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T H I N K D E T E R R E N C E

Dynamic Parity: A New Approach to American Nuclear Deterrence



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Executive Summary

In the evolving strategic environment, where adversaries like China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia are expanding their nuclear capabilities, the United States must alter its nuclear strategy to match the increased threat facing the nation. The pages that follow propose a strategy of “dynamic parity” as a solution for maintaining balance and protecting the American national security. This strategy emphasizes creating a symmetrical balance of nuclear capabilities with the collective capabilities of China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia. Historically, nuclear deterrence was central in averting both nuclear war and great-power conventional war. It enabled unprecedented global prosperity. However, the current strategic environment presents significant challenges, with autocratic adversaries aiming to disrupt the American-led rules-based international order. The growing nuclear arsenals of these non-democratic states are intended to coerce and deter American intervention in regional conflicts, necessitating a shift from the existing “business as usual” nuclear policy.

The Need for a New Strategy

The bipartisan Congressional Commission on America’s Strategic Posture highlighted the inadequacy of the current nuclear arsenal in deterring China and Russia. The United States must adopt a dynamic approach to its nuclear strategy to adequately address the increasing threats posed by the combined forces of China, North Korea, and Russia. Dynamic parity is designed to achieve four primary purposes:

1. Balance the American nuclear arsenal against the collective arsenals of China, North Korea, and Russia to prevent the United States from becoming inferior in nuclear capability.
2. Enhance extended deterrence by assuring allies of American commitment to match adversary expansion with comparable capabilities.
3. Create a flexible framework for managing the growth or decline of operationally deployed nuclear weapons in the absence of arms control.
4. Inform American nuclear force configuration, size, and deployment.

Dynamic parity introduces a new “counter-conflict” doctrine to guide operational purposes, boost arsenal adaptability, and augment strategic clarity. By reducing strategic ambiguity, American nuclear policy becomes clearer to both allies and adversaries. This clarity helps deter adversaries by conveying the certainty of the United States’ response to any nuclear aggression. The strategy also calls for regular updates and modernization of nuclear forces to maintain parity and ensure credibility.

Finally, the strategy suggests specific near-term actions to protect, enhance, and expand America’s nuclear deterrent until dynamic parity can be fully activated. Dynamic parity requires nuclear weapons and their delivery systems once again become a national priority in order to effectively deter aggression by the axis of autocracy challenging the United States.

Dynamic Parity: A New Approach to American Nuclear Deterrence

By

Curtis McGiffin & Adam Lowther

After the November presidential election in the United States, the next president, as commander in chief, must develop a new nuclear strategy. The US is no longer the preeminent nuclear power. Multiple adversaries are growing their nuclear arsenals for the specific purpose of coercing and deterring the United States from interfering with their aggression against neighboring states. Such ambitions are part of a broader desire to topple the American-led international order. The truth is simple, the nation can no longer conduct nuclear deterrence policy as “business as usual.”¹ The next administration has an opportunity to fundamentally reshape American nuclear weapons policy in the interest of national security and for the benefit of peace and stability. Dynamic parity offers a real balance-of-power strategy to a free world facing an “axis of autocracies” armed with expanding nuclear arsenals, coercive strategies, and a desire to change the world.

Before the dawn of the nuclear age, powerful nations regularly engaged in devastating wars using increasingly destructive weapons. This resulted in ever higher casualties and societal damage. In the first half of the 20th

century, approximately 80–100 million people died during World War I and World War II, averaging over 30,000 fatalities per day.² These global conflicts brought to power murderous and oppressive regimes that saw the rise of Soviet communism following World War I and communism’s spread across Europe and Asia following World War II. Estimates suggest communist governments were responsible for the deaths of 100 million people in the 20th century alone.³ The introduction of nuclear deterrence by the United States was crucial in preventing nuclear aggression and limiting conventional conflict—effectively ending great-power wars. No other variable is more important to the “long peace” the world currently enjoys, which is marked by a significant and sustained decrease in the number of civilian and military lives lost to war, than nuclear deterrence.⁴ Over the past seven decades, the absence of war also allowed nations to divert resources from defense and war to economic and technological development, leading to a period of unprecedented prosperity.

This period of prosperity is facing an extraordinary challenge from China,

Iran, North Korea, and Russia. It is the duty of every American president to ensure this prosperity does not come to an end. Despite any assumed good intentions of idealists in the nuclear disarmament community, Chinese premier Xi Jinping, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong Un, and Russian president Vladimir Putin understand that nuclear weapons are the most effective tool for achieving national interests any nation can possess. They are tools of deterrence, coercion, and war.

