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## For Whom Should America Fight A Nuclear War?

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Most Americans are horrified by the prospect of nuclear war. Yet during his recent summits with the leaders of South Korea and Japan, President Joe Biden reaffirmed Washington's willingness to use nuclear weapons to defend both nations. Even though the U.S. risks nuclear attack in return.

"Total" conventional war is horrific. Nuclear weapons greatly magnify the threat. The U.S. and Russia could destroy each other and the rest of the planet. The realization of how close Washington and Moscow came to nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis fuels present efforts to eliminate nuclear weapons. However, mankind has opened Pandora's Box and the deadly knowledge is out.

Thankfully, none of the other nuclear powers—including Russia, China, and even North Korea—have any reason to target America by itself. Their sometimes-serious disputes with the U.S. still are not important enough to trigger nuclear conflict. A much greater danger exists, however, because of Washington's commitment to often nonessential, always cheap-riding, and sometimes reckless allies.

The principal defense against nuclear weapons, given the difficulty in preventing their use, is deterrence. *Attack me and I will destroy you in return.* This mutually assured destruction is unsatisfactory, since the failure of deterrence leaves both sides devastated and dead. Horror at this possibility led Ronald Reagan to advance the Strategic Defense Initiative. Alas, the likelihood of thwarting a determined attack by even a medium-size nuclear power is slight, at least in the near term.

The best response is to reduce the odds of getting into a nuclear war. Most Americans understand that instinctively, but not Washington's foreign policy community. Its members largely share a consensus that the U.S. must run the world, irrespective of cost. Some seem almost giddy just thinking about Washington trampling its adversaries underfoot. Hence the strong support for endless wars, at least until they turn into irrevocable disasters, such as Iraq.

When it comes to nuclear weapons, most members of the Washington blob appear to believe that nuclear war just can't happen, so the U.S. should feel free to threaten to unleash death and destruction on other states to advance its foreign policy ends. For instance, President Dwight Eisenhower publicly discussed using nuclear weapons to encourage negotiations over ending the Korean War. In 1973 Richard Nixon issued a nuclear alert to back Israel in the Yom Kippur War. Hence Washington's refusal to endorse no first use of nukes.

Even more important is the affirmative threat to use nuclear weapons to defend allied nations, so-called extended deterrence, or a nuclear umbrella. This policy first evolved in Europe during the Cold War. Washington was at a conventional disadvantage since the Soviet Union faced fewer political constraints on deploying a large army. Hence the policy of "massive retaliation," that is, the willingness to respond with disproportionate force to any attack. That included using nuclear weapons to stop a conventional assault.

Washington has since provided nuclear umbrellas to cover more countries. Certainly, Japan and South Korea are protected. Australia, another treaty ally, also probably is included, though Canberra receives less attention. And there are several maybes—Philippines (a weak treaty ally), Israel (an unofficial ally with vast political clout in Washington), and Taiwan (not officially recognized by America, but a long-time U.S. security ward). Indeed, Washington follows a calculated policy of "strategic ambiguity" toward Taiwan, which means refusing to say whether the U.S. would defend the former even with conventional weapons.

The expectation is that the mere threat of Washington going nuclear would deter anyone anywhere doing anything against the country concerned. However, claiming to have extended deterrence to another country means little. Talk is cheap, as oft has been said. It is essential that potential aggressors *believe* that America is willing to act, which means risking nuclear war which could involve the U.S. homeland. During the Cold War the nuclear umbrella over Europe appeared credible. Washington had gone to war twice to ensure European independence. The continent, ravaged by years of fighting, then was unable to effectively defend itself. The Soviet Union looked capable of dominating Eurasia, a key American fear. Moscow could find Washington's threat to use nuclear weapons believable.

Much the same situation occurred in Asia. Japan was disarmed and initially no one wanted to see a revived Japanese military. The U.S. went to great effort in the Korean War to preserve South Korea, which neighbored both the Soviet Union and People's Republic of China. Seoul came out of the conflict even more impoverished and hapless, and thus in greater need of American support. Moscow and Beijing would have gained little from testing Washington's seriousness in threatening nuclear war.

However, the situation has changed dramatically. First, the danger is different. The Russian military has revived since the Soviet break-up but is not the Red Army

reincarnated. Moscow is unlikely to even use force in Asia, where its geopolitical role is minimal. And Russia is in no position to dominate Europe, let alone Eurasia.

Meanwhile, the PRC has shown no warlike designs on South Korea or Australia. So far, anyway, Beijing has focused on territory seen as historically Chinese. That still could pose a problem for Japan and the Philippines, which have disputes over islands and waters with the PRC, but the latter has shown no interest in conquering those nations' home islands. Moreover, while control of Eurasia matters greatly to Washington, the status of individual nations—such as the Philippines—matters much less. Frankly, nothing that happens to the latter would greatly affect U.S. security.

Second, Washington's allies could defend themselves. In that sense America's policy succeeded, providing a shield behind which they could recover economically. The Europeans vastly outrange Russia, their only plausible threat. Japan is the world's third ranked economic power and could spend far more on the military, enough to deter attack even from China. The Republic of Korea enjoys 50 times the economic strength and twice the population of North Korea. It is one thing to contend that the U.S. should risk its cities to prevent hostile dominance of entire continents. It is quite another to advocate such an approach so that wealthy allied states don't have to pay more for their own defense.

Third, the rise of North Korea as a nuclear power greatly complicates the situation in Asia. Neither Russia nor China has any interest in going to war on the Korean peninsula. Thus, Pyongyang would be greatly outclassed by the U.S., which had overwhelming conventional strength as well as nuclear weapons, in another Korean conflict. For the Democratic People's Republic of Korea nukes have become the great equalizer. If war erupted and the DPRK's existence was threatened, like during the Korean War before China intervened, the North could credibly threaten the use of nuclear weapons. America's ability to retaliate would not deter a regime which otherwise faced elimination.

Fourth, the balance of costs and benefits has changed in all these cases. During the Cold War the nuclear umbrella over allies appeared to elevate a preexisting risk of nuclear war only slightly. This minimal cost seemed warranted by the stakes—control of Eurasia. Today the direct threat of nuclear conflict with either Moscow or Beijing is minuscule. The main reason such a confrontation still seems possible is because of America's continuing defense of its allies. Imagine bringing Georgia and Ukraine into NATO along with their active conflicts with Russia. Americans then could plausibly find themselves trading cities with Russia because of a fight between Kyiv or Tbilisi and Moscow that mattered not at all to the U.S.

The situation in Asia is somewhat different but similarly dangerous. The Biden administration has reiterated past U.S. assurances that it would defend every Japanese island, even if contested by China, and every Filipino ship, even if in waters claimed by the PRC. That could draw America into war over an ally's useless rock or vessel, a conflict that ultimately could go nuclear. That would be madness.

Taiwan is in a category of its own, acting as a hair-trigger for war. The U.S. must decide, as a Chinese general asked years ago, whether America would trade Los Angeles for Taipei. Finally, the DPRK's acquisition of nuclear weapons and a means of delivery that could hit Pacific territories and apparently reach the American mainland will inevitably put into question an alliance in which even an American conventional military response might trigger North Korean nuclear retaliation.

What in any of these situations would make it worth America losing one or more major cities?

Nuclear weapons are here to stay. Such is the reality of the world. Washington still could reduce the danger. The most important step would be to close the assorted nuclear umbrellas which the U.S. has distributed around the globe.

Even if extended deterrence was necessary during the Cold War, it no longer advances American security. Indeed, it is affirmatively dangerous. Restricting nuclear weapons to America's defense could become an important legacy for the Biden administration.

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