

CHAPTER 12

The Role of Strategic Communication in Deterrence: Lesson from History

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Gone are the Cold War days of an enemy one could count on, the isometric exercise of two enormous powers leaning against each other to keep the military balance. No more alarming encounters as the nuclear clock ticked to zero, and seemingly beyond, with great nuclear forces a word away from launch, and the world an hour away from a war after which "the survivors would envy the dead."¹

During the Cold War the United States and its primary allies relied on a policy of deterrence to prevent the Soviet Union and its allies from starting a central nuclear war and from escalating crises or regional conflicts to that level.

To maintain an effective deterrent to war and escalation of conflicts, most believe seven essential elements needed to be in place:

1. A U.S. and allied capability that could inflict an unacceptable level of damage in retaliation to an attack.
2. The will to use this retaliatory capability if the United States, its allies or vital interests were attacked or severely threatened.
3. The ability to effectively communicate both the U.S. will and its overwhelming retaliatory capability to adversary leaders so the U.S. deterrence threat was credible and understood.
4. The capability to survive an enemy attack and still retaliate with overwhelming force.
5. The capability to correctly and speedily identify the origins of any large-scale attack.
6. Knowledge of the locations of the attackers and the capability to reach their vital assets in response.

7. A rational opponent who would understand all of the above and who, in self interest, would be dissuaded from risky aggressive behavior that could lead to central nuclear war.

During the Cold War period of 1945-1991, perhaps the closest the superpowers came to nuclear war was the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Rational behavior finally prevailed, and as a result, there was "the dawning of another day" – the metaphor used for the end of the crisis in the 2000 movie *The Thirteen Days*. This came about through a series of decisions, understandings, misunderstandings and blind alleys all communicated in some form among enemies. And that communication, that *strategic communication*, was essential in *deterring* both the United States and the Soviet Union from taking action that could quite possibly have spelled an end to civilization as we know it.

We face a somewhat different challenge in the 21st century. The world has stepped back from the Armageddon threatened by the Cold War, but has moved down a different path with dangers of its own. As nuclear weapons proliferate, and tensions rise in areas of the world where nuclear weapons have spread and exist, the threat of a smaller state or terrorist organization using one or more nuclear weapons to wreak havoc on a rival regional enemy or on the United States becomes ever more likely. The nuclear club has now grown to include not only the big five (United States, Russia, China, France and the United Kingdom), but also North Korea, Pakistan, India and reportedly, Israel. The Iranian and North Korea nuclear weapons programs may well spur their regional adversaries also to seek nuclear arms.

Nuclear know-how is available. A number of states which had nuclear weapons have now given them up: South Africa, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus. Libya nearly acquired nuclear arms through the black market before giving up its pursuit under pressure. Clearly, there is a widespread knowledge today of how to create highly enriched uranium or bomb-grade plutonium, as well as how to weaponize these highly explosive materials. While mounting such weapons on missiles or delivering them by aircraft or other means is somewhat more problematic, that knowledge is available as well. Deterring such attacks requires solving a variety of different equations, some with more variables. But

one of the pivotal tools for solving that deterrence of war problem will again be strategic communication.

Effective strategic communication is at the heart of effective deterrence. It is public diplomacy, public relations, declaratory policy and actions that combine to send a deterrence message. It's all the ways a country or organization presents its intentions to its audience and attempts to influence that audience. Deterrence of war, escalation or proliferation relies heavily on messages of strategic communication, and those messages have little effect if they are not credible. To demonstrate credibility in the post-Cold War world, military power is necessary, but not sufficient. For deterrence of war to work, the United States must have a coherent message, the message must be well-explained, and others in the world must understand and buy into the message, whether from an allied or adversarial point of view.

The strategic deterrence policy of the United States is among the most important for this country, and one that must be virtually perfect. In a coherent strategic communication plan, one that conveys the nuclear retaliatory power and will of the United States, the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons should be the centerpiece of the U.S. deterrence posture. For this enterprise to be successful the United States must have the absolute confidence and respect of its various audiences – and its threat of retaliation must be credible.

The 2010 Nuclear Posture Review

As this was written, the United States had just concluded its Nuclear Posture Review (NPR); a top-to-bottom look at all matters nuclear performed at the start of each administration. This review forms the foundation for the *strategic deterrence policy* and its underlying *strategic communication plan* of the United States. The 2010 NPR lays out the strategy and capability required to deter war, to deter escalation of ongoing conflict and is mated with a nuclear nonproliferation policy to reduce nuclear threats. This story, this vision the United States wishes to project, at once must be credible and at the same time be backed by policies that match the philosophical objectives.

The Nuclear Posture Review for the Obama administration had the benefit of front-end guidance from the President, namely his speech made in Prague in April of 2009.² The speech outlined four goals for his nuclear weapons national strategy:

1. Negotiation of a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START)
2. United States ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.
3. Strengthening of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which was reviewed in 2010.
4. Locking down of all fissile material worldwide inside four years to prevent it from falling into hostile hands.

The Prague speech was *declaratory policy*, a clear and unambiguous statement on the record that outlines the intentions of the President and the United States.³ Such statements are elements of strategic communication and help convey the vision of the United States. In President Obama's speech, he clearly lays out where he would like to lead the country and the world *vis a vis* nuclear weapons. But all four goals require the cooperation and approval of others. The first and third are treaties that require agreements with other countries and eventual ratification by the United States Senate. The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, part of the push for controlling nuclear spread, was concluded in 1996 but has not yet been ratified by Congress. The President has told the world the direction he wishes to take, but that direction is anything but sure. But his willingness to enter into and abide by treaties with respect to nuclear weapons, rather than only take unilateral actions, is a strategic communication message all by itself and signals a declaratory policy that is a departure from the policies of the George W. Bush administration.