Each new president publishes a *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR), reflecting his view on nuclear weapons employment and deterrence. Despite the decreasing size of America's nuclear arsenal, every post-Cold War president maintained largely the same nuclear force posture. Beginning in the late 1990s, the United States relied on fragile arms control treaties, appeased violators of these treaties, and deliberately reduced the role of nuclear weapons in national security. These actions led to nuclear and threat proliferation by adversaries, weakened ally assurance, and led to the creation of a conventional force that is overused and under-resourced. This will only change with a new approach that shifts America's nuclear deterrence strategy from reducing the role of nuclear weapons to one that seeks to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in adversary strategy by credibly deterring them.⁵ The outcome of the 2024 election will determine the direction of the nation's nuclear strategy.

The 2023 bipartisan Congressional Commission on America's Strategic

Posture concluded that the United States is not fielding a nuclear arsenal adequate for the task of effectively deterring China, North Korea, Russia, and, potentially, a nuclear-armed Iran.⁶ As the Strategic Posture Commission made clear, the Biden administration's business-as-usual *Nuclear Posture Review* (2022) is inadequate for the threats currently facing the nation and those on the horizon.⁷ The current nuclear triad modernization effort was devised 14 years ago to deter a world much less dangerous than exists today. A reexamination of the nation's nuclear posture is needed, regardless of who takes office on January 20, 2025.

The shape of a revised nuclear posture and strategy is contentious. On the one hand, advocates of arms control and disarmament contend that Russian president Vladimir Putin's threats to use nuclear weapons and China's move to become a nuclear peer of the United States, not to mention North Korea's expansion of its nuclear arsenal, do not necessitate a growth in the United States' nuclear arsenal.⁸ On the other hand, the bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission and many long-time nuclear professionals are calling for modifying the posture of the nation's strategic nuclear forces to address the larger number of targets and expand the ability of the arsenal to address the capabilities of America's adversaries.⁹ In essence, the debate is a question of sufficiency.

We believe that the United States should adopt a strategy of dynamic parity. The following pages explain that strategy.

Purpose

The purpose of dynamic parity is fourfold. First, it seeks to create a balance of nuclear capability between the axis of autocracies and the United States and thus prevents any perceived superiority by either side. Second, it enhances extended deterrence by assuring America's allies that any expansion of adversary strategic and tactical nuclear forces is met with a comparable expansion by the United States; there is always enough for them. Third, it creates a framework for managing the growth or decline in operationally deployed nuclear weapons in the absence of arms control. And fourth, it informs the configuration and size of the American nuclear arsenal.

Critics of dynamic parity may argue that building to parity with the nation's adversaries is arms racing, but such an assertion is only true if the objective is to win the race by building a larger arsenal. That is not the purpose of dynamic parity; "arms reacting" is not arms racing. It is an effort to mitigate adversary advantage without seeking an American advantage.

While strategic ambiguity has a long tradition within deterrence theory, especially among American theorists and practitioners, dynamic parity purposefully reduces ambiguity. As Michael Mazaar writes, "The more ambiguous the demand is, the more chance there is for failure in the deterrent policy." Dynamic parity largely seeks to drive down ambiguity by laying out a clear direction for American nuclear policy.

It remains a delusion that arms control agreements can effectively influence Russian behavior or actually constrain an adversary determined to achieve some measure of military superiority. Arms control for the sake of arms control was a mistake of the American strategic policy community that is now haunting the United States as the nation attempts to find ways to both modernize its nuclear arsenal—with no new strategic systems fielded 15 years into modernization—and employ non-nuclear capabilities to maintain deterrence against China and Russia. Even before the Soviet Union collapsed, American advocates of nuclear disarmament captured arms control efforts and turned arms control—in the pursuit of American interests—into an industry that depended on continuous arms control, regardless of American interests. Sustaining funding and lucrative positions became the reason for being (*raison d'être*). No such industry exists in Russia. The same is true in China. As the Russians know, arms control exists to further a nation's interests—not for its own sake.

The primary benefit of arms control to the United States is the understanding of an adversary's thinking gained through the negotiation and verification process. Laurence Beilenson rightly points out in his seminal work, *The Treaty Trap*, that to assume that the presence of arms control treaties is concomitant with peace and their absence with war is fundamentally a mistake. With President Putin effectively ending Russian participation in arms control agreements with the United States and China unwilling to negotiate, dynamic parity offers an alternative to

arms control that sets clear standards for increasing or decreasing the size (capacity), capability, and composition of the American arsenal—absent arms control by harmonizing with adversaries’ arsenals in total. If the purpose of arms control is to advance a nation’s interests, dynamic parity offers a complementary approach.

