

Deterrence and Defense Strategy: Old Lessons and New Contexts

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Key Points

- Subject of study: We related academic concepts to current debate on defense strategy
 - Based on experience working on policy and strategy
- Concepts that we reviewed:
 - Deterrence, stakes, balance of interests
 - Tripwires and brinkmanship
 - Rocking the boat
 - Multiple options and cost imposition
 - Costly signals
- Main implications: Defense strategy could focus less on winning battles and military modernization and more on deterrence and signaling commitment
 - Such an approach may be more affordable
- Shortcoming of academic concepts: Rooted in the Cold War
 - New studies are needed to explore multipolarity and new technology

Current discussion on defense strategy

Key characteristics

- Great power or strategic competition
- Deterrence and the effective use of force linked to US military edge
- Waging conventional wars against China and Russia
 - Effectively defending partners or allies from aggression,
 - Deterrence by denial
 - Integrated deterrence
 - Deterrence by punishment (cost imposition)
- Calls to increase US defense spending and innovation

The surest way to prevent war is to be prepared to win one
- 2018 National Defense Strategy.

What is game theory?

- Formal mathematical models
 - Two or more actors that interact
 - Courses of actions, payoffs, costs
 - Incomplete information
- Advantages
 - Transparency, precisely defined terms, accounts for assumptions
 - Structures thinking when we have scant empirical evidence
- Modeling dialogue
- Nobel prize winners

