Introduction

As we survey the world today, we find the nuclear landscape to be more uncertain and precarious than it has been at any time since the end of the Cold War. In recent years, Russia has taken to routinely rattling its nuclear saber—publicly embracing the value and utility of nuclear weapons while rejecting further nuclear arms control efforts—in an effort to intimidate its smaller neighbors and to test European unity along the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) periphery. North Korea’s expansion and diversification of its nuclear arsenal and associated delivery platforms, combined with Kim Jong-un’s penchant for provocation, has raised the risk of nuclear coercion and undermined confidence in current deterrence approaches. Meanwhile, nuclear competition between Pakistan and India continues to grow, spurred on by Pakistan’s now-open acknowledgment of a range of “tactical” nuclear weapons as part of their “full spectrum deterrence.” And China, unabashed in its desire to assert greater regional dominance, is modernizing, diversifying, and hardening its nuclear forces while simultaneously enhancing complementary capabilities in space, cyber, and advanced missile systems. Over a quarter century past the fall of the Berlin Wall, nuclear dangers appear to be growing rather than receding, contributing to an increasingly complex security environment.

Yet, in spite of a landscape so fraught with nuclear perils, we also see deepening discontent with the very notion of nuclear deterrence. Recent political trends in Europe and in the United States indicate a growing skepticism about the benefits of the internationalist system on which deterrence, and especially extended deterrence, depends. We hear a growing chorus of voices questioning its legitimacy, dividing the global community between the nuclear have and have-nots: indeed, the United Nations will begin negotiations this upcoming March on a nuclear weapons treaty ban for which none of the nuclear weapons—possessing states have indicated any support.

Why, then, in the face of such concerning nuclear challenges, is there so little consensus in the United States and abroad about the importance of the U.S. nuclear arsenal in assurance, deterrence, and stability, and about what these changes mean for declaratory policy and
capabilities? Why are the divisions and disagreements—at home and abroad—about U.S. nuclear policy and posture deepening? Do those of us within the nuclear policy establishment, who might be considered members of the so-called Washington elite, see the security environment clearly and correctly, or are we operating in a self-defining echo chamber that limits our ability to understand the security environment as much of the world sees it?

Deterrence depends fundamentally on our ability to shape both our adversaries’ and allies’ perceptions and calculations of risk. It is a conversation between and among allies and adversaries, designed to convince adversaries that the risks of conflict far outweigh any potential benefits and to assure allies relying on U.S. security guarantees that this conversation is working to protect their core interests. Credibly doing both, in turn, rests on a shared understanding of the risks or threats that shape the global security environment; the nature and value of the global security architecture that shapes and governs this environment; and, finally, the role of the United States in the global security system.

Our security environment is shifting in ways that will have unexpected implications for nuclear deterrence. Yet it seems that even these basic perceptions are not, in fact, strongly shared today. Moreover, the nuclear policy establishment’s tendency to talk in a “nuclear silo”—with only those other members in this small community, and in jargon largely inaccessible to those outside the field—has at least partially contributed to these divisions.

A more candid discussion of the role of nuclear deterrence in U.S. national security strategy going forward must include a more panoramic view of the world—one that not only takes into account our security challenges in their varied forms, but that also honestly recognizes the place of the United States, and specifically its nuclear deterrent, in relation to those challenges. We cannot have the same discussion we have had the last two decades. We see why not as we climb out of the nuclear bubble:

**A New Generation**

Fully one-third of the United States’ population was born after the Cold War ended. Members of this generation have no experience with, and little knowledge of, the threats that shaped our security environment for nearly 50 years and the defining role played by nuclear deterrence in keeping the peace. The language, experience, and concepts of the Cold War do not resonate with or inspire a generation that did not live through it and that is consumed with a range of contemporary problems. During the Cold War, nuclear dangers loomed large and figured prominently in the public discourse. Civil defense efforts—“duck and cover”—ensured that
Americans knew the fear of nuclear weapons even as we survived the entire period by deterring their actual use. Nothing has arisen to re-explain deterrence in contemporary terms that address the world of today and tomorrow, rather than of yesterday.

This is the demographic reality all over the world. This generation does not take our assumptions—about the role of nuclear weapons in our national security or about the role of the United States in the world—at face value.

**Alternative Threat Perception**

Other strategic threats, such as global warming, capture the imagination and anxieties of this generation because it experiences them. Cyber threats, for example, are part of every American’s daily life. Cyberattacks against the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and Sony Pictures—and, most recently, the Democratic National Committee—are known for having exposed sensitive personnel files and confidential data. Increasingly, however, cyber criminals have also used ransomware to hold companies’ and individuals’ computers and smart phones hostage. In the first three months of 2016 alone, such criminals collected $209 million from victims. These threats are ubiquitous and do not need to be explained because they are experienced. Threats that require us to sustain a strategy of deterrence must seem very distant and remote to this generation.