Unlike the classic action-reaction cycle that motivates the disarmament community, dynamic parity makes clear that such a cycle can end if an adversary chooses. America’s thirty-year policy to lead by example has failed to convince the autocratic nuclear powers to share its dream of a nuclear-free world. By ensuring an equal threat is placed upon their shoulders, dynamic parity introduces a new approach to peace and stability by following the example set by the axis of autocracies.

The Threat

According to *America’s Strategic Posture*, “The United States lacks a comprehensive strategy to address the looming two-nuclear-peer threat environment and lacks the force posture such a strategy will require.”¹⁰ The challenge is more than the “three-body problem” often discussed, which suggests that two nuclear peers (China and Russia) is fundamentally different than facing one nuclear peer (Soviet Union).¹¹ The challenge is even more complex than this implies. In addition to Russia’s large and modernized nuclear arsenal, there is China’s dramatic breakout and North Korea’s push to field a nuclear triad with 300 to 500 weapons.¹² A study group convened by the Center for

Global Security Research at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory found that “China will come to equal Russia if not surpass it as a nuclear weapon state.”¹³ The Korea Institute for Defense Analysis estimates North Korea will likely possess 300 nuclear warheads by 2030.¹⁴

While China, North Korea, and Russia each have their own national interests, they all share a common desire to end the American-led international order and reset the post-World War II global status quo. The likelihood that both China and Russia, along with North Korea, will “openly conspire or privately collude to compel the United States to split its attention and resources between two theaters” is significant.¹⁵ This leaves the United States in a position where it must possess the nuclear force required to ensure the credibility of deterrence and prevent adversaries from employing nuclear coercion. Moreover, due to America’s reluctance to allow allies to participate in nuclear deterrence by fielding their own arsenals, the United States must be able to extend deterrence unaided by nuclear-armed allies like France and the United Kingdom or potential aspirants like Japan, Poland, and South Korea.

The growing relationship between China and Russia is also why some in the United States view its current nuclear force structure as inadequate. Since the pronouncement of a “comprehensive strategic partnership” in 2001, which was later refined to a “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination” in 2012 and further affirmed as a “comprehensive strategic partnership

of equality, mutual trust, mutual support, common prosperity, and long-lasting friendship” in 2019, China and Russia share a strong and powerful strategic alignment. Their partnership was again defined as having “no limits” in February 2022, indicating the depth and strength of their relationship.¹⁶ Although not a formal military alliance, Putin and Xi described their “no-limits” declaration as a strategic partnership “superior to any Cold War era alliance” in which “there are no ‘forbidden’ areas of cooperation.”¹⁷ The Strategic Posture Commission’s report concluded, “The new partnership between Russian and Chinese leaders poses qualitatively new threats of potential opportunistic aggression and/or the risk of future cooperative two-theater aggression.”¹⁸

Moreover, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a Eurasian political, economic, security, and defense organization established by China and Russia in 2001. The SCO membership includes four declared nuclear powers—China, India, Pakistan, and Russia—as well as one aspiring nuclear power, Iran. All have the goal of promoting a new international political and economic order.¹⁹ While not yet embracing the principle of collective security, China uses the SCO to “enhance its ability to project power beyond its borders,” exercise its military with foreign countries, and build a “community of common human destiny”—a term used to link the SCO with the Chinese Communist Party’s goal of building a Sinocentric global order.²⁰ Russia is more than willing to support Chinese ambitions in Asia as long as Russia has a free hand in Europe.

This autocratic alignment directly challenges the American-led rules-based international order by overwhelming the United States with military, economic, and geopolitical challenges.²¹ Slowly draining American will, capability, and influence is a primary objective of Xi, Kim, and Putin. This leaves the United States at a crossroads. It can either compete to win or it can appease and allow American leadership and influence to fade, much as a declining British Empire faded into a middle power in the twentieth century. Rather than allowing the latter, it is time for a reinvigoration of American power. The United States should begin by dramatically reshaping its approach to deterrence. This requires the nation to field the world’s most credible nuclear force and develop an employment doctrine that accounts for current and emerging threats.