This NPR, unlike any before it, is first and foremost a product of the front office, and the document *does* represent policies the President controls. President Obama was "making editing changes in the Nuclear Posture Review right up to the last minutes before it was to go to press," says William J. Perry, defense secretary in the Clinton administration.⁴ In the past, this document was always important in the halls of the Pentagon and the scientific world, but had never risen to the level of political policy.

But this NPR is presidential declaratory policy, and such emphasis reinforces its effectiveness as strategic communication.

Among the key conclusions of the NPR:

- The United States will continue to strengthen conventional capabilities and reduce the role of nuclear weapons in deterring non-nuclear attacks, with the objective of making deterrence of nuclear attack on the United States or our allies and partners the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons.
- The United States would consider the use of nuclear weapons only in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners.
- The United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states party to the NPT and is in compliance with their non-proliferation obligations.⁵

The language in the report concerned some the United States had not foresworn the first use of nuclear weapons. It concerned others the United States had been too transparent with non-nuclear states that may use chemical or biological weapons against it knowing in advance the penalty would not be nuclear, provided they were toeing the line with regard to the NPT.

But no one could say the administration's policy was not clearly communicated. And a reasonable case could be made the policy was credible. In the document, the administration made no claims not backed up. For instance, in the case of stating publicly the United States would not use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear country in compliance with the NPT, it merely stated the obvious. The threat of nuclear attack against a non-nuclear state as a policy may have excited some hard-liners in the past, but in fact almost no one believed the United States would have lowered the nuclear-use threshold to that level if the survival of the country were not in question; the threat of "nuking them back to the stone age" was simply not credible.

Leaving some ambiguity in the public declarations was good strategic communication as well. Allowing nuclear states, or those on the

road to nuclear weapons such as Iran, to wonder just what the United States *would* do is effective strategic communication too, particularly when the target set has been narrowed significantly by eliminating the non-nuclear states as targets for possible nuclear retaliation. A state may be more deterred from acquiring its own nuclear weapons when it realizes the crosshairs of the United States and other nuclear states could be on it as a result of its acquisition.

The ambiguity implied in not stating a policy of “no first use” is also useful as a deterrent. After all, first use was an unstated policy option during most of the Cold War in Western Europe to be ready to blunt the superior numbers of a conventional Warsaw Pact attack. Not taking the option off the table now is credible and good strategic communication provided the President and his national security team is *willing*, and *seen to be willing* to use nuclear weapons in some contingencies.

If the 2010 NPR, underpinned by the President's Prague speech, is a blueprint for the future, what did strategic communication look like during the Cold War?

Communicating Deterrence Threats During the Cold War

The various deterrence strategies used by the United States and the Soviet Union are well known to those who lived through those years, particularly those who participated actively. In some respects, strategic communication for deterrence of war was much simpler during the years following World War II and before the fall of the Berlin Wall. There were two major super powers, the United States and the Soviet Union. A fabulously expensive arms race kept military capabilities at rough parity, rational leaders headed each country and both countries realized a nuclear war between them might possibly spell the end of civilization.

Despite endless variations on the theme – missile gaps, missile defenses, first use, survivable second strike, counterforce strategies, countervailing strategies, massive retaliation, flexible response and others – all focused on the same goal: not allowing the other side to gain enough of an edge that it thought it could win a nuclear war. To deter the Soviets or any other adversary from war or escalation, each side thought it

important to communicate clearly to the other the existence of sufficient survivable retaliatory capability to make an attack by its rival futile at best, and, at worst, suicidal. Each side strove to communicate enough capability and will to use that capability to deter the other. This was strategic communication.

The United States and the Soviet Union deterred one another from nuclear attack by the concept of mutually assured destruction, or MAD, a term that actually came into use in the 1960s when coined by Robert McNamara. The underlying concept was each side controlled client states around the world, and the sponsor superpowers supplied arms and support to those clients. In turn, the sponsors could more or less count on those smaller states to do their bidding – particularly in time of war – and exercised extraordinary control over them in time of crisis. These smaller client states became part of the stalemate. The threat of nuclear war at the superpower level lessened the threat of conflict at the client state level out of fear such a war would escalate out of control. There were wars, to be sure – in the Middle East, Korea, Southeast Asia and others – but the superpowers kept a lid on these conflicts. This *balance of power* during the Cold War period brought a tense, stomach-churning, five-minutes-to-midnight sort of stability for close to 50 years. And stability and bi-polar alignment made strategic communication and resulting deterrence ever so much simpler than today.

Why was deterrence and its vehicle, strategic communication, easier then? Primarily, it was because each side had a single audience. Of course China was a player to some degree, and the "China Card" was a factor in some of the thinking between the two super powers over the years. But, essentially, if the Soviet Union and the United States deterred one another, stability in the largest sense reigned throughout most of the world. Interestingly, this stalemate that could end civilization if broken played out with a set of rules, underpinned by the concept an *accidental* war would be the cruelest of fates. Each side carefully monitored the activity of the other, and each side also informed the other when exercises or launches that could appear threatening took place so the opponent would not draw the wrong conclusion and *launch on warning*⁶ when the circumstances were actually benign.

