The Illogic of US Nuclear Declaratory Policy in Today's Strategic Environment

By Alex Mazzone

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The current U.S. nuclear declaratory policy is not effectively tailored to today's strategic environment. Calculated ambiguity, or the deliberate use of ambiguous language about potential nuclear weapon use, was justified during the Cold War when the United States faced a single strategic adversary. However, the landscape has fundamentally changed, with two nuclear-capable adversaries, Russia and China, who are both able to launch devastating attacks on the homeland. Strategic realities have evolved significantly since the Cold War era in ways that challenge the logic supporting calculated ambiguity's use during that time. Additionally, the existence of three nuclear-armed superpowers strains many supposed benefits of using calculated ambiguity (e.g., ambiguous threats having a de-escalatory effect during times of rising tensions). To remedy the incompatibility of calculated ambiguity with today's strategic environment, the United States must divide the Western nuclear deterrence mission in two dyadic relationships by offsetting responsibility of the European nuclear deterrence mission to the United Kingdom and France. This will set up U.S. nuclear strategy to capture the historical upside of calculated ambiguity while mitigating its costs in this novel strategic environment.

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The Purpose of U.S. Nuclear Declaratory Policy

Michael Mazarr of the RAND Corporation defines deterrence as "the practice of discouraging or restraining someone— in world politics, usually a nation-state——from taking unwanted actions, such as an armed attack. It involves an effort to stop or prevent an action."[1] Deterrence is an actor's attempt to manipulate an adversary's perception of the costs and benefits of taking an action with the goal of convincing them that the costs outweigh any potential benefits. Deterrence is best summed up as the "generation of fear" at its core.[2] Cold War theorist William Kaufmann stated that expressing the "intention to defend a specific interest" is fundamental to an actor who seeks to strengthen their deterrence policy.[3] Declaratory policy— and other forms of public statements— is one way a country expresses an intention to defend a specific interest. Regarding nuclear weapons, this equates to a country's public statements on its position on under which circumstances it would use nuclear weapons. Declaratory policy is a signaling tool. It communicates a country's nuclear posture with the goal of increasing an adversary's perceived costs of taking an action. It can also be used to assure allies and partners that are privy to extended nuclear deterrence commitments.

For deterrence to be effective, threats must be credible. To be fearful, one must be convinced. The problem with a threat of nuclear weapon use involves the threat's credibility. When two countries possess nuclear weaponry capable of mutual retaliation, a threat to use nuclear weapons is seen as less credible as both nations would face mutual destruction if the threat was fulfilled. How can one credibly threaten nuclear weapon use when its use amounts to one's own demise? Thomas Schelling argues "the threat that leaves something chance" is the way out of this credibility problem.[4] Schelling's concept introduces ambiguity into U.S. nuclear strategy, where the potential for unintended escalation serves as a psychological deterrent, bridging the gap between the need for credible threats and the desire to avoid the disastrous consequences of mutually assured destruction (MAD) outcomes.

Schelling's concept is lived out in the United States through use of "calculated ambiguity" in its nuclear declaratory policy. Calculated ambiguity speaks to the deliberate use of ambiguous language when stating the circumstances under which the United States would consider using nuclear weapons. The Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) has embraced calculated ambiguity since its inception in 1994. The Biden Administration's NPR outlines: "as long as nuclear weapons exist, the fundamental role of nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack on the United States, our Allies, and partners. The United States would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its Allies and partners."[5] By design, the decision-makers in Washington and Omaha (home of United States Strategic Command, or STRATCOM) themselves do not truly know what constitutes an extreme circumstance until they are placed into a situation that warrants such an evaluation. Leaving the final decision to chance is what deters, the logic goes.

Different Challenges, Same Policy, Expecting The Same Results?

Strategic challenges inform a country's nuclear strategy as much as, if not more than, its general theoretic basis. There have been two distinct strategic challenges the United States has faced. The first was the Cold War, when the Soviet Union had a nuclear arsenal capable of inflicting a devastating blow on the homeland. The second and current strategic challenge is characterized by the emergence of two adversaries, Russia and China, who not only possess nuclear capabilities that can inflict devastating damage on the homeland but also a shared goal of challenging U.S. global hegemony. While the strategic challenge has changed, the core principles used to inform U.S. nuclear strategy have remained the same. The most recent Congressionally-mandated Strategic Posture Commission (SPC) states the six principles of U.S. nuclear strategy "remain sound" in light of this new strategic challenge the United States faces.[6] However, the SPC commits merely two pages to definitions of these principles without a clear analysis as to how exactly they remain sound in this new strategic environment.[7] One of these six principles is calculated ambiguity.

