The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy: Why Strategic Superiority Matters

Matthew Kroenig
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Question and Answer

Question:
What kind of nuclear posture does the United States need to protect itself and its allies?

Answer:
The United States needs a robust nuclear posture, with capabilities designed to limit damage in the event of nuclear war. It has always pursued meaningful strategic superiority over rivals and desired a nuclear arsenal “second to none.”
Outline

1) Conventional Wisdom: Second-Strike theory
2) The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy
3) The Advantages of Nuclear Advantages
4) The Disadvantages of Nuclear Advantages?
5) Conclusions
1) Conventional Wisdom: Second-Strike Theory

- The Logic of Second-Strike Theory
  - Second-Strike Capabilities
  - Mutually-Assured Destruction (MAD)
  - Brinkmanship and the balance of stakes

- This leads to a puzzle:
  - Why has the United States always retained a robust nuclear posture?

- Two possible answers:
  - 1) US nuclear strategy is illogical (Jervis, Glaser, etc.)
  - 2) We need a better theory
2) The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy

What is unique about American Nuclear Strategy?

▪ **Counterforce Targeting**
  - Legal and ethical motivations
  - Damage limitation
  - Force requirements

▪ **Extended Deterrence**
  - Washington extends its nuclear umbrella to over thirty formal treaty allies in Europe and Asia.

In a game of chicken, we might expect the smaller car to swerve first even if a crash is devastating to both.
Hypothesis 1: In the event of a nuclear war, nuclear superior states suffer less damage.
Nuclear Exchange Simulation Results

Russia First-Strike on the United States

China Second-Strike on the United States
3) The Advantages of Nuclear Advantages

Hypothesis 2: Nuclear superior states are more likely to get their way in high-stakes nuclear crises.
Table 3. Cross Tabulations of Nuclear Crisis Outcomes, 1945-2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superiority</th>
<th>Win</th>
<th>Loss</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>14 (54%)</td>
<td>12 (46%)</td>
<td>26 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>4 (15%)</td>
<td>22 (85%)</td>
<td>26 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18 (35%)</td>
<td>34 (65%)</td>
<td>52 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[X^2 = 8.497 \ (p=0.004)\]
The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962
Sino-Soviet Border War, 1969
1973 Arab Israeli War
1999 Kargil War
The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962
Hypothesis 3: Nuclear superior states are less likely to be targeted with military threats in the first place.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Threats against Nuclear Superior States</th>
<th>Threats against Nuclear Inferior States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soviet Union</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>0</strong></td>
<td><strong>49</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4) The Disadvantages of Nuclear Advantages? Strategic Stability

The Claim: Nuclear superiority undermines strategic stability and increases the risk of nuclear war.

The Reality:
- The United States still has a 2\textsuperscript{nd} Strike capability.
- The enemy can always back down.
- The evidence doesn’t support this view.
The Claim: The pursuit of nuclear superiority provokes costly and unnecessary arms races

The Reality:
- States often unable or unwilling to match US developments.
- The United States has always maintained meaningful superiority over rivals.
- States design nuclear postures for many other reasons.
- Sometimes arms races are necessary.
The Claim: If the United States pursues nuclear superiority, nonnuclear states will build nuclear weapons.

The Reality:
- States build nuclear weapons for other reasons.
- A strong U.S. nuclear arsenal is an important force for stopping the spread of nuclear weapons.
- Quantitate and qualitative evidence supports my view.

4) The Disadvantages of Nuclear Advantages? Nonproliferation
4) The Disadvantages of Nuclear Advantages? The Defense Budget

The Claim: The United States cannot afford a robust nuclear posture.

The Reality:

▪ Ashton Carter, Obama’s Secretary of Defense, “nuclear weapons don’t actually cost that much.”
▪ U.S. nuclear modernization costs 5-7% of the defense budget.
3) Conclusions

**Implications for international relations theory:**
- A new theory of nuclear deterrence: superiority-brinkmanship synthesis theory.
- Second-strike theory is not wrong, but it is incomplete.

**Implications for U.S. foreign policy:**
- U.S. leaders are not illogical.
- The US could scale back commitments. If not, then…
- The US should maintain a robust nuclear posture.
Thank You