Further, the two powers established elaborate, direct communications methods to discuss any movements or crises that required

immediate and personal contact to provide assurance to the other side or to negotiate. The famous "hot line" between the two countries, originally a teletype at the Pentagon installed after the Cuban Missile Crisis, is an example of such a communications tool.

All of the forgoing underscores the fact people on both sides were and are in the decision loop, and what looked like a reasonably straightforward deterrence equation during the Cold War was run by "by people who [were] ignorant of many facts, people who [could] be gripped by anger or fear, people who make mistakes—sometimes dreadful mistakes."⁷ These were rational actors who tended to act like human beings in time of crisis, and these same rational actors saw the need for very careful communication, both tactical and strategic, to ensure deterrence held. It almost didn't in 1962.

The Cuban Missile Crisis and Strategic Communication

President John F. Kennedy's foreign policy during the first year of his administration was a succession of failures starting with the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, followed by the June-November 1961 Berlin crisis during which the U.S.S.R. sealed off East Berlin by building a wall through the city while the United States did little but file diplomatic protests. The year was further marred by the March 1961 communist offensives in Laos that brought most of that country under their control. The year 1961 was also the year Nikita Khrushchev addressed the United Nations and pounded his shoe on the lectern to the dismay of the western world. The year 1961 also saw the Soviet Union exploding the world's largest nuclear explosion in a test estimated at 50 megatons.

Further, at the 1961 Vienna summit conference Khrushchev shouted across the negotiating table at the young American president, appearing to shake him. It seemed clear the Soviet leader's perception of John Kennedy was of an inexperienced and timid decision-maker who could be bullied. It is in this context the Soviet leader apparently decided to gamble by sneaking nuclear weapons, and missiles with which to launch them, into Cuba in the early fall of 1962.

The United States had long adhered to the Monroe Doctrine that admonished other great powers to avoid imperialistic adventures in the

Western Hemisphere. The Kennedy administration had indeed verbally warned the Soviet leadership against putting nuclear weapons or establishing a major military buildup in Cuba and had been assured it contemplated no such moves – right up to the event itself. The U.S.S.R. leadership then did just what it said it would not do, only to be discovered by U.S. intelligence before it had presented the nuclear *fait accompli* in Cuba.

Up until that point, U.S. deterrence policy had failed in terms of preventing the U.S.S.R. nuclear build-up in Cuba. U.S. strategic communication failed because, despite having superior nuclear forces and having verbally warned the Soviets against stationing nuclear arms in Cuba, the Soviet leader simply did not believe President Kennedy had the will to act against such a provocation. Khrushchev had underestimated President Kennedy, seeing in him the pattern of ineffectiveness and indecision at Vienna, Berlin, Cuba and during the Bay of Pigs disaster. U.S. verbal strategic communications were not congruent with previous U.S. actions “on the ground.” U.S. words of warning did not match its deeds and JFK did not personally impress the Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

However, once the missiles were discovered, President Kennedy toughened his stance, turning to clear and decisive verbal and action communications, which eventually caused the Soviet leadership to backtrack and reverse course on its policy by withdrawing the nuclear weapons and missiles from Cuba. Kennedy’s public televised warning to the Soviet Union made it all but impossible for him to retreat and permit the Soviet gambit. In fact he was so committed publicly, that to retreat at that point would have likely resulted in calls for impeachment. His public and private communications during the missile crisis matched his actions – a blockade of Cuba accompanied by a massive buildup of military force opposite Cuba’s.

The Soviet leaders were given absolutely crystal clear communication that the option was withdrawal or war, and that war would likely be nuclear war – at a time when the U.S.S.R. was at a military disadvantage. The U.S. strategic communication during the 13 days of the crisis was magnificent – a stark contrast from the previous 20 months where perceived weakness and lack of credibility were the hallmarks. The

Kennedy administration strategic communication package included a well coordinated media campaign.

The President's televised challenge to the Soviet missile buildup left him little public room to reverse course, a fact Khrushchev had to realize. The U.S.S.R. had been put in the position of retreating or risking a nuclear exchange. In the second week of the crisis, JFK's team took the communications initiative – mobilizing U.S. public opinion, allied public opinion, and world public opinion to back the U.S. position and isolate the Soviet Union. U.S. United Nations Ambassador Adlai Stevenson dramatically presented the U.S. intelligence results to the U.N. Security Council, an event reported by the world press. Dean Rusk, U.S. Secretary of State, called for a meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS) where U.S. representatives briefed Latin American allies on the developments and the Soviet threat in the Caribbean. U.S. officials briefed NATO allies. Meanwhile the United States and Soviet Officials exchanged diplomatic threats and possible solutions.

Outside the public eye, Attorney General Robert Kennedy and other U.S. representatives met with Soviet diplomats to search for a peaceful solution. One was eventually found and negotiated, an agreement where U.S. Jupiter Missiles were to be withdrawn from Turkey in exchange for the removal of Soviet missiles and nuclear weapons from Cuba. The bargain was sealed, and its compromise terms agreed upon by the Soviet leadership only if the United States kept the promise to remove missiles from Turkey, an undisclosed secret during the Cuban drawdown. This solution helped preserve JFK's reputation, as well as his ability to keep a lid on escalation pressures from his critics.

