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2022

# Strategy and Conventional-Nuclear Integration for the Navy

Russell, James A.; Larsen, Jeffrey A.; Wirtz, James J.

Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School

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## NPS NRP Executive Summary

Strategy and Nuclear-Conventional Integration for the United States Navy

Period of Performance: 10/15/2021 – 10/21/2022

Report Date: 10/21/2022 | Project Number: NPS-FY-22 257-A

Naval Postgraduate School, National Security Affairs (NSA)



NAVAL RESEARCH PROGRAM  
NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL  
MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

# STRATEGY AND NUCLEAR-CONVENTIONAL INTEGRATION FOR THE UNITED STATES NAVY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Principal Investigator (PI):** Dr. James A. Russell, National Security Affairs

**Additional Researcher(s):** Dr. James J. Wirtz, National Security Affairs; Dr. Wade Huntley, National Security Affairs; Dr. Thomas Johnson, National Security Affairs

**Student Participation:** LT Joshua Hudson USN, National Security Affairs; LT Dan Feeney USN, National Security Affairs

**Prepared for:**

Topic Sponsor Lead Organization: N3/N5 - Plans & Strategy

Topic Sponsor Name(s): Curt Buckles, N3/N5 Strategic Deterrence Policy Adviser

Topic Sponsor Contact Information: [curtis.i.buckles.civ@us.navy.mil](mailto:curtis.i.buckles.civ@us.navy.mil); 703-693-2775

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### Project Summary

The Navy is confronting a new era of potential war on the high seas against two-nuclear armed adversaries: Russia and the People's Republic of China. Russia is threatening to use nuclear weapons in its war against Ukraine—one of the theaters of which includes the Black Sea. China has been engaged in a series of operations across the Indo-Pacific domain designed to create a political environment favorable to the PRC. The People's Liberation Army-Navy has been instrumental to this effort across the Indo-Pacific's maritime domains. The Navy today thus confronts the prospect of maritime conflict in these theaters with nuclear states. It must address how and under what circumstances it will integrate its conventional and nuclear weapons across the full spectrum of conflict, ranging from non-kinetic, gray zone-type encounters all the way up the escalatory chain to a nuclear exchange. At present, the Navy (and the other services) conceptualize warfare in discrete areas: conventional, chemical, biological, cyber, and nuclear. This project addresses the Navy's challenges in developing a coherent conceptual framework that recognizes the linkages between all these domains of warfare, with particular emphasis on nuclear and conventional weapons.

**Keywords:** *nuclear weapons, conventional weapons, warfighting concepts, escalation ladder, deterrence, maritime strategy* **Keywords:**

### Background

Traditional operational, tactical, and intellectual divisions between different domains of warfare have been all but eliminated in the modern era. It is increasingly apparent that war has been and is being waged in many different domains simultaneously: kinetic conventional operations on land and sea and in the air, information operations across communications domains, cyber operations that affect military and non-military targets, and space operations that reach across all domains. Nuclear weapons are certainly part of this framework, sitting as the ultimate "guarantor" of escalation dominance to states with these weapons. Within these domains, there has always been a kind of "firewall" between using nuclear and conventional weapons in war, with nuclear weapons thought of as discrete weapons with discrete (and strategic) capabilities that would only be employed in the direst circumstances.

That said, this "firewall" between nuclear and conventional weapons conceptually and operationally has remained somewhat tenuous. During the Cold War, the Western alliance envisioned nuclear weapons as part of an "escalation ladder" that would deter the Soviet Union from invading Western Europe and, in the event of war, would allow the West to prevail using nuclear weapons if necessary. The Navy's role in this history is of central importance. During the Cold War, it routinely deployed thousands of nuclear weapons at sea, ranging from tactical to strategic weapons (in the case of submarine-launched ballistic missiles). Like the other services, the Navy participated in the fielding and deployment of these weapons to its operational components.

The global strategic landscape has changed since the end of the Cold War, and the Navy's conception of the role played by nuclear weapons must be rethought.

This study sits at the nexus of the central challenge facing the United States Navy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Navy N3/N5 organization requires answers to the following questions that are addressed in this report:



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1. How can the Navy best posture itself to integrate nuclear and conventional weapons across the different domains of war?
2. Does the Navy need a different mix of nuclear and conventional weapons to preserve and strengthen integrated deterrence?
3. What is the appropriate relationship between conventional and nuclear weapons in the structure of integrated deterrence as enunciated by the National Command Authority?

To answer these questions, the study draws upon the security studies and international relations literature that addresses the issues of deterrence, conflict escalation, coercive political strategies, and arms races. The research team uses this literature as a baseline to analyze the Navy's problem set in posturing itself across the domain. The study recommends steps that the Navy should take to address the strategic environment with respect to the integration of conventional and nuclear weapons.

### **Findings and Conclusions**

This study finds that the Navy needs to relearn some of the lessons from the Cold War, when it integrated conventional and nuclear weapons into its operational planning and linked its force structure with ideas of wartime escalation management and nuclear deterrence. This study confirms that the Navy needs to consider its Cold War-era approaches to consider such issues as:

- (1) the appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional weapons carried aboard ships; and
- (2) developing plans to integrate its systems for cross-domain operations that reflect the requirements of the "all domain" war that links conventional and nuclear weapons.

The literature on deterrence and nuclear weapons and their role in national security strategy provides a good starting point for the Navy to develop a conceptual framework to apply naval power in this complex strategic environment. This can be done in part through education of the mid- and senior-level leaders facing these challenges. This conceptual framework can form the basis for exercises and experiments to explore the ideas as applied in different regional scenarios.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

A central finding of this study is that the Navy and the United States need much greater fidelity on the dynamics of the relationship between different warfare domains. Stated differently, there is much that the Navy does not know about how deterrence does and does not work as it contemplates the integration of conventional and nuclear weapons. The findings of this report suggest that the Navy investigate how to further operationalize strategies of deterrence across warfare domains. A means to such an end can be accomplished via table-top exercises and/or visits of research teams to key friends and allies across the geographic commands to establish common understandings on nuclear deterrence and multi-domain war.

### **References**

N/A

### **Acronyms**

N/A