Without a critical re-evaluation, U.S. nuclear

declaratory policy risks being informed by logic unfit for today's strategic challenge, which would undermine its role in U.S. nuclear strategy. To analyze whether this principle remains sound today, one can comparatively examine the logic that justified calculated ambiguity's use to manage the past strategic challenge with today.

The Cold War Logic of Calculated Ambiguity Applied Today

Proponents of calculated ambiguity claim its use improves deterrence against a conventional attack. They suggest that adversarial uncertainty on whether a conventional attack will warrant a nuclear response increases the potential costs an adversary perceives if they commit that action.

This logic was the beating heart of calculated ambiguity during the Cold War. As Franklin C. Miller states, "the whole purpose of threatening to use nuclear weapons first was to defend North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) from a devastating conventional attack by the Soviet Union."[8] Throughout the Cold War, the United States was deeply concerned about a conventional attack on NATO due to massive Soviet conventional advantages. Signaling this concern, former President Dwight D. Eisenhower once stated, "two more divisions or ten more divisions on our side would not make very much difference against this Soviet ground force [of 175 divisions]."[9] Washington also had concerns regarding the Soviet military dispositions. Many policymakers believed the Soviet military had a "doctrinal penchant for quantity" which amplified calls in Washington to close the conventional gap.[10] This concern was validated by the asymmetry in the U.S.-Soviet conventional balance of power in Europe that persisted throughout the Cold War. Washington's answer was to counterbalance Soviet conventional advantages with nuclear weapons and calculated ambiguity. As such, today's conventional balance of power in Europe and Asia matters greatly for determining the applicability of the Cold War logic of calculated ambiguity to today.

Europe

The European conventional balance of power today favors NATO over Russia. As Chief of the British Defense Staff Admiral Sir Anthony Radakin recently noted, "NATO's combat air forces outnumber Russia's 3 to 1. NATO has 4 times as many ships and 3 times as many submarines as Russia… plus an additional strategic depth of a population of over 1 billion. The biggest reason that Putin doesn't want a conflict with NATO is because Russia will lose. And lose quickly."[11] Moreover, the United States need not be in a conventional balance of power calculation to underscore the point. Barry Posen and Stephen Walt note that "NATO Europe's combined gross domestic product (GDP) is more than $15 trillion; Russia's GDP is only $1.7 trillion" and "NATO's European members spend three to four times what Russia does on defense every single year" to show Europe can match Russian conventional power without U.S. support.[12] Therefore, U.S. military strategy need not rely on the threat of massive cost imposition vis-à-vis nuclear weapons to deter a Russian conventional attack on NATO. Put simply, the Cold War logic of calculated ambiguity does not apply to Europe's conventional balance of power today.

Asia

In comparison to Europe's conventional balance of power, Asia is undoubtedly more precarious. China is investing in capabilities to compete and outmatch the United States in key conventional domains. For example, a Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) report on U.S.-China naval activity notes that "China now possesses the world's largest maritime fighting force, operating 234 warships to the U.S. Navy's 219."[13] To be sure, the Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index for 2024 ranks the United States above China in conventional military strength, but also shows a year-over-year score that decreased for the United States and increased for China, suggesting growing Chinese relative power.[14] While Asia's conventional balance of power may appear to fit well with the Cold War logic of calculated ambiguity, its overall contribution to U.S. deterrence policy in Asia is undermined by two factors:

1. The need for a tailored policy of calculated ambiguity
2. The cost threshold of a China-Taiwan conflict

First, the problem set for U.S. deterrence policy is distinct from the Cold War's problem set. During the

Cold War, the United States did not have to balance West German bellicosity to deter Soviet aggression because Bonn was firmly cemented into NATO security guarantees. This stands in contrast to today where both adopting a policy that makes the first-use of nuclear weapons possible and explicitly committing to not defend Taiwan could increase the likelihood of Chinese aggression.