Strategic communication in the Cuban Missile Crisis played a large role in the build-up to the crisis. There could be no doubt it played a crucial role in its resolution. Kennedy and Khrushchev exchanged letters. Khrushchev communicated through a businessman who happened to be in Moscow, and back channels in Washington were used, including ABC reporter John Scali. Diplomats in countries far removed from the crisis floated proposals intended to reach the principals, direct diplomacy between the administration and Ambassador Dobrynin took place in Washington and confrontations occurred at the United Nations. Communications were all over the map, and an atmosphere prevailed of, if not 'try anything,' at least 'let's make sure we are exploring all avenues.'

Further, communications were slow in 1962, and the delay had two implications. First, each side had a few hours to interpret messages and decide courses of action. This aspect had the obvious down side of allowing each to *misinterpret* messages and take the *wrong* action – which almost happened on more than one occasion during the crisis. Second, the crisis suffered from lack of *direct* communication at the highest level, leaving messages to be sent through lower echelons and back channels with more inherent delay and chance for inappropriate action before the decision makers were privy to the latest thinking or offer. The delays and the routing of the letters from Chairman Khrushchev allowed President Kennedy and his Executive Committee to use the tactic of ignoring a second, more intractable, letter of uncertain provenance and to respond to the first which gave some breathing room.

A case can be made the crisis was an inexorable slide into a war neither side wanted – but was saved by rational actors on both sides. An equally forceful case can be made that both sides were deterred from the start by the destructive and suicidal power that could have been triggered all too easily. In any case, a deal was struck.

The overarching implication of the whole crisis was both super powers stared down each others' gun barrels more than either would have liked. And for all of the tough talk and misinformed adventurism during that grim October 48 years ago, the Soviet Union and the United States realized they needed to be more careful in their actions and the strategic messages sent over the remainder of the Cold War.

To be sure, the arms race continued between the two diametrically opposed ways of life, and both sides spent unimaginable fortunes to maintain parity with the other. But, that the world came close to Armageddon in 1962 later made the deterrence through careful strategic communication a bit easier. Neither side wished to peer over the precipice again, and both sides were willing to communicate – and listen.

This was not a friendly arrangement – far from it. Rather, the two adversaries saw clear advantages to not blowing each other to bits and proceeded on that basis. The first of a series of arms control agreements, SALT I, came in 1972, and while honest men can argue the efficacy of arms control over the next 20 or so years, the process did at least signal a willingness to reduce tensions – or at a minimum – to talk. So, does that mean rationality prevailed during the Cold War? Probably so. But in

retrospect, given the people involved could have been ignorant of many facts and could have been gripped by anger or fear, rationality seems like mighty thin gruel.

Robert Kennedy, writing in his memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis, pointed to a key tenet of strategic communication (although the term was not yet coined in 1968) when he said, "The final lesson of the Cuban Missile Crisis was the importance of placing ourselves in the other country's shoes."⁸ A corollary of the statement is, because of cultural differences and translation, others may not *hear* the same message being *sent*, and the sender must take care to ensure the message being heard is precisely the one intended. Robert Kennedy went on to quote his brother, the president, on the concept of leaving the other side the opportunity to retreat gracefully:

Above all, while defending our own vital interests, nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to the choice of either a humiliating defeat or a nuclear war.⁹

A New and Dangerous World

A combination of effective deterrence and some "plain dumb luck" allowed the Cold War to end without a central nuclear war. But 10 years after the Soviet Union came apart, a new kind of threat emerged to challenge the U.S. and its allies. The attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, showed the world terrorist ability to commit mayhem on a grand scale. The salient questions in many quarters became: what if terrorists get their hands on a nuclear weapon? If they acquire such a weapon could they be deterred? Could they build one if they had the right materials? Could they buy a complete weapon? If they somehow came into possession of one, could they smuggle the weapon into the United States or an allied country and detonate it?

Two developments amplified these concerns. First, the detection of a nuclear technology smuggling and distribution network created and operated by Dr. A.Q. Khan, the force behind Pakistan's nuclear weapons program. Second, the crumbling of the Soviet Union and the questionable

state of nuclear weapons security in the 15 republics of the former Soviet Union as the union came apart. Add the underpaid or out-of-work former Soviet nuclear scientists who could be available to other countries or terrorist organizations, and little doubt remained why President George W. Bush declared in 2002:

The gravest danger our nation faces lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology. Our enemies have openly declared that they are seeking weapons of mass destruction, and evidence indicates that they are doing so with determination.¹⁰

Three Goals, Three Audiences

During the Cold War era, the United States had three major deterrence goals: (1) deterrence of armed attacks and major warfare; (2) deterrence of escalation of any military conflict to the level of use of weapons of mass destruction (chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear); and (3) deterrence of the proliferation of WMD from one state or group to another. All three apply today.

To pursue those goals, an effective strategic communication effort needs to be consistent, unified and plausible if it is to help the United States deter war, escalation and WMD proliferation. First, all elements of the administration need to speak with one integrated voice to the rest of the world. Second, once the U.S. deterrence policies are agreed upon, every opportunity needs to be used for broadcasting those policies to rival and allied audiences so they are clearly understood and emphasized. Third, actions and words must be coordinated to communicate the same messages:

- Military aggression against the United States, its vital interest and its allies will be so severely dealt with the aggressor could not bear the cost.
- The United States has escalation dominance making escalation of any ongoing conflict counterproductive in the extreme.

