employment are considered in detail.

Strategic Dialogue and Crisis Communication

Open lines of communication have proven useful for increasing understanding, clarifying intentions, and encouraging deconfliction. Communication with potential adversaries, both in peace time and crisis, plays an important part in managing potential conflict and the risks of escalation. However, dialogue requires a willing partner. Despite U.S. overtures, China and North Korea have shown limited genuine interest in substantive dialogue on nuclear issues; while Russia is interested in dialogue, primarily to reduce U.S. power, not for the sake of strategic stability. Nevertheless, the United States has managed to establish some channels of communication that are useful for mitigating inadvertent escalation.

As an example, the United States and Russia maintain a Strategic Security Dialogue to manage nuclear competition and nuclear risks. DoD maintains military-to-military lines of communication with Russia on several issues central to reducing the risks of miscalculation, including dialogues on strategic issues and communication on operational and tactical de-confliction. It is a strategic imperative that the U.S. military maintains reliable lines of direct communication and strategic dialogue with the Russian military for de-confliction, strategic messaging, and crisis-management purposes. Such dialogue reinforces U.S. regional and strategic stability objectives, provides the opportunity to communicate military and operational safety requirements, and offers the means to de-escalate potential crisis situations effectively.

The open channels of communication between senior defense leaders in the United States and Russia have proven invaluable in managing crisis situations and operational de-confliction. For instance, Secretary Esper has opened a line of communication with Russian Minister of Defense Shoygu, employed in four phone calls, three for de-confliction purposes. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) and the Russian Chief of the General Staff (CHOD) have also opened a line of communication. Since 2017, they have met face-to-face on four occasions to discuss broader strategic issues and operational safety concerns. The CJCS-CHOD channel is an effective means to message operational safety concerns involving military forces worldwide. Through this channel, the CJCS has been able to address in greater detail the importance of U.S. national security interests pertaining to both regional and strategic stability issues. This is important for realizing enhanced mutual understanding of military postures and operations. This dialogue serves to calibrate strategic expectations which also enhances stability.

The United States and Russia also have a three-star communication channel for direct and timely communication between the Joint Staff Director for Strategy, Plans, and Policy and the Russian Chief of the Main Operations Directorate of the General Staff. This channel has allowed for the effective management of more detailed communication at the operational and tactical levels, pursuant to CJCS guidance.

The Incidents at Sea Agreement (or INCSEA) allows for regular military interaction with Russia contributing to enhanced operational safety, with regular communication mechanisms to address unsafe incidents when our forces are operating in close proximity. In addition to communication on such incidents through Naval Attaché channels, annual meetings allow for addressing prospective incidents in more detail and for dialogue to suggest new safety measures and procedures for future close-proximity situations.

DoD engages with the People's Republic of China (PRC) People's Liberation Army (PLA) on policy issues, including the DoD's efforts to prevent and manage crisis and reduce risk of conflict. DoD's requests to meet with the PLA about nuclear forces and policy have been routinely rebuffed; however, DoD continues efforts to establish crisis communications with the PLA as a line of effort to de-escalate incidents before they become crises.

Although negotiations on denuclearization are ongoing with North Korea, the risks of inadvertent escalation has not been a deliberate agenda item for bilateral discussion.

The United States also has participated in the P-5 process at the United Nations which is another forum where the United States, Russia, and China can discuss important issues such as nuclear doctrine, forces, and strategy. The last meeting was on the margins of the U.N. First Committee in December 2019. DoD expects there will be further engagements in 2020.