

DECISIVE POINT

The USAWC Press Podcast Companion Series

Podcast Transcript

Cliff R. Parsons

“Deterring Russian Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons: A Revised Approach”

A change in deterrence thought and strategy is necessary to avoid nuclear escalation in armed conflict with Russia. Traditional threat-based deterrence strategies will not be successful, and a new strategy must address the conditions that might cause Russian leadership to employ nuclear weapons. An examination of the Able Archer 83 exercise using an original framework highlights the ways Russian interests and US actions interact to generate misperception and inhibited deterrence. The US military must execute extremely restrained, deliberate, and empathetic operations that pursue minimalist military objectives to achieve the political goal.

Read the article [here](#).

Email usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.parameters@army.mil to give feedback on this podcast or the genesis article.

Keywords: deterrence, nuclear, misperception, Russia, multidomain operations

Episode Transcript

Stephanie Crider (Host)

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Major Cliff Parsons is in the studio with me to discuss his article, “[Deterring Russian Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons: A Revised Approach](#),” which was published in the Winter 2023–24 issue of *Parameters*. Parsons is an Army strategist and Art of War scholar. He's currently a student at the Basic Strategic Art Program at the US Army War College.

Welcome to Decisive Point, Cliff.

Cliff Parsons

Hi, Stephanie. Thank you so much for having me.

Host

In the article, you offer the Interests, Action, Misperception (IAM) framework as a tool to deter the use of nonstrategic nuclear weapons through dissuasion rather than threat. Why is this approach the right one (for) the current strategic context?

Parsons

So, let me first start by defining dissuasion. Dissuasion is a much broader deterrence approach than traditional coercive-based approaches. So, deterring by denial or punishment relies on a threat or a negative incentive to, you know, persuade an adversary not to take an action. Dissuasion, on the other hand, really opens up the possibility of using negative, neutral, and even positive incentives to persuade an adversary not to take an action. So neutral and positive incentives include actions like distraction, rewards, and really what I want to focus on, which is restraint.

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So, assuming that Russia and the (United States) US are in armed conflict, I argue that traditional deterrence approaches like denial and punishment are not going to be effective. (I) can't reliably deny the utility of Russian nonstrategic nuclear weapons, which I'll refer to from now on as “NSNW.” If vital interests are at stake, (then) punishment is not going to be effective either. Instead, the focus should be on removing the perception that a Russian leader may have that nuclear use is necessary to begin with. So, dissuasion through US military restraint is the best way to prevent Russian nuclear use and armed conflict. The focus is on removing the need.

Host

What is the Interests, Action, Misperception—or IAM—framework and how does it prevent the use of NSNW?

Parsons

I wouldn't say that it so much prevents the use of NSNW as it helps us to understand one source of misperception in bilateral deterrence relationships. So first it's—it's not a revolutionary framework, it's not rocket science—it's basic, fundamental extrapolations from coercion theory and from scholars who've studied deterrence and human behavior in crises. So, the framework really just codifies a mental process that should be occurring already when conducting the business of national security.

There are three variables in the framework. The first is Russian interest—self-explanatory. The second is US actions or reactions that are going to interact with those Russian interests to drive adversary perceptions. And that leads us to the third variable, which is misperception, and this is the focus of the framework, right? How does the interaction of Russian interest and US actions drive or not drive misperception? And misperception is then likely to lead to inhibited or strained deterrence. Now, there is the possibility that misperception can lead to successful deterrence. However, my focus is on misperception inhibiting deterrence.

So, for Russia, it's useful in walking through numerous potentialities of how our actions—US actions— can interact with Russian interests and then how that interaction may or may not lead to misperception that can inhibit or “gum up” our efforts at NSNW deterrence. So, the main utility of the IAM framework as it relates to NSNW deterrence is that it helps us in preventing a Russian misperception that could lead to NSNW use. It can highlight the conditions under which Russian leaders may feel the necessity to use NSNW based on actions that the US takes.

Host

You offer Able Archer, a 1983 NATO exercise, as an example of how to apply the IAM framework to prevent escalation. Please walk us through the exercise and your application of the framework.

Parsons

Able Archer 1983 is an especially unsettling event because it played on very modern US-Russian themes like Russian paranoia and vulnerability and the US proclivity for large, overt, decisive military power. Now, before I go on, I just want to say that there is disagreement amongst scholars about the extent of what some called a Soviet war scare during Able Archer, but I believe that there was certainly a concern among Soviet leaders at the time and that the degree of this concern is, really, irrelevant, right? The fact that it existed at all is what is relevant to the IAM framework and to NSNW deterrence.

So, a little bit of context. In 1981, Ronald Reagan begins a campaign of diplomatic, economic, and military measures to place severe pressure on the Soviet system. (From) rhetoric to military exercises, the Reagan administration was harsh on the Soviet Union and sought to expose glaring holes in their defense capabilities, and they were very successful in doing so—possibly too successful. Soviet interviews after the fact discuss the paranoia and concern that gripped Soviet leadership as the Reagan administration's rhetoric and military exercises culminated in November of 1983 with Able Archer 83.

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So Able Archer 83—it’s an annual command post exercise conducted by NATO. It’s designed to test nuclear release authority and a notional Warsaw Pact attack. It’s not supposed to be inflammatory—was not supposed to be. Yet, because of US actions leading up to the exercise, it was exactly that. After three years of US anti-Soviet rhetoric and really provocative military exercises that did a great job exposing holes in Soviet strategic defense systems, Able Archer begins. And it begins just weeks after the US had invaded Grenada, prompting a flurry of encrypted communications between the US and the (United Kingdom) UK, another nuclear-armed power. And just a week after the Beirut barracks bombings, which prompted a global security posture up (or increase). To a security conscious and, you know, paranoid Soviet analyst, these signs were ominous.