- Nuclear proliferation, either by the state acquiring or the state assisting such efforts, will be dealt with so severely that those that go down that path will suffer losses that far exceed any gains in security and prosperity.

As the United States goes about nuclear deterrence in the 21st century, it also has three distinct audiences to consider: leaders of adversary nation-states, leaders of terrorist organizations and leaders of allied countries that depend on U.S. protection from the first two. Any strategic communication campaign must carefully delineate between these three.

Deterrence of military attacks or conflict escalation by other states in the international system still relies on the seven elements that helped deter superpower war during the Cold War. However, as noted elsewhere in the essays on tailored deterrence, each rival state is different in leadership, in regional pressures, in political history, strategic culture, military capability and situational awareness. Thus, the deterrence message must be tailored so rival leaders clearly understand the likely costs of starting or escalating a war or becoming a WMD proliferator and are presented with a persuasive package of messages, verbal and kinetic, that deter and contain them.

Deterring Iran and North Korea

Deterrence of war, WMD use and WMD proliferation through strategic communication leans heavily on engagement – both with our allies (who can help bring pressure to bear on mutual adversaries and who must be convinced of U.S. backing in the face of growing dangers) and directly with those adversaries.

The USAF Counterproliferation Center has proposed increased engagement with our allies and adversaries in some of its earlier work on strategic communication.¹¹ The central theme at the time was the United States did not have an effective government-wide integrated strategic communication campaign in place. Further, such a campaign when built must be more than just a public relations effort, and if such a campaign were to be successful, it should have a significant component focused on telling the U.S.'s story concerning WMD.

The United States was reasonably effective with its demonstration of action when it invaded Iraq in 2003, sending the clear message it would not tolerate a rogue state with a WMD program. While the invasion took place based on faulty intelligence and may have been ill-advised, it certainly had an effect around the world. Libya may have given up its WMD programs partially as a result of that demonstration. And we may never know if other countries decided to abandon or not start a weapons program as a result.

But, “The United States turned heads with its message of willingness to use force, but failed utterly in communicating the righteousness of the cause. The critical element missing was a coherent message – using precise and planned words, together with other instruments of influence, to explain to the world why the United States was worthy of being followed – and if not followed, at least understood.”¹²

Now the United States faces North Korea and Iran and their weapons programs. President Obama has indicated a willingness to engage both, but has significantly fewer cards to play than did his predecessor when he dealt with Iraq. North Korea already has detonated at least two nuclear weapons, however primitive, and is *de facto* in the nuclear club, even if its ability to deliver the weapons remains questionable. An Iraq-like invasion to preempt the use of those weapons is problematic at best and a formula for disaster at worst. Iran is not as far along in its program, but has developed the ability to enrich uranium (it is not clear North Korea has that capability) and has hardened most of its nuclear facilities, as has North Korea. Again, for that reason and others, a preemptive invasion of Iran does not seem advisable in the short term. Containment through deterrence is the fallback position of the United States if Iran acquires a nuclear weapon capability as it seems poised to do.

In both cases, strategic communication is necessary, but probably not sufficient. While engagement is clearly in order, the United States and its allies must be prepared for continued obfuscation from governments that as a minimum do not think and function as ours does and are quite possibly irrational at times. Strategic communication is probably more effectively applied with our allies, partners and those who have more influence with North Korea and Iran than does the United States. These

coalitions of sorts can be used to isolate the two countries and to bring pressure to bear.

The sense of the entire world being against these rogue states should be a very effective strategic communication message in itself, but the danger always exists that the isolation could drive them to believe nuclear weapons are all the more necessary – a fine line the U.S. and its allies must walk.

Communications messages normally consist of a theme, a delivery method and the audience. In North Korea, the audience almost certainly must be the government and specifically Kim Jong Il. No civil society exists to speak of, NGOs are not trusted and the average citizen has no access to the outside world. He hears what the government wants him to hear. Pure communications directed at anyone but the highest members of the government are not likely to have much effect. Further clouding the strategic communication front is security issues tend to trump the plight of the population in dealings with North Korea.¹³ Themes and delivery methods are almost moot if the only audience is a 68-year-old stroke victim with an out-sized sense of entitlement.

On the other hand, Iran seems a richer target ripe for strategic communication. There are two distinct audiences, the government and the population – and the former really has two factions. Ahmadinejad's alarming rhetoric may or may not represent the full position of the Iranian government, since the supreme leader of the country is the religious leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, himself a hard-liner, but perhaps not always in consonance with his president. The population of Iran is reasonably open and proud of its country, but is not as anti-West as its leadership. As such, it represents a potential audience, or target, for a strategic communication campaign.¹⁴ Further, the typical man on the street in Iran has more access to the outside by far than do the people of North Korea. For example, the 2009 election uprisings in Iran were broadcast around the world thanks to the protesters' access to Twitter.

Despite being brutally put down, the protesters demonstrated information flowed in and out of Iran. And Iranians have had access to the internet for some years, although the Iranian government maintains the capability of blocking or slowing access, as it did earlier this year.¹⁵ Methods of reaching the population are there, and the Iranian people seem to be willing to take risks to reach the outside world.