Deterrence is perhaps best defined as the condition made or maintained by the deliberate expression of a credible threat designed to shape an adversary’s perceptions through fear of consequence or failure. Deterrence is the result of a calculated effort to convince an adversary not to challenge the status quo. The term comes from the Latin word *deterreo*—of terror—to terrify someone into submission. To create this sense of fear, “Deterrence requires a combination of power and the will to use it and the assessment of these by the potential aggressor.”²²

Understanding the threat posed to the United States is key to embracing any approach meant to deal with the nation’s defense strategy, including deterrence. The goal is to reduce vulnerability, not

embrace it as the United States has over the past three decades.²³ The nation needs a strategy that changes the current dynamic of “continuing American societal vulnerability to Russian and Chinese nuclear attack” because it “is the key condition that underlies their [Chinese, North Korean, and Russian] coercive strategies to use limited nuclear escalation threats to advance their respective expansionist goals.”²⁴

Dynamic Parity

“Dynamic parity” is a nuclear strategy that ensures the United States deliberately maintains a symmetrical balance of nuclear capability and deployment behavior—equivalent to the combined nuclear forces of adversaries. This strategy necessitates a reciprocal equivalence in the following three categories.

First, capability refers to a full spectrum of weapons and delivery systems. Under dynamic parity, the United States would field nuclear capabilities symmetrical to those of its collective adversaries. This does not mean the American arsenal should match every novel weapon an adversary deploys. Instead, it means American forces must field a roughly equivalent capability, but not less.

By deploying similar capabilities to those of an adversary, stability is promoted because adversaries understand their own capabilities and the implications of employment. In essence, asymmetry is the enemy of stability. If Russia, for example, deployed an autonomous, nuclear-powered torpedo designed to deliver a 50-megaton warhead, the United States is not required to

duplicate such a weapon. The concept of rough equivalence allows for other systems to provide parity in deterrence, perhaps relying more heavily on mobile or silo-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) not affected by a coastal torpedo attack.

Symmetry achieves a desirable psychological effect by minimizing the uncertainty felt by adversaries (humans prefer symmetry) while reinforcing the natural tendency of humans to overestimate perceived risk—leading to risk aversion.²⁵ Under dynamic parity, American leaders must avoid incorrect and conciliatory assumptions that specific American capability is inherently destabilizing when possessed by the United States but not destabilizing when fielded by America’s adversaries.²⁶

Second, capacity refers to the number of weapons and delivery systems and incorporates the principles of survivability. Under this category, capacity is the approximate number of adversaries’ nuclear weapons—collectively. For example, if China, North Korea, and Russia field a force of 3,000 operationally deployed strategic nuclear weapons and another 3,000 operationally deployed tactical nuclear weapons, the United States would approximate those numbers. Important to this force-sizing construct is the central tenet that the United States will increase or decrease the size of the American arsenal based on the actions of China, North Korea, and Russia with respect to the size and capabilities of their arsenals. If one or more adversaries desires a reduction in nuclear arms, the United States will

verify those cuts and follow suit. Arms control agreements are not required under dynamic parity to reduce the number of operationally deployed nuclear weapons. This approach places the onus on adversaries to determine the size of America's fielded nuclear forces.

Third, force composition is the way in which nuclear forces are configured. The American nuclear arsenal must include an optimal mix of warheads and delivery systems that include high and low yields, stealth, standoff cruise, mobile, and silo-based ballistic missiles. The associated nuclear command, control, and communications, aerial refueling, suppression of enemy air defenses, and other support are also required. Additionally, America's nuclear posture must consider how much of the force is "on alert" and geographically dispersed to improve response time and survivability—placing increased risk of failure upon adversaries.

Furthermore, in conjunction with exceptional training and preparation, America's current technological capability gives the United States an advantage in parity. This means there is an expectation that although similar in number and delivery systems, each American weapon is more capable than its Chinese, North Korean, or Russian counterparts. Bombers are stealthier, reentry vehicles are less susceptible to countermeasures, and submarines are quieter. Superior design and build quality leads to higher operational readiness rates and probability of success. This then leads adversaries to doubt that a first strike on the United States is a risk worth taking—

increasing the likelihood of deterrence holding. Maintaining an advantage in quality and reliability gives the United States a perceptible advantage that is not destabilizing but does cause an adversary to pause.