By committing to a policy that leaves open the possibility of first-use, the United States provides Taiwan with further cover to engage in pro-independence rhetoric. For example, one quantitative study found that Taiwanese public opinion on independence remains unchanged by being confront with Chinese military presence, but became more supportive of *de jure* independence after seeing evidence of U.S. military aircraft around Taiwan.[15] The report also notes strategic ambiguity may have a positive influence on maintaining stability in the Taiwan Strait, suggesting that some sort of modulation of ambiguity is necessary to maintain deterrence in this specific problem-set.[16] This is true as committing to not defend Taiwan at all significantly lowers the cost threshold of attack, which also increases escalation risks from China.

Instead, calculated ambiguity regarding a U.S. conventional response strikes the right balance that maintains the current status quo. As Eric Gomez (formerly) of the Cato Institute states, "the possibility of U.S. military intervention raises the potential costs to China of attacking Taiwan, while the possibility of U.S. nonintervention restrains Taipei from declaring independence."[17] The United States already maintains this tailored policy of calculated ambiguity. Unlike in Western Europe during the Cold War, U.S. policy remains explicitly ambiguous on whether it would intervene at all in a China-Taiwan conflict. Since the United States is trying to deter two actors from unwanted actions, a tailored policy of calculated strategic ambiguity offers more deterrent value than calculated ambiguity regarding a nuclear response.

The other unique factor is the high-cost threshold for China. Beijing would incur more costs in a Taiwan scenario than Moscow during the Cold War due to geography. A Chinese amphibious land invasion and subsequent occupation of Taiwan is a herculean task in comparison to a Soviet incursion into Western

Europe. As John Mearsheimer states, "navies are at a significant disadvantage when attempting amphibious operations against powerful land-based forces, which are likely to throw the seaborne invaders back into the sea."[18] The stopping power of water creates a higher cost threshold for China in comparison to the Soviet case. This unique cost makes calculated ambiguity regarding a nuclear response at best marginally additive to an existing high-cost threshold, while at worst a disadvantage by incentivizing pro-independence rhetoric from Taiwan. Additionally, it would be antithetical to U.S. obligations outlined in the Taiwan Relations Act that stipulate providing "arms with a defensive character" to Taiwan in the event of a Chinese conventional attack.[19] It is difficult to rationally suggest the first-use of nuclear weapons fits into this classification.

Finally, it is not clear that China's military shares the "penchant for quantity" with the Soviets. President Xi Jinping's call for a "world-class" military by 2049 is often cited as evidence for this claim.[20] However, MIT's Taylor Fravel suggests argues the term is an outline of "a general, high-level, and overarching concept for the development of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)" that does not attempt to "identify the ends for which a world-class or even modernizing PLA would be used" or "indicate the manner in which such forces would be used."[21]

There are more clearly defined Chinese military strategies that are more illuminating on Beijing's thinking. For example, China's active defense strategy identifies "the dialectical unity of restraining and winning war" as a core tenet. This principle highlights the need for effective restraint in warfare as the unconstrained use of force may cause escalation.[22] This strategy negates the claim that China's military shares the Soviet disposition for quantity. Instead, it reflects an appreciation for strategic defense in winning war, which implies preemption when core interests are challenged as opposed to conventional balance of power calculations.

In addition, any likely conflict between Washington and Beijing will likely involve mostly naval assets. According to the Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index, the United States still leads China in many crucial aspects of naval warfare such as sea control, firepower, long-range maritime force projection, and ballistic missile submarine capabilities.[23] As such, even if China's military strategy did seek to leverage

its marginal advantages in the conventional balance of power, it does not currently have conventional advantages in key asset areas as was true in the Soviet case. Therefore, the assumption that China's military strategy prioritizes quantity with the same disposition as the Soviets is inaccurate and therefore should not amplify concerns in Washington that buttress support for a policy of calculated ambiguity.

Despite a marginally unfavorable conventional balance of power, these unique factors suggest the Cold War logic of calculated ambiguity do not entirely align with the strategic realities in the Asian case. Moreover, this logic is undermined by the current European conventional balance of power. If such logic is no longer salient in either case, do other theoretical arguments formulated during the Cold War that advocate for the use of calculated ambiguity still have potency in the face of this new strategic environment?

A Paradigmatic Change

The current strategic environment is structurally different from anything the United States has faced in its nuclear past. The United States is now confronted by two nuclear-armed adversaries who are bound together by a desire to supplant its global hegemony. More concerningly, there are now three superpowers with sizable nuclear arsenals in the international system.