The United States and allies appear to be using all of the strategic communication avenues open to them: attempting to drive a wedge between the population and the government, trying to separate the two factions of government, isolating the country through diplomatic pressure and sanctions, engaging directly with leadership, and making direct demands. Perhaps the most likely avenue for success is a popular uprising similar to 1979, but in reverse – against the theocracy. But such a shifting of the tectonic plates in Persia will undoubtedly come well after acquisition of Iranian nuclear weapons, leaving the world left to deter their use, not their development.

Communication and Deterring Terrorist WMD Use

Deterring a terrorist organization from acquiring or using WMDs is quite another matter. Brian Jenkins of RAND says we have already failed in one sense in deterrence: two out of five people in the United States consider it likely a terrorist organization will detonate a nuclear weapon on our soil in the foreseeable future. This, despite as far as we know, no terrorist organization has a nuclear weapon, nor does it presently appear to have the means or material to build one.

Yet Jenkins makes the case al-Qaeda or some other organization already is a terrorist nuclear power since, as Alfred Hitchcock put it, "The terror is not in the bang, only in the anticipation of it."¹⁶ That may be, but many believe if a terrorist organization is able to obtain a nuclear weapon, it will not be at all deterrable, and if it can find a way to employ it, it will do so.

Prudence dictates one assumes this worst case when trying to prevent the unimaginable from happening. But Lewis Dunn of SAIC postulates possession may not be the whole story since a detonation of a nuclear weapon by a terrorist organization could be perceived as so horrible as to be damaging to the terrorist's cause, or the weapon could be deemed too valuable as a tool of blackmail to be expended.¹⁷ Brian Jenkins would support this latter possibility. Still, as Admiral Richard Mies, former commander of the U.S. Strategic Command, says in Jenkins' book, "How do you deter or dissuade someone whose reward is in the 'afterlife?'"¹⁸

The short answer is you probably don't, in the current environment. People who kill thousands at once by flying airplanes into buildings are unlikely to hesitate to detonate a nuclear weapon if they have one. Neither are terrorists who are willing to make their final act on this earth a suicide bombing.

Three avenues are open to us to stop this potential game-changer. First is to marshal all of our intelligence and law enforcement capability, and that of our allies, to stop terrorists or terrorist smuggling networks from obtaining the material to make a bomb or from getting a complete weapon itself. A subset of this approach is to ensure all weapons and materials are first *known* and then *secured*. The knowing and securing become more difficult the farther one removes himself from the first world.

The second method, and this *is* strategic communication, is to encourage, to *demand*, the nations of the world band together to isolate those who would traffic these sorts of materials and particularly to isolate those who would use the weapons. And that demand needs to be specific about actions the United States will take against a country or organization that, willingly or otherwise, supports nuclear terror. This means of deterring WMD use by terrorists threatens those that supply and support their WMD efforts. This deterrence is directed at supporters rather than the possibly undeterrable terrorists.

The third way is to change the environment. This does not imply appeasing terrorists. Rather it is a sincere campaign of confidence building, of maintaining the moral high ground (or *regaining* it if one believes the United States is somewhere below the peak at the moment) and of understanding what other cultures are hearing as it communicates. It means leadership and persuading the countries of the world to follow the United States because they see it in their own best interest to cooperate because *they want to*, not just because our country is rich and powerful. Rather, a U.S. strategic communications plan to deter war, escalation and WMD proliferation must show the United States leadership and military capability is in the best interests of all its allies and most of the world community and, hence, worthy of their support.

U.S. Nuclear Posture and the Nonproliferation Regime

As the United States continues to nudge, pull, threaten and otherwise exert influence on the rest of the world with regard to the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons, it must be able to look those other countries directly in the eye and say, "This is our position on nonproliferation, here's how we are reducing our arsenal and making the world safer, and here is how we are posturing the remainder of our forces to maximize deterrence, while minimizing the potential that these weapons will ever be used again." If the United States, the only country to ever use nuclear weapons, can make that case for the moral high ground, the United States will be effectively using strategic communication.

To berate other countries on nuclear programs without first clearly explaining why the United States has the moral authority to do so is a tricky business at best. The United States *does* have that authority, but in past years it has not made a good case for it in the theater of world opinion, choosing instead to assume the other players simply will understand because of who we are. But our audience wants to know, among other things, how the United States intends to carry out its obligations under Article VI of the NPT which states:

"Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control."¹⁹

At the same time, our allies around the world need to be reassured the nuclear umbrella the United States has extended over them since World War II will be there as its arsenal decreases and its posture is reduced. And our adversaries should know whether or not the United States will possess sufficient retaliatory capability in the future to make any WMD attack futile on their part. They must also be convinced by U.S. words and deeds, in a coordinated strategic communication package, that the U.S. leadership has the will to use military force to punish any attacker who strikes at them.

In this world where there is a natural tension between nuclear posture and nonproliferation, the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR),

combined with the Prague speech the preceding year, the new START treaty, the Global Nuclear Summit, and the five-year review of the Nonproliferation Treaty, does a good job of laying out that case for the high ground. The policy taken as a whole allows for a continuing, but reducing, nuclear arsenals, with an ultimate goal of zero nuclear weapons in the world. But at the same time it acknowledges the *realpolitik* of current times: as long as adversaries have nuclear weapons, the United States must have a strong posture for deterrence (including the continuation of the nuclear triad of bombers, submarine launched missiles and ICBMs), as well as for security guarantees.