Parity in size and capability, coupled with better force composition against the collective nuclear forces of China, North Korea, and Russia, aids in ensuring the strategy closes any perceived gap in deterrence credibility and strengthens deterrence by fielding sufficient nuclear forces to employ them anywhere on the escalation ladder. In fielding a nuclear force equivalent to nuclear-armed adversaries, they are denied the perception of superiority and thus the ability to use nuclear coercion or force employment in "escalate to de-escalate" or "escalate to win" strategies.²⁷

For dynamic parity to work, the United States must restore its ability to regularly replace its nuclear forces with modern systems that improve safety, security, reliability, and effectiveness. This means the United States must never again take a holiday from building the next generation of weapons or allow the nuclear enterprise's design and manufacturing capability or broader defense industry to fall into the type of disrepair that now requires major investments in human capital and infrastructure.²⁸ For example, the cost increases plaguing the Sentinel missile program are largely the result of an Air Force acquisition system that is attempting to estimate the cost of a program that is programmed to last five decades, rather than be replaced in 10–15 years, and incorporate new technologies and

efforts that are unprecedented.²⁹ This is a challenging task and a direct result of the procurement holiday that allowed Russia to surpass the United States as the world's leading nuclear weapon state. Russia already modernized its forces and maintains the largest and most diverse nuclear weapons stockpile of any state.³⁰

Just as in the Cold War, when the United States replaced fielded systems every decade or sooner, the United States must again commit to the consistent funding required to operate a nuclear enterprise that fields a modern arsenal with full-spectrum capabilities and symmetrical parity. Revitalizing and routinizing the upgrade and replacement cycle will fix many of the cost challenges facing the Department of Defense and the infrastructure challenges facing the Department of Energy and the defense industrial base. By transforming the current sustainment model to a replacement model, costs will decline in much the same way as costs decline in industry. Just as it would be ludicrous to ask Ford to build trucks that last 30 to 50 years before replacement, the same applies to the weapons labs, production facilities, and the defense industrial base.

A nuclear enterprise that is constantly working to field the next generation of weapon systems ensures that the United States does not find itself in a position where it can no longer effectively project costs and must continue to modernize aging warheads and delivery vehicles—driving the cost of nuclear modernization significantly higher.³¹ It also ensures that the United States avoids a scenario in which

adversaries rapidly field superior nuclear arsenals. Only when China, North Korea, and Russia know that the United States will never be outmatched and can build more effective systems than an adversary will the nation avoid an arms race and ensure deterrence remains stable. Nuclear arms reaction on the part of the United States does not constitute nuclear arms racing by the United States. The reality is the United States must respond to the actions of adversaries, or allies will participate in the development and fielding of their own nuclear weapons.

Dynamic Parity's Force Employment Doctrine

Nuclear strategy necessitates a force employment doctrine.³² The dynamic parity approach presents a counter-conflict force employment doctrine that integrates the most advantageous aspects of counterforce, counter-value, counter-access, and counter-influence targeting. This involves the capability to accurately target adversary weapons in first-strike damage limitation efforts (counterforce targeting) and ensure second-strike retaliation against high-value targets (counter-value targeting). The counter-access component involves using the threat of lower-yield battlefield nuclear strikes to support regional extended deterrence. Lastly, counter-influence targets the adversary's perceived leverage through strategic messaging that wisely utilizes ambiguity and clarity to intentionally shape or counter adversary behavior.³³

This counter-conflict force employment doctrine is consistent with the symmetry,

clarity, certainty, and adaptability found in dynamic parity. Symmetry is perhaps the most fundamental of all attributes because fielding a nuclear arsenal of similar size and capability to America's adversaries is at the heart of dynamic parity. A nuclear force that is too small is often forced into a counter-value strategy, which would place Americans in the undesirable position of purposefully targeting civilians.

Next is clarity, particularly in declaratory policy. China, North Korea, and Russia must understand that American action toward parity is taken in reaction to their own activities. Thus, clear and effective communication is critical to strategic success. The aggression of North Korea in 1950, Iraq in 1990, and Russia in 2022 are powerful examples of the dangers of ambiguous deterrence. In each case, the United States failed to clearly communicate a meaningful deterrent threat. This failure made aggressors believe they could act without facing a decisive response from the United States. Deterrence relies on clear communication to prevent another state from taking certain actions. When a deterrence message is ambiguous, failure is more likely. The deterring state must attempt to be precise, persistent, and plausible in its commitments, and its adversary must understand the message. Furthermore, America's deterrence message must cut through the noise of politics and ensure an adversary perceives it clearly.³⁴

Certainty plays an equally important role in shaping adversary perceptions and belief that the strategy laid out by the United States is an accurate predictor of American action. In many

respects, dynamic parity relies less on strategic ambiguity than previous nuclear strategies. Adversaries and allies alike must be certain of America's commitment to fight and win a nuclear conflict, which elevates the risk to an adversary of challenging American deterrence—ultimately leading to peace and stability. This is demonstrated not only through the deployment of nuclear systems but also by the nation's commitment to regular resourcing and replacement of older systems with the next generation.