This introduces the three-body phenomenon, which has been popularized in physics but applies to all dynamic relationships involving three players. In short, when jumping from two to three, interactions become highly complex and difficult to predict. As William Broad states, "in many aspects of nature, threes have an almost magical power to sow chaos, to become more than the sum of their parts. Scientists call them nonlinearities. In short, the interval from two to three can produce a counterintuitive jump in complexity."[24]

 The fundamental change is clear: U.S. nuclear strategy and its related actions now influences the decision-calculus of two adversaries instead of one. Additionally, Russia and China are capable of simultaneously launching devastating strikes on

the U.S. homeland. This paradigm shift challenges traditional notions of nuclear deterrence as they were underwritten by assumptions involving two actors as opposed to three. This has led top U.S. officials, including former STRATCOM Commander Admiral Charles Richard, to claim the United States must start "rewriting deterrence theory" to solve this problem.[25] As a core pillar of nuclear deterrence theory, calculated ambiguity must be part of this recalibration.

The Effects Of The Three-Body Problem On Calculated Ambiguity

While benign in certain fields, this jump in complexity is concerning for calculated ambiguity. Unlike the Cold War, U.S. nuclear declaratory policy now influences the perceptions, actions, and potential reactions of two adversaries capable of launching devastating attacks on the U.S. homeland. Therefore, it should not be surprising that the three-body problem has damaging effects on many supposed benefits of calculated ambiguity.

Effects on The De-Escalatory Nature of Ambiguous Threats

The three-body problem diminishes the argument that calculated ambiguity has a de-escalatory effect in times of rising tensions. Proponents of calculated ambiguity argue that ambiguous threats work to de-escalate tensions before or during a conflict. As Matthew Costlow states, "by keeping the option open of employing nuclear weapons first, U.S. leaders can make a last-ditch deterrent threat to prevent a major crisis from escalating or a conflict from growing more costly."[26] While this may be true in a dyadic relationship, it may not be the case when a second adversary must also be managed. In fact, it could have the opposite effect.

Although mutual retaliation persists in light of today's strategic environment, a threat that leaves something to chance may have a psychological deterrent effect on one adversary but can simultaneously invite escalation from another. For example, consider a Chinese conventional attack on Taiwan. If the United States threatened first-use with the intent to deter further aggression by China, it could incentivize Russia to become more bellicose in its willingness to use nuclear

weapons. To be clear, this isn't merely about breaking the taboo on nuclear weapon use; U.S. threats of first-use in one theater alter adversarial calculations in another theater. Remember, declaratory policy is a signaling tool. The difference now is U.S. nuclear declaratory policy signals to two adversaries capable of launching damaging strikes on the homeland.

In this example, the Russian decision-calculus could see U.S. threats of first-use in Asia as an opportunity to test U.S. resolve. There are several reasons supporting this claim.

First, Russia could calculate that Washington would be less incentivized to envelope itself into nuclear escalation in Europe if it is simultaneously involved in a similar enterprise in Asia. Nuclear risk taking is a dangerous game and it is logical for Russia to assume that the United States would refrain from playing two games of nuclear chicken simultaneously. If an adversary does not want to take an action that one also does not want them to take, then the levers one can pull to induce that non-action will have increased leverage. As such, a U.S. threat of first-use in Asia provides Russia with a perceived coercive advantage in issuing nuclear threats which suggests calculated ambiguity does not have a de-escalatory effect given the three-body problem.

Second, a U.S. threat of first-use in China-Taiwan conventional conflict communicates constraint to Russia regarding Washington's ability to respond to Russian aggression. A U.S. threat of first-use in Asia signals commitment to the Asian theater. If the United States make this declaratory statement, it is plausible for Russia to assume that U.S. military assets will be tied up in Asia, constraining their use in Europe. Furthermore, Washington does not maintain the adequate number of current assets required for the nuclear mission, such as tankers, to engage in multiple theaters simultaneously. This has mostly occurred due to atrophy of the nuclear industrial base.[27] A U.S. threat of first-use in Asia would also communicate constraint on Washington's attention to Russia. Russia has shown a willingness to take advantage of perceived Western divides in attention in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014). If an adversary signals commitment to another theater and their assets and attention is constrained by that commitment, then the levers a country can pull are less likely to be met with a cost greater than

the costs without it. These constraints give Moscow additional perceived coercive advantages to issuing nuclear threats following a U.S. threat of first-use, damaging claims regarding calculated ambiguity's de-escalatory effect.