The 2010 NPR shores up the NPT regime by foreswearing use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear countries in compliance with the treaty, while leaving extant the possibility of first use if necessary against threatening or attacking nuclear states. Then it moves on to state publicly our largest threat to security is terrorists with nuclear weapons, and we are moving in cooperation with the countries of the world to shut off any access to nuclear materials or weapons within four years. Pretty clear and credible stuff.

If the United States is to have a consistent policy regarding how to deter proliferation by nuclear wannabes, it needs to explain why it treats some states differently than others. For example, it needs to better explain its seemingly turning a blind eye to Israel's nuclear weapons program while demanding other states adhere to the NPT. Also, it needs to develop a convincing rationale to the world as to why it rewards India with trade that supports its nuclear power industry while India remains outside the NPT and ignores the call to a ban. These are tough issues for the United States, but ones with valid policy explanations. Any part of a coherent nuclear strategic communication plan should address the exceptions and others as they arise, and fully explain why the allowances made for the Indias and Israels of the world do not apply to Iran and North Korea, or any other questionable state that chooses to start a nuclear weapons program.

Finally, a word on the goal of total nuclear disarmament. The approach the United States has chosen in recent years is the only rational one available. That is, to work with Russia to reduce the arsenals of both countries while still maintaining enough weapons to deter the other, to offer security guarantees to each side's allies, and to offer an

overwhelming counter to rogue states such as Iran and North Korea. The goal of going to zero is morally correct, since clearly so long as such weapons exist, the world faces the risk of devastation from nuclear wars.

But as long as opposing sides have them, and as long as rogue states see these weapons as the great equalizer, the United States cannot go to zero. There is no deterrence value in going to zero in an attempt to show leadership; such a move would be perceived by other nations as weakness. That is not to say over time world arsenals could not be reduced to the point zero is on the horizon.

But in the near-to-medium term, no such possibility exists, and our strategic communication plan should say so. Further it would ease the U.S. task of getting world-wide support for its nuclear nonproliferation programs and goal if the United States better explained the exceptions for Israel and India. Its strategic communications effort on behalf of deterring WMD proliferation would be strengthened if a case for such inconsistency could be more effectively communicated.

Communicating the Nuclear-Use Threshold

Taking the moral high ground and having others follow the United States depends on having a very high and very credible nuclear-use threshold. The world must know the U.S. does not consider a nuclear weapon “just another weapon” in its warfighting tool box. It must avoid situations such as experienced in Central Europe during the Cold War where first use of nuclear weapons was almost an expected choice to blunt the attack of the superior numbers of the Warsaw Pact.

The U.S. leadership can't think in terms of using nuclear penetrators because our conventional weapons don't dig deep enough. It must not revert to the thinking of some in the past that using nuclear weapons as a radioactive barrier in North Korea (MacArthur) or against the communists in North Vietnam (Goldwater) is an acceptable warfighting doctrine. The dividing line between nuclear weapons and conventional weapons should be a yawning chasm. Those with a finger on the nuclear trigger should realize going nuclear is *not* just the next step in weapons escalation, and to cross that abyss has extraordinary security and moral implications. The only possible warfighting use of nuclear

weapons should be when our back is against the wall, survival is at stake and *there are no other options*.

To put ourselves in that position, the United States must maintain a superior conventional force that can take on all potential adversaries, and one that can work its will without having to resort to nuclear weapons. Sixty-five years after the fire-bombings and destruction of Dresden and Tokyo, world opinion and self-restraint also place restraints on *conventional* efforts from causing too many civilian casualties or the euphemistic *collateral damage*.

Such restrictions militate for the ultimate in precision weapons, which the United States currently possesses, but should ensure it maintains. In 1984, Freeman Dyson, a noted physicist, actually made a case that precision guided munitions (PGMs) could obviate the need for nuclear weapons altogether.²⁰ Dyson was about 20 years ahead of his time, but the capability of the United States is not far removed from that ideal today, particularly with regard to smaller states. As a result, President Obama seemed comfortable in forswearing the use of nuclear weapons against the small NPT states and rightly so.

Part of a strong conventional force must be a limited defense against ballistic missiles launched from the likes of North Korea or Iran, or from larger powers that accidentally launch a single or a very low number of missiles. The United States approaches that capability now, although some newer systems have been significantly reduced in scope by the Obama administration.²¹

To leave ourselves uncovered against small attacks would be the height of irresponsibility and abandoning the Missile Defense Treaty of 1972 was the only route to conventional insurance against those attacks. During the Cold War under that treaty, each side was limited to one local system, and many restrictions were placed on testing. Both sides relied on MAD as insurance against a missile attack – not much of a defense. As Casper Weinberger said in a speech at the U.S. Air Force Academy in the early 1990s, MAD put the United States in a position that in order “to be perfectly invulnerable, we needed to be perfectly vulnerable.”

Having a high nuclear threshold allows the nuclear strategic communication plan of the United States to be credible and having an invincible conventional force permits a high nuclear threshold. The United States should never put itself in a position of making threats it

would never carry out and threatening to use nuclear weapons when vital national interests are not at stake falls into that category.²²

The other side of the coin, however, is a potential adversary must first believe there *is* a threshold beyond which the United States would use nuclear weapons against it, and to be effective, the threshold should be just a bit elusive or ambiguous.