Finally, dynamic parity requires a nuclear enterprise that is adaptable and responsive to the driving forces of adversary behavior and military posture. It should be able to react in any necessary direction to constantly maintain the required parity without disrupting the existing state of peace. Adaptability ensures that neither China, North Korea, nor Russia can ever maneuver the United States into a position where it is effectively coerced into accepting an adverse change to the status quo.

Impact

There are four areas where dynamic parity seeks to have the greatest impact: strategic stability, adversary behavior, ally assurance, and damage limitation. In this age of great-power competition, each of these areas has the potential to experience significant instability and uncertainty, which is exactly what this strategy seeks to counter.

Strategic stability is a state of international relations in which there is minimal interstate violence and little

likelihood of undesirable systemic change. Deterrence stability, a subset of strategic stability, is a condition in which decisive disincentives exist against the employment of nuclear weapons and great-power conventional wars, which can escalate to nuclear use. Dynamic parity aims to create the conditions necessary for these statements to hold true.³⁵ Reducing ambiguity is important to increasing strategic stability as it helps allies and adversaries understand and predict American behavior. The constant fluctuation of American strategic behavior has long been a point of contention for allies and adversaries.³⁶ This instability makes predictability difficult, leading to greater uncertainty and a desire to hedge against unforeseen risk, often creating a negative feedback loop.³⁷ Again, dynamic parity is designed to help mitigate these challenges.

At present, a revanchist Russia is working closely with China, Iran, and North Korea to ensure Russian victory in Ukraine.³⁸ Part of Russia's strategy is to threaten the use of tactical nuclear weapons against North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states—a capability where Russia holds at least a 10 to 1 advantage over NATO.³⁹ China is in the midst of a nuclear breakout that may see the People's Republic of China match or surpass the nuclear forces of the United States in the next decade.⁴⁰ Additionally, North Korea is growing its arsenal as rapidly as possible,⁴¹ and there is the nascent threat of a nuclear Iran and the regional proliferation such a move would cause.⁴² As the bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission recently identified, these are not challenges the United States can ignore.

Although recent comments by Biden administration official, Pranay Vaddi, suggest there is an understanding that additional nuclear weapons may be required, stable nuclear deterrence requires far more than a reticent willingness to acknowledge the reality facing the nation.⁴³ Dynamic parity is premised on creating nuclear parity through an approximate matching of the numbers and capabilities of America's adversaries.⁴⁴ Historical examples of crises between nuclear-armed powers suggest that the state with an inferior nuclear arsenal backs down.⁴⁵ Matthew Kroenig writes, "The most stable nuclear balance of power would be one in which both states possess survivable arsenals of roughly equal size."⁴⁶ Thus, without increasing the number and variety of operationally deployed nuclear weapons, the United States will soon find itself inferior to not only Russia but potentially China and certainly the collective nuclear force of the very nations that seek to topple the existing international order. Dynamic parity is an alternative approach intended to alter the impact of the American arsenal on the behavior of the nation's adversary.

French President Emmanuel Macron's recent effort to convince European states that France can effectively supplement or replace the United States as Europe's provider of an extended deterrent for "sovereignty and strategic autonomy" is emblematic of a growing concern that American power and ability to spread a nuclear umbrella over allies is increasingly uncertain.⁴⁷ South Korean President Yoon Suk Yol's January 11, 2023, remarks suggesting that the Republic of Korea will consider

pursuing an independent nuclear weapons program was a first that was only assuaged by President Biden in the Washington Declaration.⁴⁸ President Yoon decided against pursuing nuclear weapons because he feared Western reprisal for proliferation. “If we develop nuclear weapons, we will receive various economic sanctions like North Korea does now, and our economy will be dealt a serious blow,” Yoon said.⁴⁹ Should American commitment to either Europe or Asia waiver, states in both regions may pursue their own nuclear weapons programs.

Dynamic parity seeks to satisfy allies’ extended deterrence concerns by offering a clear and concrete prescription for a more credible extended deterrence. The desired impact is clear; if there is sufficient confidence in American extended deterrence commitments and capacities, allies will be less inclined to pursue nuclear weapons.

