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Nuclear Deterrence and Arms Control Agreements between three Peer Adversaries

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NUCLEAR DETERRENCE BETWEEN THREE PEER ADVERSARIES



Naval
Postgraduate
School

Problem Statement: Is classic nuclear deterrence strategy effective between three nuclear armed peers?

- China has emerged as a peer military and economic adversary to the United States. This changes the balance of power and dynamics of nuclear deterrence.
- Traditional nuclear deterrence strategy was based on the cold war reality of a bi-lateral contest between the US and USSR.
- Sino-Russian relations have improved and are better than they have been since the 1950s placing US in uncharted waters in the realm of nuclear deterrence. Some nuclear deterrence assumptions may require re-evaluation



Sino-Russian relations are better than they have been since the 1950s

Research Questions and Methodology

Students participating in the Space Nuclear Command, Control, and Communications (SNC3) certificate present their findings to the following questions:

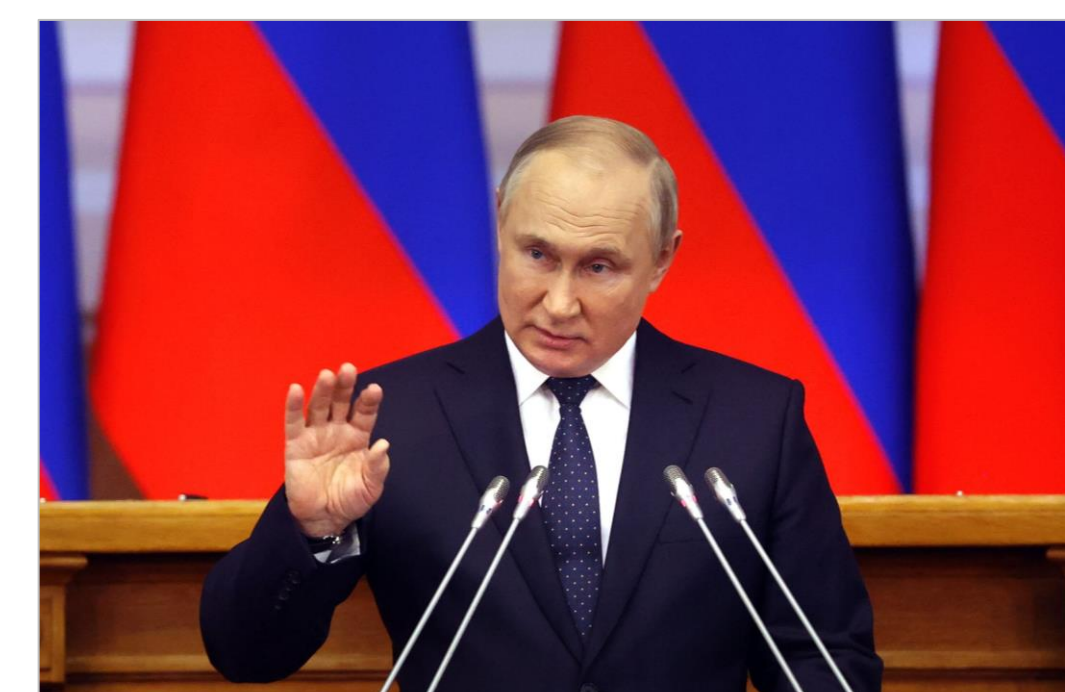
- How does the dynamics of nuclear deterrence change when there are three peer nuclear adversaries?
- How might the new peer adversary's behavior change as they move status within the nuclear deterrence framework?
- How might the current peer adversary behavior change as a third peer actor change the deterrence framework?



After decades of minimum deterrence, China is increasing the size of its nuclear arsenal and adding newer and more advanced weapons

Research Results

- Russia and the US extended the New Start Treaty until Feb 6, 2026, which constrains them from nuclear arms growth, but no such agreement exists to constrain China.
- Russia and the US should continue to reduce the number of weapons in their respective arsenals. Still, the current world situation makes cooperation very difficult, especially US-Russian relations, due to Russia's war in Ukraine.
- The US should consider diplomatic or economic incentives to convince Beijing that growing its nuclear arsenal is not in its best interests.
- The US should work to find common ground with China and mutually pressure Russia to reduce the size of its nuclear weapons arsenal if possible. In the meantime, bilateral arms agreements between the US and China should be a strategic goal if trilateral agreements are not possible.



The US must reassess its nuclear deterrence strategy in light of developments in Russia and China

Recommendations for Further Research

- Research what agreements China would be willing to make in exchange for reducing or maintaining a relatively small nuclear weapons arsenal.
- Commission the US Naval War College Wargaming Department to conduct a wargame, or series of wargames, to study the problem of trilateral nuclear deterrence.



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Topic Sponsor: N3/N5 – Plans & Strategy

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Technical Report:
Nuclear Deterrence and Arms Control
Agreements between three Peer Adversaries