Third, for both reasons stated above, a U.S. threat of first-use in Asia damages the credibility of any potential U.S. nuclear threats in Europe. If the United States seeks to refrain from playing two simultaneous games of nuclear chicken and its resources/attention are viewed as constrained, Russia will plausibly see any subsequent U.S. threat of nuclear use as less credible. As such, a threat that leaves something to chance in one theater erodes the credibility of U.S. nuclear threats in other theaters, damaging the claim that calculated ambiguity has a de-escalatory effect.

To summarize, Russia has sufficient reason to perceive coercive advantages in issuing nuclear threats in a scenario where the United States signals first-use in Asia. If the United States is interested in reducing miscalculation risks, it is unclear how threats of first-use, which send signals to two strategic adversaries, achieves that mission. By signaling a strong commitment to either theater via nuclear threats, the United States may encourage opportunistic nuclear behavior, which undermines the claim that ambiguous threats are de-escalatory in nature.

As a final note, in general, uncertainty on the circumstances that warrant U.S. nuclear weapon use may incentivize Russia and China to coordinate simultaneous aggression, which damages the claim that calculated ambiguity has a de-escalatory effect. For example, if China is interested in launching a conventional attack on Taiwan, it surely will consider the possibility of U.S. threats of first-use. If China is interested in decreasing the likelihood of the United States issuing such a threat, coordinating simultaneous aggression with Russia is an effective way to do so. If the United States is faced with two conventional fronts it is less likely to issue threats of first-use because such threats send signals to both adversaries, increasing the risk of miscalculation and inadvertent escalation. As such, calculated ambiguity may serve as an accelerant to Moscow-Beijing simultaneous aggression, again damaging its supposed de-escalatory effect.

Effects on Extended Deterrence Guarantees

The three-body problem damages the claim that calculated ambiguity is a boon to the extended deterrence guarantees that the United States offers to its allies and partners. The previously mentioned escalation incentives that the three-body problem induces works to undermine calculated ambiguity's supposed benefits related to extended deterrence guarantees. To illustrate the original claim, Matthew Costlow argues "a policy that essentially forbids even threatening nuclear employment in defense of an ally unless it is under imminent threat of attack by nuclear weapons is hardly reassuring."[28] While U.S. threats of nuclear first-use in one theater may assure those regional allies, they may strain U.S. commitments to allies in other regions by incentivizing opportunistic adversarial aggression, as previously articulated in the last section. In this way, calculated ambiguity may no longer be a catch-all in terms of assuring allies because threats of nuclear first-use in one theater create escalation incentives in other theaters where the U.S. nuclear umbrella extends.

Effects on Flexibility

The three-body problem damages the claim that flexibility strictly provides advantages to U.S. nuclear deterrence policy. Since calculated ambiguity adds flexibility to U.S. nuclear strategy, its value is also diminished. To better illustrate how calculated ambiguity adds to flexibility, Matthew Costlow states, "calculated ambiguity provides U.S. officials with a range of options for crises and conflict."[29] This influences decisions about the future of U.S. nuclear weapon programs. For example, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley stated the President "deserves to have multiple options" when conveying his support for the development of a low-yield nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile.[30]

To better understand the logic of flexibility, let's take Herman Kahn's well-known escalation ladder model. Kahn argues escalation occurs at distinct decision-points, ranging from peacetime tensions to all-out nuclear war.[31] Its implication is that de-escalation is possible along the various 'rungs' of the escalation ladder if one possesses tit-for-tat capabilities.

This approach is incompatible with today's strategic environment. The model's assumption of a linear progression of conflict up and through nuclear exchanges, which is hard to stomach in a dyadic game, is even more problematic in a triadic game that structurally invites nonlinearities. If an adversary uses a tactical nuclear weapon, a response in-kind now also influences the third adversary's decision-calculus to move up and along the progression of conflict. Put simply, escalation pathways to all-out nuclear war are now more unpredictable, which degrades the claim that flexibility and tit-for-tat capabilities is strictly de-escalatory during rising tensions.

