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Strategic Insights: Thinking About Catastrophe: The Army in a Nuclear Armed World

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Nothing is more important to American security than nuclear weapons. Despite all the fretting over terrorism, hybrid threats, and conventional aggression, only nuclear weapons can threaten the existence of the United States and destroy the global economy.

This is certainly not news to American policymakers and military strategists: they have recognized the centrality of nuclear weapons at least since the Soviets detonated their first atomic bomb in 1949. But so far, U.S. strategy has focused almost exclusively on deterring attacks from a hostile nuclear state, preventing unfriendly nations from acquiring nuclear weapons and, after the break up of the Soviet Union, keeping nuclear weapons out of the hands of terrorists.

These missions remain vitally important, but today there is an additional, less understood, element of the nuclear threat. As more states join the nuclear club, including some with brittle or unpredictable regimes, a conflict not involving the United States could escalate to the nuclear level or a government could lose control of nuclear weapons or see them used during a large scale civil war. A catastrophe of this sort would devastate the global economy and environment, destroy political stability across entire regions, and unleash an unprecedented humanitarian disaster.

This means that American strategists and political leaders must expand the way they think about nuclear weapons. In addition to the traditional deterrence and efforts to control what are often called "loose nukes," the United States must now consider stabilization, relief, and reconstruction operations following a nuclear exchange, and large scale, protracted operations to deal with loose nukes after the collapse of a government or during a major internal conflict. The Army would play a leading role in operations of this sort.

Imagine a brittle, corrupt, ineffective or repressive government facing mounting internal opposition including large-scale public protests and riots; intense criticism from social media; factionalism within the elite; escalating terrorism and internal violence; economic stagnation, inflation, and widespread unemployment; and military discontent. If history is a guide, the beleaguered regime would particularly fear its armed forces.

To Americans, it might seem that the logical reaction would be to address the causes of discontent and undertake serious reform. However, brittle and repressive regimes can read history too. They know that reform can easily spiral out of the control and lead to the regime's demise. Many dictators who tried to placate intense opposition with reform ended up dead or in exile. There are other options that might seem appealing. Sometimes crackdowns and increased repression works. Another time tested response is distraction: by trumpeting an external threat, the regime inspires its opponents to "rally 'round the flag." Importantly, the armed forces, which are the most proximate threat to a beleaguered regime, will tend to shift their focus to the external threat rather than the shortcomings of its government.

History is littered with examples of beleaguered regimes attempting strategic distraction. Sometimes the results were tragic—think the seizure of the Falkland Islands by the Argentinian military dictatorship in 1982—but not catastrophic. In a world of nuclear states, though, distracting the public, elites, and armed forces from internal problems by external assertiveness could lead neighboring states or adversaries to counter escalate, thus beginning a slide toward doomsday. After all, that is exactly how World War I began.

In the modern era, though, doomsday might not mean four years of horrific trench warfare, but a nuclear strike or exchange by frightened states convinced that lashing out is their only chance of survival. Unfortunately, the more brittle a regime, the greater the chances it will attempt to distract attention from its flaws.

The path to doomsday could also begin with civil war or regime collapse in a nuclear armed state. Nuclear weapons might fall into the hands of malfeasant or desperate forces willing to use them or willing to sell them to buy conventional weapons and pay fighters. The bigger, more complex, and chaotic the nuclear state, the greater the danger posed by regime collapse and internal conflict.

Of today's nuclear states, North Korea is the most brittle and unpredictable. If nuclear weapons are used in the next few decades, odds are that Pyongyang will be the culprit. To deter this as much as possible, official U.S. policy should state that any use of nuclear weapons by North Korea will result in occupation and regime change. Only the White House can develop such a policy and it should obtain congressional backing as well, but

the U.S. military, particularly the Army, can make it more credible by demonstrating its ability to not only destroy North Korean military targets, but also to occupy and stabilize that nation if necessary. Deterrence requires capability, communication, and credibility. The better the U.S. military is at being capable of removing and replacing the North Korean regime, the less likely North Korea will believe that it can get away with using nuclear weapons. Admittedly, China would be opposed to such a policy, but that could have benefits, clarifying the risks of North Korea's behavior and encouraging Beijing to be more active in controlling that dangerous nation.

The risk of external assertiveness escalating to the point of a nuclear exchange is less likely for other nuclear states, but the risk is greater than zero. For instance, Pakistan's support for terrorist attacks on India (or at least tacit acceptance of them) could ignite an escalating conflict. If India was the victim of a mass casualty terrorist attack perhaps on an even larger scale than the 2008 Mumbai one, it might feel compelled to respond with force. If the government in Islamabad saw this as an existential threat, it might respond with nuclear weapons, whether through a direct strike on India or a demonstration. That could lead New Delhi to conclude that it had no option other than a nuclear counterstrike.

Escalation to the nuclear level by Russia and China may be less likely but still conceivable. Imagine, for instance, that both devolve into large scale civil war where one or both of the combatants control nuclear weapons. Faced with annihilation, one side might decide that a nuclear strike on its opponent was justified and necessary. Either could resort to external aggression as a distraction from internal problems as well, thus increasing the chances of escalation.

In all likelihood the U.S. military would not be ordered to occupy major nations after a nuclear exchange, but it might be committed to a massive multinational relief, stabilization, and reconstruction operation. This would be the most challenging mission of that type ever undertaken, dwarfing even post-World War II occupation operations in Asia and Europe. Among other things, the U.S. military would have to function in a highly contaminated and utterly chaotic environment, possibly for years.

It is hard to overstate what a challenge this would pose. Traditionally "big Army" had only a minor supporting role in nuclear missions, mostly through air defense, logistics, and intelligence. In operations after the use of a nuclear weapon or a nuclear exchange, the Army would play a leading rather than a supporting role.

Even though unlikely, a post-nuclear military operation is plausible and challenging enough that the Army should be thinking about it. For starters, the Army should commission a wide range of research on the challenges of operating in a post-nuclear setting to include scenarios like how to maximize the use of autonomous systems and best

practices (if there are any) in re-establishing functionality in totally shattered societies. Then, Joint and Army wargaming should build on the research. An annual wargame or colloquium on stabilization after a nuclear exchange could be invaluable. Along these same lines, the Army should use its extensive global network with other militaries, research institutes, nongovernmental organizations, intergovernmental organizations, and academic institutions to start and sustain analysis on relief, stabilization, and reconstruction following a nuclear exchange.

Hopefully a post-nuclear military operation will never be necessary. However, if it does, the effort spent thinking it through, even planning for it, will be invaluable. Given the Army's unique skill set, it is well positioned to lead this.

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