As the exercise began, a series of activities occurred on the Soviet side I could talk at length about. I will not do that; I just want to highlight a couple. (There was__ frantic messaging coming from KGB headquarters to western KGB offices asking for warnings of imminent attacks. You have Soviet missile commanders who are spending their nights in their wartime headquarters, even the chief of the Soviet General Staff spends the final evening of Able Archer in his wartime bunker. And you have five times the peacetime amount of mobile nuclear missiles deployed in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. You have one very disturbing anecdote of likely KGB enforcers that were added to nuclear missile silo staff. Normally, there were two individuals: one missile commander mentioned—you know, during able Archer we actually had three—and I didn’t know the other person and certainly guessed why he was there.

The exercise ends . . . things returned to normal, fortunately. The main point of all this, right, is that Soviet leaders clearly thought the US considered a first strike a viable option. The degree of concern that the Soviet leaders had is somewhat irrelevant, so I don’t get into the debate about how likely the Soviet leaders thought it was. But the fact that they believe to any degree that the Reagan administration would consider a surprise nuclear first strike as a legitimate option is a colossal foreign policy failure. And it’s an extreme misperception that resulted from the interaction—going back to the framework—of unintentional US actions and Russian interests.

Host

How can we use the framework to deter modern Russia from NSNW use?

Parsons

So first let me say, I am not a Russia expert. But if you use the framework and reflections on Able Archer when thinking through military conflict with Russia today, you come away with some profound and unsettling conclusions. The first is that Russian nuclear use is positively correlated with two factors, and (those are) their perception that their vital interests are threatened and their inability to secure those interests via conventional means. Second conclusion is that if we have a capability, is it so crazy to think that we may actually use it? And then thirdly, deterrence is globally connected, so actions that one combatant command take(s) can influence perceptions in another combatant command’s area of responsibility.

This also applies across time. What I mean by that is that historical actions affect present perception. So, let me explain with a scenario. Assuming a Russian fait accompli of NATO territory triggers an armed NATO response, let’s look at the three variables of the IAM framework and the interaction of US actions and modern Russian interests and the resulting perception outcome of that interaction. So, the US military, and by extension US-dominated NATO, is likely going to stick to its doctrine and culture and execute decisive military operations that seek to establish local air superiority and rapidly defeat Russian ground forces to roll back that fait accompli. Now, creating local air superiority over a Baltic state, for instance, is going to require stripping Russian air defenses nearly back to Moscow. And based on Russia’s performance in Ukraine, I predict that NATO could, in fact, deal a crushing blow to Russian conventional ground forces. So, combining this decisive conventional defeat in the field with severely attrited air defense systems within their homeland that may involve nuclear command and control as well, how do we think the Russian leaders are feeling?

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US political objective is going to be limited. We know that; we know it's going to be to reestablish the sovereignty of whatever country was attacked. But will the Russians know this? So, how will these US military actions interact with Russian interests? So, the Russian interests at play here are regime survival and territorial sovereignty, and they're going to be immediately threatened in this scenario, assuming that Vladimir Putin is still in office. This is going to be the latest in a number of action—actions—that he knows the West perceives as aggressive. But this time it was with NATO territory. And not only this, but the defeat of his conventional forces in the field may stir up domestic unrest inside of Russia, especially with the elites, and he will fear what's coming next—internally and externally.

The Russians watched the Gulf War in Iraq 2003. Putin knows what our air power can do; he knows what comes after the devastating air campaign. So, going back to one of the conclusions, deterrence is global, right? US actions elsewhere in time or space can impact deterrence in other regions or times, and he knows we have an exquisite military capability—we've just used it. And he just lost most of his ways to hedge against it. Now, NATO has no intention of moving into Russian territory; they simply reestablish international boundary in this scenario and are reconsolidating. But with no other way to secure the perceived threat to his vital interests and the misperception that his regime and territorial sovereignty are at risk due to those US actions—those NATO actions—he could certainly employ NSNW to try to end the conflict before NATO forces can move into Russia. So, the IAM framework, here—it helps the decisionmaker understand how routine US military actions, you know, the application of doctrine or our proclivities for decisive action, can interact with deep-seated Russian interests to create catastrophic misperceptions that lead to deterrence failure.

Host

Do you have any concluding thoughts you'd like to share?

Parsons

Yeah, so there's a counterinsurgency adage that goes something like this: the more protected you are the less safe you are. It's counterintuitive, and the idea is that if a counterinsurgency force rides around in up-armored, opaque vehicles and removes themselves from the population for protection's sake, the less safe they'll probably be in the long run because they've isolated themselves from the population and they've allowed the insurgency to take root and expand. And a similar counterintuitive concept applies in the case of armed conflict with Russia, and that is that the more decisively the United States wins at the tactical or operational level, the less decisively we may actually win at the strategic level. A French theorist once stated that there are ways of conquering that quickly transformed victory into defeat, and the use of even one Russian nuclear weapon likely equates to strategic failure for the US.

Host

Listeners, you can read the full article at press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters. Look for volume 53, issue 4.

Cliff, thank you for making time to speak with me today.

Parsons

Thank you so much.

Host

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