

National Institute
FOR Deterrence Studies
THINK DETERRENCE

National Institute for Deterrence Studies & Peter Huessy Seminar

Deterring Two Nuclear Peers: America's Strategy for China, Russia, and the Future of Nuclear Deterrence

A Virtual Seminar with Dr. Matthew Kroenig

Presented by

National Institute for Deterrence Studies

Date

October 2, 2026

Featured speaker

Dr. Matthew Kroenig

How to Cite

National Institute for Deterrence Studies. (2026, October 2). Deterring two nuclear peers: America's strategy for China, Russia, and the future of nuclear deterrence: A Peter Huessy Seminar with Matthew Kroenig [Webinar transcript]. <https://thinkdeterrence.com>

Abstract

Dr. Matthew Kroenig examines how U.S. nuclear strategy and force posture should adapt to an era in which the United States may need to deter Russia and China simultaneously while also accounting for North Korea and a changing security environment. Looking back to assumptions that shaped the 2010 nuclear posture, he argues that the strategic landscape has changed substantially and that U.S. planning should retain humility and flexibility. The discussion addresses counterforce strategy, flexible response, strategic and non-strategic nuclear forces, missile defense, extended deterrence, arms control, China's nuclear buildup, allied assurance, and the challenges posed by increasingly aligned adversaries. Kroenig argues that the United States should preserve the central goals of deterrence, assurance, and hedging while adapting forces to the emerging two-peer nuclear environment.

Executive Summary

- **The strategic environment has changed dramatically since 2010.** Kroenig contrasts earlier expectations of a low probability of conflict with Russia or China with today's concern about simultaneous major-power conflict and nuclear escalation.
- **Deterring two nuclear peers requires renewed attention to force sufficiency.** He argues that China can no longer be treated as a lesser-included nuclear case and that U.S. planners should examine both near-term upload options and longer-term force structure.

- **Established nuclear strategy still matters.** Kroenig defends counterforce and flexible response as important elements of deterrence, damage limitation if deterrence fails, and the provision of credible options to national leaders.
- **Theater nuclear capabilities can strengthen flexibility and assurance.** The seminar discusses additional non-strategic nuclear capabilities in Europe and Asia, including the role of sea-, air-, and potentially ground-based options.
- **Missile defense can contribute to deterrence, defense, and assurance.** Kroenig argues that homeland missile defense can reduce an adversary's confidence in limited coercive attacks while providing protection if deterrence fails.
- **Allied assurance remains central.** The discussion considers NATO, French and British nuclear forces, South Korea and Japan, and ways the United States can reinforce extended deterrence while encouraging allies to contribute more to conventional defense.
- **Strategic flexibility is essential.** A central lesson drawn from the contrast between 2010 and 2026 is that future plans should be able to adapt to geopolitical and technological surprises.

Editorial Note: This transcript was prepared from an automated transcript supplied by NIDS and lightly edited for readability, punctuation, speaker identification, and obvious transcription errors. Apparent transcription errors in names and organization references were normalized where the intended wording was clear. The speakers' meaning and sequence of discussion have been preserved.

Edited Transcript

Kimberly Cherington | Welcome and Introductions

Good morning and welcome. I'm Kimberly Cherington, and on behalf of the National Institute for Deterrence Studies, or NIDS, thank you for taking the time to join us today for this important discussion with Dr. Matthew Kroenig. We're delighted to welcome everyone joining us live, and we'd also like to recognize our sponsor partners represented on today's call.

Thank you to Bechtel, Collins Aerospace, General Dynamics, Lockheed Martin, Moog, TechSource, Northrop Grumman, JRC, SBCC, and SPA. We truly appreciate your continued support of NIDS and our programming. Throughout today's presentation, we encourage you to submit your questions using the chat or Q&A button, and we will address them during the dedicated Q&A portion of today's seminar.

We have a full lineup of speakers for these virtual seminars this fall, and we are adding more each week. On October 16, Major General (Ret.) Garrett Harencak will speak on "The Nuclear Knowledge Gap: Why Deterrence Matters." On October 30, we are honored to have Vice Admiral Robert Gaucher, Douglas Williams, and Richard Seif discuss the future of the undersea deterrent. On November 13, Joe Oder, Assistant Deputy Chief of Staff for Strategic Deterrence and Nuclear Integration in the U.S. Air Force, will speak on deterrence integration, connecting policy, modernization, and operations in the nuclear enterprise. You can find information, speaker updates, our full lineup, our monthly deterrence newsletter, and registration at thinkdeterrence.com. Please also follow, like, and share our content on X, YouTube, and LinkedIn.