Calculated ambiguity is part of the broader application of flexibility in U.S. nuclear deterrent but to make ambiguous threats credible they must also be backstopped by flexibility in options. An ambiguous threat of first-use in response to a conventional attack by an adversary that is backstopped by a high-yield nuclear warhead will be less credible than if it is backstopped by a low-yield option. In this way, calculated ambiguity requires flexibility. Additionally, credible calculated ambiguity requires augmenting nuclear options such that "U.S. nuclear strategy includes the option of preemptively striking an adversary's nuclear forces before they can be launched and inflict damage on the United States."[32] Facing two strategic adversaries, this would "generate much larger force requirements" (i.e., having enough nuclear warheads to hit targets in Russia and China simultaneously).[33]

The problem is larger force requirements would force Beijing and Moscow build up their nuclear arsenal. The three-body phenomenon perverts the possibility of arms control. Under calculated ambiguity and the flexibility it requires, the United States will always need more than the individual weapon counts of Russia and China. In turn, Beijing and Moscow will see this as a gap that ought to be filled by building more weapons, which subsequently invites further U.S. build-up, ultimately leading to a three-way arms race. As such, it is unclear how stability is reached under current U.S. nuclear declaratory policy given the three-body problem.

Since it invites larger force requirements, which in turn generates a three-way arms race, the value of calculated ambiguity is damaged. If the United States is committed to arms control and reducing risks of miscalculation and escalation, it is unclear how a

blanket policy of calculated ambiguity is a favorable means to reach those ends given today's strategic environment.

Effects on Adversarial Perceptions

The three-body problem diminishes the value in using calculated ambiguity to dictate adversarial perceptions in a way that is favorable to U.S. interests. Calculated ambiguity not only encourages an unbounded three-way arms race by the larger force requirements it invites. It also acts as an accelerant by affecting adversaries' perception of U.S. nuclear employment strategies. By embracing calculated ambiguity, the United States is signaling an openness to the first-use of nuclear weapons.

Therefore, it is difficult to see how adversaries can distinguish between the United States pursuing an escalation dominance employment strategy, which would push adversaries to develop tit-for-tat capabilities, and a counterforce employment strategy that fits within the MAD framework and makes strategic stability more likely. As Tong Zhao states, "the ambiguity in U.S. policy thinking raises suspicion in China that Washington does not intend to make a distinction between capability requirements for an escalation dominance strategy and a limited counterforce strategy and is pursuing an escalation dominance strategy. Furthermore, from China's perspective, an escalation dominance strategy is indistinguishable from what is known as a nuclear primacy strategy, which aims to develop a disarming first-strike capability."[34] This suggests that the value of calculated ambiguity is not only diminished by the realities of the three-body problem, but also a casual influence on creating the problem in the first place.

Proponents of calculated ambiguity often make the counterargument that "there is good reason to be skeptical that tinkering public political statements has much impact on the strategic calculus of [China] and [Russia] who appear to have made up their minds about American strategic intentions" when confronted with this claim.[35] While this may be true to some extent, U.S. nuclear declaratory policy also informs domestic decisions on nuclear force size and structure, as previously articulated. If adversaries do not make strategic calculations based on adversarial policy, they surely must make them based on adversarial

capabilities. Therefore, if U.S. nuclear declaratory policy influences capability development, then it has an indirect effect on adversary strategic calculus, likely serving as self-reinforcing evidence of their own beliefs about U.S. intentions. If the United States is interested in lowering its threat perception, a desirable goal given the three-body problem and its inherent complexities and unpredictability, then a blanket policy of calculated ambiguity is not effective means to reach that end.

On Effects: Conclusion

The three-body problem significantly undermines the supposed benefits of calculated ambiguity. It diminishes the perceived de-escalatory nature of ambiguous threats, as threats of first-use in one theater can provoke aggressive responses from another adversary, thereby increasing the risk of miscalculation and escalation. Additionally, calculated ambiguity fails to provide the necessary flexibility and credibility in deterrence commitments, leading to a potential arms race rather than strategic stability. Calculated ambiguity also adversely affects adversarial perceptions, reinforcing suspicions about U.S. intentions and encouraging adversaries to develop their nuclear capabilities in response.

Ultimately, the complexities introduced by the three-body problem suggest that a blanket policy of calculated ambiguity may not be the most effective nuclear declaratory policy for managing the current strategic challenge facing the United States. If policymakers are interested in recalibrating U.S. nuclear deterrence strategy for this new challenge, then augmenting our current declaratory policy is a great place to start.