**Nationalist Trends**

The end of World War II brought about an internationalist era of transcending systems and structures—alliances, the European Union, NATO, and the United Nations—built on a belief that mutual dependencies and entanglements contribute to stability and the prevention and management of conflict. These systems were based on shared values and principles, and they were sustained by habits of cooperation. Taken together, they form much of the anatomy—backbone, nervous system, and muscle—of our structures for deterrence and, especially, extended deterrence.
Today, we are in the grips of fractious, nationalistic politics, and polarized, politicized policymaking, both at home and abroad. In Europe and the United States, the rise of political players and parties that do not share this internationalist, progressive view of the world suggests an implicit rejection of our assumptions about the benefits of such globalized institutions. Increasingly, more nations are looking inward and perceiving more burden than burden-sharing in collective relationships and alliances. The resulting strain on these systems and structures, so foundational to the foreign policy and national security establishment, is tremendous.

**Brexit**

The vote for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union in June of last year was our first wake-up call that the status quo is not assured and the current political establishment may not prevail. We have only begun to understand the implications of these dynamics with our closest ally and nuclear partner—the United Kingdom—and, by extension, NATO. While it may be true that the UK’s own modernization program is underway—the first steel plate of the new Dreadnought-class submarine was cut in October—the book has yet to be fully written given deep divisions over the Brexit vote and the prospects for renewed efforts at Scottish independence.

Should a Scottish referendum post-Brexit succeed, Scotland’s independence would throw open the fate of the U.K.’s nuclear deterrent (which is based in Scotland), given that the Scottish National Party has stated its desire to remove nuclear weapons from Scotland. The implications for the U.K., should it need to relocate its nuclear submarines, could be significant. Today, three independent nuclear weapons states (the United States, the United Kingdom, and France) share common values, perspectives, and commitments regarding the role of their nuclear forces and their responsibilities as stewards of nuclear weapons. Were three to suddenly become two, deterrence would in turn become weaker.
Crackdown in Turkey

The United Kingdom is not the only NATO ally with whom we share nuclear deterrence responsibilities that is facing great challenges. In Turkey, the full impact of the failed coup attempt in July, and the subsequent widespread crackdown across all sectors of Turkish society by President Erdogan, still has yet to be fully determined.

At the time of the coup, many experts were calling for the removal of U.S. nuclear weapons at the Incirlik air base in Turkey. The ramifications of such a significant policy change, however, remain unclear. What are the implications for NATO, as a nuclear alliance in which multiple countries share responsibility for deterrence? Would the calls for removal start and stop with Turkey? Would the Turkish government reassess its role in or commitment to NATO?

Human Displacement and Dislocation

Amid a shifting political status quo and increased security challenges on its periphery, Europe has simultaneously been consumed with a migration crisis emerging to its south. Sixty-five million people are currently forcibly displaced from their homes and communities, many forced to move multiple times in and out of their country of origin. That figure, which jumped from 59.5 million in 2014 and has risen by 50 percent in five years, is mind-boggling. It is rewriting global demography and challenging the fundamental principles of progressive societies. We now have country-size populations on the move—fleeing conflict, violence, and economic ruin in ways unprecedented since the end of World War II.

As millions flow into Europe via much of the Middle East and Africa, a disturbing number is also flowing out. Approximately 4,000 European nationals have joined radical groups as “foreign fighters,” creating unprecedented outflows of would-be extremists, potential jihadists, and, in some cases, extremists of convenience—cults of the twenty-first century. These lost souls, in search of purpose and belonging, are emerging from the disaffected populations across Europe and the West—Paris, Brussels, Nice, and Munich may only be the beginning of a new terror-driven reality.
The days of Europe as a net exporter of security, bound in transatlantic partnership with the United States, may not be assured when the world’s demographics are being rewritten in such fundamental ways.

A Potential Weakening of the Westphalian System

More than 40 percent of the world’s countries are facing severe challenges in security, governance, and stability. 2015 saw a nearly 50 percent increase from 2014 in the number of countries that saw measurable decreases in indicators of political, social, and economic health. When we take into account the geographic concentration of these countries in the Middle East and Africa, the picture is even more startling.

If Europe and the United States are feeling unprecedented pressure on the transatlantic security architecture, these numbers tell the story of a potentially even bigger shift—a deep and widespread weakening of the Westphalian system of nation states. If our nuclear arsenal is designed to deter nations, what happens if nations go away? Or if they are so weak that they cannot exercise sovereignty?

The Arctic: No-Go No More

Looking further north, we see pressure building across a maritime domain that has grown increasingly complex and contested in a very short period of time. The Arctic used to be a no-go zone—more or less irrelevant for the continuous, “anytime, anywhere” requirements of our sea-based deterrent. With sea-ice coverage declining at rapid rates, no-go will soon be no more.