With that, it is my pleasure to introduce today's guest, Dr. Matthew Kroenig. Dr. Kroenig is a nonresident senior fellow with the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, a tenured professor at Georgetown University, and a senior fellow at NIDS. He has also served in the Department of Defense and the intelligence community under multiple presidential administrations and served on the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States. A leading expert in U.S. national security, strategic deterrence, and great-power competition, Dr. Kroenig is the author or editor of eight books, including *The Return of Great Power Rivalry* and *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy*. He is also a columnist for *Foreign Policy* and

a frequent contributor to national and international media. I am pleased to introduce our host and moderator, Mr. Peter Huessy, President of GeoStrategic Analysis and a senior fellow at NIDS. Peter, over to you.

Peter Huessy | Opening Remarks

Thank you very much, Kimberly, and welcome, Matthew. It is delightful to have you here. Thank you for taking the time out of your schedule to join us. I also want to acknowledge our president, Jim Petrosky, and thank Kimberly, our operations manager, for the great work she does.

We are beginning to put together a couple of sessions or panels, probably by Zoom rather than in person, on the impact of the midterm elections on the nuclear enterprise. We do not know what will happen in November, but we want to bring together smart people to discuss the potential implications.

I asked Matthew to talk about this question: if we went back to the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, what did we get right and what did we get wrong? More importantly, whatever we plan today for the next 10, 15, or 20 years must retain enough flexibility to adjust when assumptions prove wrong. Matthew is thoughtful and balanced, and someone I have long followed and admired. Thank you for joining us today. Over to you.

Matthew Kroenig | From 2010 to the Two-Peer Nuclear Challenge

Thank you very much for the introduction, Peter and Kimberly, and for the opportunity to speak with you and your distinguished audience today. The topic is deterring two nuclear peers: America's strategy for China and Russia. I will approach it in the way Peter suggested by looking back to 2010, when our current force posture was essentially set at 1,550 deployed strategic nuclear weapons under New START. What did we get right, and what did we get wrong?

I think one could argue that we got the situation right for the time, but the world has changed so much since then that many assumptions from 2010 no longer hold. The Obama administration's strategy documents treated armed conflict with Russia and China as extremely remote and focused instead on terrorists and rogue states. Today, we worry about simultaneous major-power war with Russia and China, including the possibility of nuclear conflict.

On strategic forces, the earlier debate was how much further the United States could reduce. Today, the discussion is increasingly whether the United States needs to upload warheads and plan for a larger strategic nuclear force. On non-strategic nuclear weapons, the earlier conversation was also about reductions, including whether to retain B61 gravity bombs in Europe. Missile defense policy was oriented toward rogue states such as Iran and North Korea rather than Russia or China. Those assumptions have changed.

That experience should teach us humility. We have an understanding of the current environment and where it may be going, but 15 years from now the world could look very different. One important assumption from that era did hold: the need for nuclear modernization. I give former Senator Jon Kyl significant credit for spearheading that effort.

Matthew Kroenig | Threat Environment and Simultaneous Conflict

I will discuss the threat environment, the goals of U.S. nuclear strategy, the appropriate strategy, and the forces required to implement that strategy. These comments follow in part from the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, on which I was honored to serve. The commission released its bipartisan report in 2023.

The current security environment includes major wars and persistent nuclear risks. Russia's war in Ukraine continues, Russia probes NATO in other ways, and there remains a risk that a direct NATO-Russia war could escalate to nuclear use. North Korea possesses nuclear weapons and delivery systems able to threaten U.S. allies, bases, and the U.S. homeland. China is conducting sustained military pressure against Taiwan and is engaged in a major nuclear buildup.

These adversaries are also increasingly working together. That creates a risk of simultaneous conflict even without perfect coordination. If war in Europe expanded to involve U.S. forces, China could see an opportunity

in the Indo-Pacific; likewise, a major U.S.-China conflict could create opportunities for Russia. The central nuclear-deterrence challenge is therefore how to deter multiple nuclear-armed adversaries at the same time.

Matthew Kroenig | Goals and Strategy

Deterrence remains the primary goal. If deterrence fails, U.S. strategy should seek to achieve national objectives at the lowest possible level of damage. Assurance of allies also remains important because credible extended deterrence reduces incentives for allies to pursue independent nuclear arsenals. Hedging should remain a goal as well, because the United States must prepare for technological and geopolitical surprise.