Conclusions

As the United States struggles with its role as the only superpower left on the face of the earth, it has a set of dynamics to consider. Does it exert influence from a position of pure power, or must it be the moral leader of the world? Should it attempt to shape the nations of the world or learn to live with them as they are – but nudging a bit around the edges to ensure a safer planet? Does it lead or does it revert to a form of isolationism, eschewing the benefits of potential coalitions in its actions?

How the United States responds to those challenges is the task and essence of strategic communication, and the answers must be credible. Because without credibility, positions taken by the United States will have no deterrent effect, particularly with those states that either possess nuclear weapons or would like to have them.

President Obama has taken a clear stance with his Nuclear Posture Review in 2010 and the speech in Prague in 2009. The policy is one of engagement with the nations of the world, and in concert with the new START treaty and the NPT review, one that clearly strives to balance its strength through its nuclear posture with a desire to eventually see a world without nuclear weapons. At the same time it takes a pragmatic approach, realizing nuclear weapons are necessary in the foreseeable future to use as a deterrence tool.

With this stance, the President has taken strides toward an effective strategic communication campaign, a campaign crucial to deterrence. First, the President has realized the importance of such a campaign and the importance of his own role in demonstrating to the world the vision of the United States. And that the vision is not a public relations campaign delegated to someone in the State Department. It is the vision the administration wishes to project for this country, the vision on which

policies should be based, and one he and the top officials of this nation should constantly shape. This vision and its supporting policies should aim the country at the moral high ground, toward building confidence in its leadership.

The United States, the only country to ever use nuclear weapons against another, should continue to demonstrate it is a good steward of its decreasing arsenal and a tough but reliable ally that can be counted on to use that arsenal as a deterrent for the good of the world. It should demonstrate it angers slowly, it has an extremely high threshold for the use of nuclear weapons, but there is a limit to its patience.

Further, in this post Cold War age, the focus of United States deterrence should be on rogue states such as Iran and North Korea that issue threats to their neighbors, but at the same time it should not let its guard down too much against past adversaries. And it should continue to marshal the forces of the rational world to isolate these rogue states and those that would join them, and to isolate terrorist organizations and their possible attempts to acquire nuclear materials or weapons, since the latter are not likely to be deterred in their use should they ever get their hands on a weapon.

Words matter. Actions matter. Allies and partners matter. Pulling all three together effectively and communicating a coherent, tough, and credible vision and message to adversaries and allies is the essence of deterrence, and of strategic communication. Strategic communication can have no higher calling than to prevent a nuclear war or terrorist attack.

Notes

¹ Premier Nikita Khrushchev, Pravda (July 20, 1963).

² Speech delivered by President Barrack Obama, Prague, the Czech Republic (April 5, 2009).

³ Strategic communication is a general term, the application of which, obviously, is not limited to the United States. However, for the purposes of this discussion, the focus of strategic deterrence will be on the positions of the United States – unless specifically mentioned otherwise.

⁴ Hoagland, Jim, "President Obama's farsighted nuclear strategy," *Washington Post* (April 18, 2010).

⁵ Nuclear Posture Review Report (April 2010), Department of Defense, Washington, DC., p. ix.

⁶ Since ICBMs and SLBMs can reach their targets in a scant 30 minutes, each side had an incentive to launch a retaliatory attack inside that window to avoid losing that asset which itself was probably targeted in a mass attack. In modern times, the United States has been considering a conventional ICBM to deliver a "bolt from the blue" to terrorist locations and other time-sensitive targets around the world, but has hesitated to put such a weapon in the inventory for this same reason. A launch of a conventional ICBM would look like a strategic, and possibly nuclear, launch to Russia or China, and would require extensive communication and pre-briefing to avoid misinterpretation.

⁷ Dr. Robert Butterworth quoting Fred Ikle, "Out of Balance," *Aerospace Power Journal* (Fall 2001).

⁸ Kennedy, Robert, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Norton, New York, 1969), 124.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁰ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Sept. 17, 2002).

¹¹ *Toward a National Counterproliferation Strategic Communication Plan*, USAF Counterproliferation Center, (Dec. 2007).

¹² Estes, Richard. *A Message Not Yet Sent: Using Strategic Communications to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction*, USAF Counterproliferation Center Future Warfare Series No. 35, (July 2006).

¹³ Testimony of L. Gordon Flake, executive director of the Mansfield Foundation, before the Subcommittee on Asia and Pacific, House Committee on International Relations, (April 2004).

¹⁴ Interview with Charles Lutes, director of Counterproliferation, National Security Council, (March 2010).

¹⁵ Fathi, Nazila, *Iran Disrupts Internet Service Ahead of Protests*, *New York Times* (Feb. 10, 2010).

¹⁶ Jenkins, Brian Michael, *Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?*, Prometheus Books, Amherst, N.Y. (2008), 26

¹⁷ Lewis A. Dunn, *Can al-Qaeda be Deterred From Using Nuclear Weapons?*, Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction, Occasional Paper 3, National University Press, Washington, DC (July 2005).

¹⁸ Jenkins, *ob cit*, 277.

¹⁹ The Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), Article VI (March 5, 1970).

²⁰ Dyson, Freeman, *Weapons and Hope*, New York (1984).

²¹ Ballistic Missile Defense Review, Department of Defense (Feb. 2010).

²² Interview with Dr. Mitchell Reiss, Vice Provost, College of William and Mary (March 2010). Dr. Reiss is the former director of Policy Planning at the State Department, a policy advisor to presidential candidate Mitt Romney, and has been chosen as the next president of Washington College in Chestertown, Md.