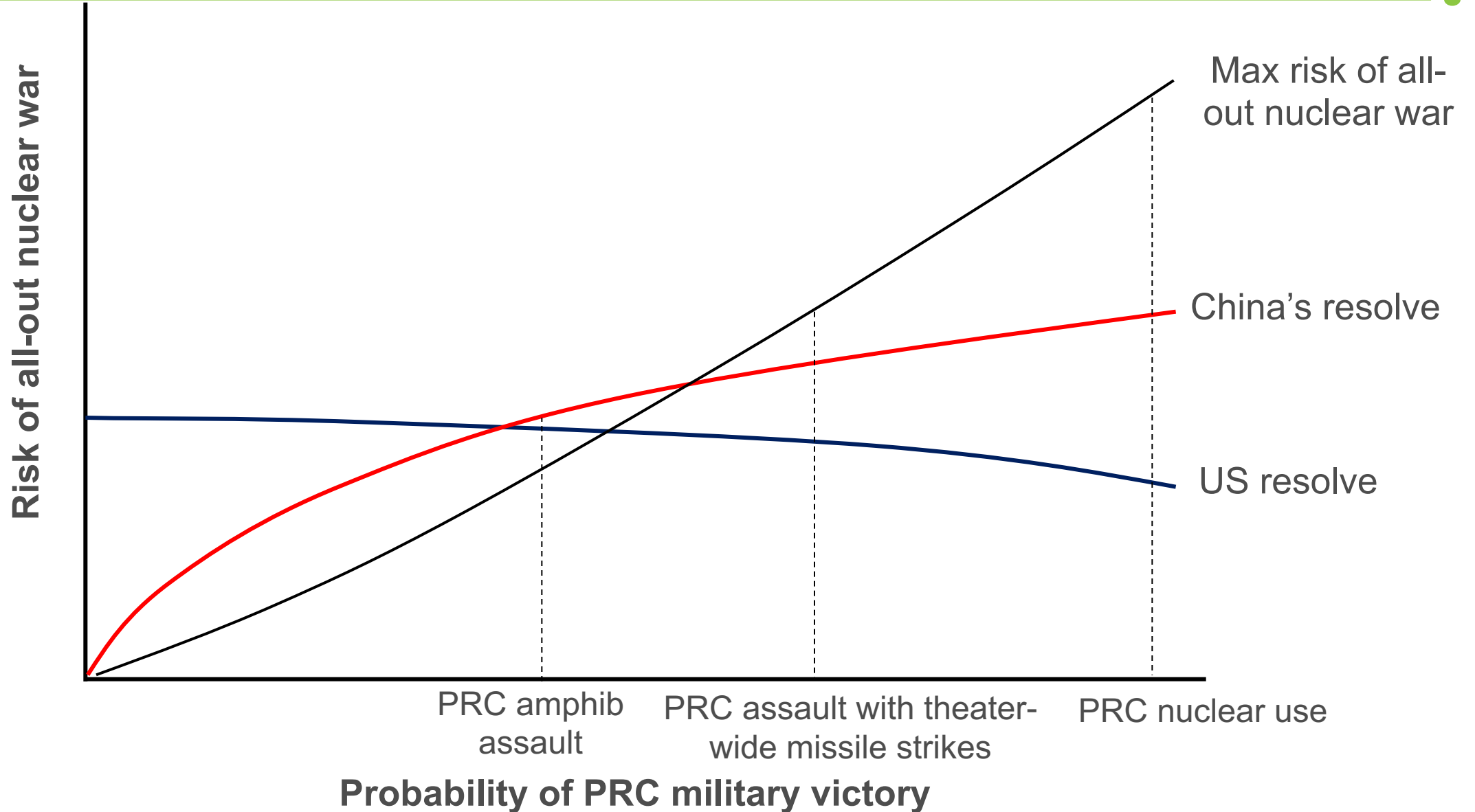
Deterrence and balance of interests

- Notable theorist: Thomas Schelling
 - Brinkmanship
 - Tripwire
 - Examples:
 - NATO during the Cold War
 - 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis
 - Berlin garrison
 - Battalions in Baltics
 - Implications for defense strategy today
 - Defense of the Baltics or Taiwan may matter less than balance of interests
 - Tripwires may be an affordable way to reinforce deterrence
 - Great power war may be brinkmanship as much as contest of military capabilities.
- 'Brinkmanship' ...is a competition in risk-taking. It involves setting afoot an activity that may get out of hand, initiating a process that carries some risk of unintended disaster.*
- Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence*

Brinkmanship in wartime

- Notable theorist: Robert Powell
- Rocking the boat
- Example: Taiwan today

Brinkmanship in wartime



Brinkmanship in wartime

- Implications for defense strategy
 - Adversaries have to worry how aggression causes escalation
 - Allies and forward military forces raise risk for adversaries
 - Lower our sights if risk for us is too great

Cost imposition

- Notable theorist: Robert Powell
- Value of multiple options
 - Large destructive steps can be difficult to use
 - Drive an adversary to having nothing left to lose
 - Small steps less likely to result in accidental war
- Example: Kim Jong Un
- But resolve and stakes still matter

- Implications for defense strategy
 - Why is China rearming?
 - Problem: How Much is Enough?

Costly signals

- Notable theorist: James Fearon
- Examples:
 - Alliances
 - CENTCOM counter-Iran deployments to Gulf
 - Balikot strikes and F-16 shootdown
- Implications of costly signals for defense strategy
 - Component of deterrence and commitment
 - Withdrawals from regions of critical interest would be opposite of a costly signal
 - Willingness to suffer costs in a conflict may be necessary in order to signal commitment to allies and adversaries

Defense strategy today

- Academic concepts point to a strategy that would:
 - Center deterrence on balance of interests rather than balance of military strength
 - Look to make any aggression excessively risky for an adversary
 - Send costly signals that the United States is committed to its interests
 - Step back from areas that fall out of US interests and are too risky to contend
- Academic concepts question victory through conventional means
 - They do not call for preparing to win a war in order to deter
 - Rather than a large military and massive modernization, they consider different ways to employ force

Further work

- Studies completed in context of Cold War, with two superpowers
- Future work needed for:
 - Current context of multiple great or nuclear powers
 - Effect of alliances on deterrence
 - Evolving context of rapid technological innovation