Some analysts argue that the two-peer problem should cause the United States to abandon traditional counterforce strategy in favor of countervalue targeting at lower force levels. I disagree. The Strategic Posture Commission concluded that the United States does not need to abandon its basic nuclear strategy; instead it needs to update its forces for the new environment.

Counterforce remains important for several reasons. Deterrence requires holding at risk what adversary leaders value, including leadership, military forces, nuclear forces, and war-supporting industry. If deterrence fails, counterforce can support damage limitation. It also aligns with the principle of discrimination in the law of armed conflict by focusing on legitimate military targets rather than deliberately targeting civilians.

Flexible response is also important. A president should not face a choice between surrender and an all-out nuclear exchange. If an adversary used a limited number of nuclear weapons, the president should have credible options between those extremes, including limited and theater-level responses.

Matthew Kroenig | Forces for the Emerging Environment

At the strategic level, if the United States intends to hold at risk adversary military and nuclear targets, China's buildup creates additional targets. In 2010, the planning assumption was that a force sized for Russia could also handle China as a lesser-included case. As China becomes a nuclear peer, that assumption no longer holds. The United States should therefore examine a larger strategic force.

In the near term, that could include uploading additional warheads to ICBMs and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. Over the longer term, it could include additional B-21 bombers and additional nuclear-capable submarines. There is time to assess the pace of China's buildup, but the United States should be examining these options now.

On non-strategic nuclear weapons, the Strategic Posture Commission recommended additional capabilities for Europe and Asia. The United States has B61 gravity bombs in Europe and deployable capabilities for Asia, but additional theater options could strengthen deterrence, particularly given Russian and Chinese theater nuclear advantages.

Missile defense is another important element. The commission recommended defenses capable of addressing coercive attacks, including from Russia and China. Even if defense cannot stop a full-scale attack, it can remove limited or "cheap-shot" options from an adversary's strategy, contribute to damage limitation if deterrence fails, and strengthen assurance of allies.

Matthew Kroenig | Closing Assessment

This is a dangerous moment. I think China is more capable than the Soviet Union ever was, and China is working alongside Russia, Iran, and North Korea. The prospect of simultaneous conflict across Eurasia involving nuclear-armed adversaries is deeply concerning. But I will end on a positive note: I think the United States and its allies will prevail, as they did in World War II and the first Cold War. It will not be easy, and we need to get our act together, but I think we will prevail.

Peter Huessy and Matthew Kroenig | Q&A: Nuclear Abolition and Arms Control

Peter Huessy: To what extent should the United States continue to seek or talk about abolition of nuclear weapons? A recurring theme in public discussion is that nuclear weapons should be eliminated or set aside because any use could lead to massive escalation. How would you respond?

Matthew Kroenig: I think putting nuclear deterrence aside would be a major mistake. U.S. nuclear weapons have contributed to preventing great-power war and to protecting allies in Europe and Asia. The United States should continue to abide by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and should pursue arms-control discussions with Russia and China, even though I am skeptical about the prospects for meaningful agreements. Unilateral American disarmament would make Americans and allies less safe. A strong U.S. nuclear deterrent remains necessary.

Peter Huessy and Matthew Kroenig | Q&A: Strategic Posture Commission Recommendations

Peter Huessy: To what extent has the administration sought to implement the requirements proposed by the Strategic Posture Commission, particularly with respect to theater nuclear forces?

Matthew Kroenig: For the most part, I think the recommendations are being followed. The commission recommended missile defenses capable of dealing with Russia and China, and Golden Dome is an ambitious effort in that direction. We recommended additional non-strategic nuclear weapons, and work on sea-launched nuclear cruise missile capability continues. The area where I still have questions is strategic forces. I think the United States should examine uploading, and I hope the commission's recommendation for a larger strategic force to deal with China and Russia is taken seriously.

Peter Huessy and Matthew Kroenig | Q&A: China's Nuclear Buildup

Peter Huessy: How is China's nuclear capability connected to its broader strategy, including what has been described as unrestricted warfare?

Matthew Kroenig: The honest answer is that I do not know exactly why China is building up. I see several possible explanations that are not mutually exclusive: a desire for a more secure retaliatory capability; status and prestige associated with being a first-class military and nuclear power; using a larger nuclear force to deter U.S. intervention in a Taiwan conflict; and a possible shift toward a more expansive nuclear posture, including counterforce or launch-on-warning concepts. I put the least weight on the argument that China is simply reacting defensively to U.S. missile defenses.