The final area where dynamic parity seeks to have an impact is damage limitation. Dynamic parity is not a strategy that regards missile defenses as a substitute for operationally deployed nuclear weapons. Acknowledging that missile defenses can increase an adversary’s risk of failure in attacking the United States, the spectrum of denial and defense options can improve deterrence while balancing cost and effectiveness. Thus, the damage limitation associated with dynamic parity is principally achieved through a risk of first-strike counterforce targeting of an adversary’s nuclear forces. While the objective of dynamic parity is to deter China, North Korea, and Russia,

the strategy must never preclude the use of nuclear weapons as part of cost imposition in defense of the nation.

Moving to Dynamic Parity

Although dynamic parity calls for a significant departure from the Biden administration’s approach to nuclear strategy, it is not an approach without precedent. Both President Nixon’s “strategic sufficiency,” found in National Security Decision Memorandum 16 (1969), and, later, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger’s “essential equivalence,” required many of the same characteristics of the United States’ nuclear arsenal as those found in dynamic parity.⁵⁰ At that time, however, the nation faced a single adversary in the Soviet Union that was already beginning to show signs of economic stagnation and decline. The strategic picture is decidedly more challenging today. The combined economic might of China and Russia, when considering purchase power parity, is 29 percent greater than that of the United States,⁵¹ while the Soviet Union’s economy never exceeded 57 percent of the American economy at its apex.⁵² Today’s challenge is far more complex and dangerous as America’s autocratic adversaries are much better financed today than they were during the Cold War.

Should the next administration adopt dynamic parity as policy, it will require a reduction in bureaucratic red tape, focused federal priority, and a dedication to success similar to that of the Manhattan Project or the “space race” to ultimately field the required

forces. This will take time. In the interim, the United States can take five steps to mitigate the growing collective nuclear superiority of China, North Korea, and Russia.⁵³

First, the United States should end the pretense that New START remains in force and declare the treaty terminated. Russian “suspension” of New START leaves the United States as the only signatory still complying with the treaty’s obligations.⁵⁴ President Putin is showing no signs of returning to the treaty and may deem it necessary to expand the number of operationally deployed Russian strategic nuclear weapons. With at least 2,000 non-strategic nuclear weapons, the Russian nuclear arsenal already far exceeds that of France, the United Kingdom, and the United States.⁵⁵ China’s breakout is only exacerbating the problem. Terminating New START will allow the United States to take steps to remedy this deficiency.

Second, the United States should begin the process of “re-MIRVing” the Minuteman III force. This requires returning hedge warheads to active service in the ICBM force. Such a move would signal China and Russia that the United States will not allow its adversaries to achieve strategic superiority. Waiting until a crisis is the wrong time to upload the hedge. It only creates further instability and encourages an attack on the United States.

Third, the US Air Force should return, at least in part, its B-2 and B-52 bombers to alert status, armed with nuclear weapons. Refueling aircraft and other support elements required to perform

the nuclear mission should also be placed on alert. At present, the bomber force is the most vulnerable leg of the triad and can be neutralized with conventional strikes against weapons storage areas. Increasing the alert status of the bomber force reduces the risk to the force while increasing the risk of a failed strike for an adversary. It is also less escalatory to return bombers to alert now, instead of waiting for a crisis. For those who suggest that a “bolt out of the blue” strike is unlikely, the United States was caught off guard by both the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. There is every reason to believe that a nuclear first strike will take the form of a surprise attack.

Fourth, it is crucial to quickly deploy a submarine and/or ship-launched nuclear cruise missile (such as TLAM-N or SLCM-N) to address the significant non-strategic nuclear weapon advantage that China and Russia have over the United States. This will enhance the United States’ ability to deter adversaries and assure allies with lower-yield theater nuclear weapons.

Finally, the next administration must preserve the nuclear warhead hedge and immediately suspend the retirement and destruction of stockpiled nuclear weapons until the National Nuclear Security Administration can demonstrate the ability to rapidly manufacture new warheads. Such efforts signal American commitment to remaining a nuclear power with a full spectrum of capabilities.