Russia has invested heavily in a militarized Arctic, building six military bases north of the Article circle, in a clear attempt to dominate the increasingly navigable region. Russia currently possesses 41 heavy icebreakers—which might not seem like many, until we recall that the U.S. Coast Guard only has two heavy icebreakers, one of which is primarily a research vessel. Russia’s strategic nuclear presence in the region has many of our northern European partners taking notice and sounding the alarm.
A Shifting Tide in the Asia Pacific

Challenges to the maritime domain are not limited to the Arctic. The Asia-Pacific region is currently experiencing a number of contested claims, increasing gray-zone tensions and conflict, as well as growing nuclear competition and expanding investments in submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) capabilities from all of the nuclear-armed states in the region (China, India, Pakistan, and North Korea).

The region encapsulates today’s multipolar world: conflicts there would simultaneously strike at the heart of U.S. deterrence and assurance capabilities in highly complex ways. The region also sits at the nexus of rising global power competition, as countries deal with Chinese political and military expansion and the U.S. response to this changing landscape.

The Humanitarian Pledge

Finally, fully 60 to 80 percent of the world’s countries do not believe in the value of nuclear deterrence or assurance even in the face of growing nuclear threats. At the 2012 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Preparatory Committee meeting, only 16 countries supported a statement calling for total elimination of nuclear weapons. By the time of the 2015 Review Conference, that number stood at 159. The 2015 NPT Review Conference “Humanitarian Pledge” joint statement included the following: “The only way to guarantee that nuclear weapons will never be used again is through their total elimination. All States share the responsibility to prevent the use of nuclear weapons, to prevent their vertical and horizontal proliferation and to achieve nuclear disarmament, including through fulfilling the objectives of the NPT and achieving its universality.”

It is unclear whether this is an inexorable trend, but this is a movement to be taken seriously. In October, the UN General Assembly approved Resolution L.41—which calls for the UN to begin negotiating on a nuclear weapons ban treaty next year—by a nearly one to four margin, with 123 countries in favor, 38 against, and 16 abstentions. At some point, these numbers have a weight all their own, speaking to a growing disaffection with the broader NPT system.
The Twenty-first-Century Deterrence Conversation

Deterrence is, at its core, a dialogue—and, as such, rests on three questions: Can we be heard? Are we listening? And are we understood?

It seems that the answer to these questions nowadays is, increasingly, no. Members of the nuclear policy community, in the United States and abroad, bear a responsibility to help move toward a more inclusive, publicly accessible conversation about why nuclear deterrence is relevant to today’s challenges.

The November 2016 CSIS report, The Evolving U.S. Nuclear Narrative: Communicating the Rationale for the Role and Value of U.S. Nuclear Weapons, focused the way we communicate with our nuclear workforce about why the U.S. nuclear arsenal remains important to the post–Cold War strategy of the United States and to the security of the American people. The report argues that, much to our own detriment, those of us most equipped with the experience and knowledge to describe nuclear weapons policy have tended to do so with highly sophisticated strategic logic dependent on concepts and jargon—such as “hedge,” “strategic stability,” “escalation,” and so on—that are not routinely defined or explained. In some cases, this has gone so far as to suggest a degree of intellectual elitism and exclusivity, raising the requirements for participation so that we end up talking to ourselves and speaking our own language rather than reaching out to others outside of nuclear policy circles.

“Establishment” nuclear policymakers and experts too often take for granted that others will prioritize, or even take an interest in, nuclear issues as we do. We forget that when we policy elites look at a security environment with rising nuclear powers, the threat of miscalculation, and the sustained importance of deterrence, others see a much different picture. To many, today’s nuclear dangers—when juxtaposed against a world of unprecedented levels of political upheaval, displacement, and human suffering—are either an unlikely risk that had long since gone with the fall of the Berlin Wall or a threat for which the United States and its allies bear the blame. And, as a result, we wonder why nuclear issues take a backseat, when we have yet to make a convincing case that they should still take a prominent position alongside other pressing questions.

Can we talk about the importance of nuclear deterrence without appearing nostalgic about “the Cold War days when everyone understood” or suggesting that the future lies in a return to the past? Can we look outside the nuclear bubble, but still draw connections to how those problems affect nuclear deterrence? Can we not only speak differently, but also listen more carefully to those outside the nuclear community? I believe that we must, if we are to convince anyone that this deterrence-assurance conversation is one worth having.

This piece has been adapted from a talk given on July 27, 2016, at the U.S. STRATCOM Deterrence Symposium. The views expressed above are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Project on Nuclear Issues, the U.S. government, or any of its agencies.
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