Peter Huessy and Matthew Kroenig | Q&A: Extended Deterrence in Europe and Asia

Peter Huessy: What are the realistic options for improving extended deterrence in Europe and Asia, including discussions involving France, South Korea, and Japan?

Matthew Kroenig: I think the administration is pushing allies to do more on conventional defense while maintaining the U.S. nuclear extended-deterrence guarantee. British and French nuclear forces can complicate an adversary's calculations, but they cannot substitute for the U.S. strategic arsenal. In Europe, additional standoff or ground-based theater capabilities could supplement existing B61 gravity bombs. In Asia, South Korean public support for an independent nuclear arsenal is a significant assurance challenge. I would be open to discussing redeployment of U.S. nuclear weapons to South Korea for assurance purposes, even if other capabilities might be preferable operationally.

Peter Huessy and Matthew Kroenig | Q&A: Flexible Options and Dual-Capable Systems

Peter Huessy: Some critics argue that giving a president multiple theater nuclear options is dangerous because it creates more ways to start a nuclear war. How do you respond?

Matthew Kroenig: I disagree. The logic of the nuclear triad is that different legs provide different attributes; similar logic can apply to theater forces. If the primary purpose is deterrence, giving the president credible and flexible options can make an adversary less likely to initiate nuclear use in the first place.

Peter Huessy: How should the United States manage escalation when adversaries mingle conventional and nuclear forces or use dual-capable systems?

Matthew Kroenig: This is not an entirely new problem because the United States has long operated dual-capable systems as well. I think fears of inadvertent escalation from striking dual-capable systems can be overstated. Even in a major conventional conflict, an adversary would still face the enormous risks of deliberately choosing nuclear escalation.

Peter Huessy and Matthew Kroenig | Q&A: A Second Cold War

Peter Huessy: You referred to the first Cold War. Does that mean you believe we are now in a second Cold War?

Matthew Kroenig: Yes, I think that is a fair description. The circumstances are different, but there are meaningful similarities: the United States and its free-world allies are competing with Eurasian dictatorships over the future of the international order while facing the risk of major-power war. I see the main alignment as the United States and allied democracies on one side and China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea on the other, alongside a substantial group of countries that do not want to choose a side.

Peter Huessy and Matthew Kroenig | Q&A: Latin America, Defense Spending, and Golden Dome

Peter Huessy: Recent elections in Latin America have produced governments more aligned with the United States. Is that connected to the broader geostrategic balance?

Matthew Kroenig: I think more pro-American governments in the region are positive for U.S. foreign policy, but in cases I have observed closely, domestic issues such as security and economic policy appear to be major drivers. I would be cautious about attributing those electoral outcomes primarily to global strategic competition.

Peter Huessy: Can the United States afford the forces needed for nuclear deterrence, and how do you see the strategic purpose of Golden Dome?

Matthew Kroenig: During the Cold War, defense spending averaged around seven percent of GDP. I believe the current environment is at least as dangerous, so a higher level of defense investment is reasonable. The United States can afford national survival. On Golden Dome, the strategic logic is deterrence, damage limitation, and assurance. A defense capable of defeating a limited attack can force an adversary to choose between a much larger, riskier attack and not attacking at all. If deterrence fails, intercepting incoming missiles reduces damage, and the existence of defenses can also strengthen allied confidence in U.S. extended deterrence.

Peter Huessy | Closing Remarks

Thank you very much. One additional point on modernization is that systems such as the Columbia-class submarine and Sentinel are intended to serve for decades, so modernization costs should also be viewed across the long service lives of these systems. Matthew, thank you. This has been extraordinarily helpful, and I hope our audience finds real value in the discussion. Thank you to you and the Atlantic Council for joining us today. I will turn it back to Kimberly for closing remarks.

Matthew Kroenig | Closing

My pleasure. Thank you.

Kimberly Cherington | Closing

Dr. Kroenig, thank you for being with us today. We always gain new insights and clarity when you join us, and we truly appreciate your continued dedication and service.

If you are new to NIDS, we are a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization supported by generous donors and dedicated to advancing peace and stability through strong national security and nuclear deterrence through our deterrence education. We invite our audience to join us on October 16 for Major General (Ret.) Garrett Harencak on “The Nuclear Knowledge Gap,” and on October 30 for our discussion on the future of the undersea deterrent.

A special thanks to everyone who helps us continue to bring forward critical programming and information highlighting the importance of our deterrence force and the people who keep our nation safe. Please share our content with your network and help us grow our community. We hope you have a peaceful day, and we look forward to seeing you again soon.