Conclusion

It should be clear to all observers that neither the diminution of the nation's nuclear arsenal, in force posture and strategy, nor the unbalanced exuberance for arms control—in the service of nuclear disarmament—swayed America's adversaries from pursuing their quest for power and international restructuring. The United States is three decades into former President Bill Clinton's "lead but hedge" strategy, which no adversary has followed. Indeed, as Keith Payne writes, there is "little hope for negotiated agreements, given Russia's constant noncompliance and China's blatant lack of interest."⁵⁶

The dynamic parity strategy seeks to balance the combined nuclear strength of America's autocratic adversaries by fielding a force that offsets the threat in real time. The American arsenal's size and composition would adjust as the nuclear adversary develops, deploys, and hardens their expanding nuclear arsenals. To meet this requirement, the United States needs to not only continue to modernize but sprint in key areas to match adversary nuclear forces. An arms race, if such a concept is even valid, is a choice adversaries will make because the size and composition of America's nuclear arsenal will prove one of their own making. As even the current administration acknowledges, the United States can no longer comply with outdated arms control treaties and questionable verification regimes or acquiesce to Russian perfidy. Moreover, dynamic parity prevents any perceived superiority by America's adversaries and thus reduces their ability to coerce the United States. Rather, it encourages

their restraint through fear of credible American reaction.

Counter-conflict targeting offers a realistic implementation of dynamic parity. It tailors its deterrent threats to situations driving both general and immediate deterrence scenarios.⁵⁷ This approach to targeting acknowledges the reality that America's adversaries are targeting what it values most: its population centers. Thus, a sagacious mix of counter-force damage limitation and the realistic exploitation of counter-value retaliation threats must be levied appropriately to ensure deterrence holds no matter how unpredictable or imprudent an adversary. Moreover, counter-access targeting threats bolster full-spectrum deterrence by enhancing symmetrical deterrence at the lower-yield nuclear thresholds. Being able to compete and deter at this lower nuclear threshold also increases the chance of war aversion via regional extended deterrence.

The 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* refers to China as America's "pacing challenge," Russia as an "acute threat," and North Korea as a "persistent threat."⁵⁸ Separately, these descriptions may be accurate, but should two or more of these threats align and collaborate in purposeful action, the threat is magnified and can only then be described as "grave."

The American people and those allies depending on the nuclear umbrella deserve a nuclear strategy that ensures peace and security moving forward. Continuing to address nuclear threats in a business-as-usual manner through appeasement, altruism, and

benevolence is folly. Dynamic parity allows the United States to take control of this challenge to its security and leadership within the rules-based international order. Today's adversaries are much less likely to comply with the rules-based order they seek to replace. Dynamic parity acknowledges and bypasses the frustrating behavior of the world's autocracies by ensuring parity with those regimes.

Finally, how could the nation afford dynamic parity? Americans currently spend about 5 percent of the defense budget and 0.1 percent of the federal budget on nuclear weapons. A doubling of these costs would mean 90 percent of the defense budget and 99.8 percent of the federal budget is still spent elsewhere. In fact, Americans spend over \$100 billion every year on waste, fraud, and abuse in Medicare/Medicaid alone. This is far more than nuclear weapons would ever cost. Yet most Americans are unaware of such losses within two programs, which are never mentioned as "unsustainable" or a reason to terminate Medicare or Medicaid.⁵⁹ Somehow, the far smaller cost of current modernization efforts are unaffordable. This is simply untrue.

It is important to remember that at the height of World War II, the United States spent almost 50 percent of the nation's gross domestic product to fight the war. Great-power wars are costly in terms of blood and treasure. Nuclear deterrence is a bargain by any measure and allows the United States to spend its wealth in areas that increase prosperity.

Democracies predominantly go to war when they fail to adequately deter non-

democratic aggressors.⁶⁰ Wars tend to start when there is a combined absence of the required deterrence capability, insufficient communication of intent, and a lack of credibility with adversaries. Dynamic parity addresses all three of these potential pitfalls to deterrence success.

Dynamic parity offers a rational response to current deterrence dynamics. Attempting to deter China, North Korea, and Russia as separate entities is a grave mistake. The United States and its allies must deter these autocratic nuclear-armed aggressors as a collective in order to deter war and preserve peace and stability. When describing the value of deterrence, the recent commander of US Strategic Command, Admiral (Ret.) Charles A. Richard, said,

Every operational plan in the Department of Defense, and every other capability we have, rests on an assumption that strategic deterrence will hold. And if strategic deterrence, and in particular nuclear deterrence, doesn't hold, none of our other plans and no other capability that we have is going to work as designed.⁶¹

Richard is correct. Dynamic parity is a solution, but certainly not the only solution. What is not a solution to the challenges facing the United States is maintenance of the status quo. The time to act is now, while there is still time. America's adversaries abhor a vacuum and will fill it if the United States continues to shrink from its role as leader of the free world.

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