The Way Out: Offsetting European Nuclear Deterrence to Allies

The United States has two options to augment its current nuclear declaratory policy in a way that remedies the problems associated with the three-body problem. First, it can retrench its position to sole purpose or no first-use (NFU). By doing so, the effect of the U.S. nuclear deterrent can remain strong while not exposing itself to the risks outlined in this paper. However, it is undeniable that calculated ambiguity

has a positive deterrent effect in a dyadic relationship. The outcomes of the Cold War are evidence of this fact. The effects of the three-body problem on calculated ambiguity equate to increased risk and diminished utility, not a full erasure of its benefits. Sole purpose and NFU come with their own risks by representing a complete overturn of the long-standing U.S. nuclear declaratory policy, which may send the strongest possible signal of abandonment and incentivize escalation from adversaries.

Therefore, the second option, which is to work to divide the Western nuclear deterrence mission into two dyadic relationships, is the more attractive policy prescription. The European theater is the most viable candidate to accommodate this policy for several reasons.

First, the United Kingdom (UK) and France already maintain sizable nuclear arsenals. The UK has 225 nuclear warheads while France has 290, both of which include second-strike nuclear capabilities. Many claim the large numerical discrepancy with Russia, which maintains roughly 5,580 warheads, is justification for the need of the U.S. nuclear deterrent in Europe, but significant scholarship has demonstrated that numerical advantages do not result in coercive advantages for an adversary. Moreover, the United States currently maintains a nuclear arsenal in Europe that does not come close to closing this numerical gap.

Second, the current conventional balance of power does not warrant a massive nuclear deterrent as a backstop to deter Russian aggression against NATO. The existing British and French nuclear deterrents are more than capable to deter Russian nuclear use, the pre-eminent goal of a nuclear deterrent, while the conventional capabilities of European countries in NATO can deter a Russian conventional attack on the bloc.

Finally, China is unequivocally the "pacing threat" the United States faces. Washington is reeling from a gutted defense industrial base, a war weary population, and an outdated nuclear weapons complex. Beijing's relative conventional power continues to rise, which amplifies these concerns. As such, the U.S. nuclear deterrent must offset some responsibility to not only mitigate issues of the three-body problem, but also to remain an effective deterrent in the 21st century.

If this bifurcation of the Western nuclear deterrence mission is achieved, then calculated ambiguity's potential benefits in a two-actor environment are more likely to come into view. All the costs outlined in this paper related to escalation risks, credibility, and constraints would be subdued by an emboldened European-led nuclear deterrent. Therefore, the benefits of calculated ambiguity can possibly be manifested in the Asian theater.

The United States can take actionable steps to distance itself from the NATO nuclear mission in ways that will disarm the need for a nuclear declaratory policy of calculated ambiguity in Europe. First, it can downsize its role in the NATO Nuclear Planning Group (NPG). Currently, France is the only NATO member outside of the NPG and has signaled in the past for a more central role in the European nuclear deterrent. If the United States can communicate a shift of the burden of responsibility by distancing itself from the NPG and emboldening France to join it, then it won't have the need to use calculated ambiguity. Second, the United States can gradually downsize the number of nuclear weapons in Europe while calling for or even financially supporting continued British and French nuclear expansion and/or modernization efforts. Currently, there are roughly 100 U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe that remain unarmed and are not deployed on aircraft. These provide minimal deterrent value but rather serve as an assurance to allies. As such, gradually offloading the weapons back to the United States or to the Asian theater would communicate a shift in the burden of responsibility to nuclear-capable European allies, removing the need for calculated ambiguity. Finally, the United States can alter future declaratory policy statements in documents such as the NPR that downplay the U.S. nuclear deterrent's role in the European theater while emphasizing the strength, reliability, and credibility of allies' nuclear deterrents. This does not equate to an abandonment of America's NATO extended deterrence guarantees, but rather a distancing from calculated ambiguity in favor of sole purpose or NFU in the European case.

U.S. policymakers should be interested in adapting nuclear declaratory policy to meet the strategic challenge the United States faces given its damaging effects on calculated ambiguity. Washington must reconcile with the nonlinearity of the three-body

problem and the potentially devastating consequences it has for humanity. To do so, it can disconnect itself from the NATO nuclear mission while emphasizing and emboldening the British and French nuclear deterrents. This will set up U.S. nuclear strategy to capture the historical upside of calculated ambiguity while mitigating its unique costs in this novel strategic environment.

Endnotes

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