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### **Deterring Russian Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons: A Revised Approach**

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# Deterring Russian Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons: A Revised Approach

Cliff R. Parsons

**ABSTRACT:** A change in deterrence thought and strategy is necessary to avoid nuclear escalation in armed conflict with Russia. Traditional threat-based deterrence strategies will not be successful, and a new strategy must address the conditions that might cause Russian leadership to employ nuclear weapons. An examination of the Able Archer 83 exercise using an original framework highlights the ways Russian interests and US actions interact to generate misperception and inhibited deterrence. The US military must execute extremely restrained, deliberate, and empathetic operations that pursue minimalist military objectives to achieve the political goal.

**Keywords:** deterrence, nuclear, misperception, Russia, multidomain operations

**I**magine the following scenario: the Russia-Ukraine War ends with an armistice; Russia begins to rebuild its depleted military and continues energy-related economic coercion in Europe. After repeated disputes with the Baltic states over energy, ethnic Russian minorities, and access to Kaliningrad, Russia begins its quadrennial military exercise, Zapad-2028, in the Western Military District, resulting in the massing of Russian forces near Estonia. Russia's leader does not intend to invade but rather to intimidate the Baltic states and demonstrate the revitalization of the Russian military following the costly Ukraine war. Yet, NATO responds by deploying defensive weapon systems and naval forces to Finland and Estonia to deter Russian aggression. These NATO capabilities enable the potential for an effective blockade of Russian naval forces in St. Petersburg. Despite repeated assurances from NATO leadership regarding the intent of these weapons systems and naval forces, Russian leaders perceive the threatened containment of the Baltic Fleet as an unacceptable risk to national security.

The Russian president orders an attack on northern Estonia to occupy the city of Tallinn to enable Baltic Sea access. A NATO force counterattacks and decisively defeats the Russian Combined Arms Army in Estonia and consolidates gains on the Estonian-Russian border. During the fight, the US Army-centric NATO force successfully executes a variant of multidomain operations by penetrating and disintegrating Russian anti-access, area denial systems to enable joint maneuver. Executing current Army doctrine

required striking delivery platforms and command-and-control nodes deep inside Russian territory.

As domestic rivals maneuver to capitalize on his failure, the Russian president also fears an incursion into Russian territory to institute a regime change due to his decision to attack a NATO nation. Lacking effective conventional options following the destruction of most of the Western Military District's forces and recognizing that NATO had achieved air superiority and could extend operations eastward at will, he resorts to employing multiple nonstrategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) that destroy a large portion of the forward-positioned NATO force. By doing so, he intended to blunt NATO offensive capabilities, deny terrain that could be used for an offensive into Russia, and signal his resolve to escalate the situation vertically to secure Russian sovereignty, territorial integrity, and regime survival.

This scenario demonstrates one way the interaction of Russian interests and US actions can generate misperception and lead to a catastrophic failure of deterrence. After a series of misperceptions and miscalculations, US and NATO forces decisively executed current doctrine and unintentionally escalated the situation from a high-intensity, but limited, border conflict to one of existential crisis for the Russian leadership. The Russian president misinterpreted NATO's intent leading to a misperception that the criteria for NSNW employment had been met.

In future conflicts with Russia, traditional deterrence strategies, including denial and punishment, will be unsuccessful because Russian leaders may perceive the US military's penchant for rapid, decisive victory as a threat to its vital interests. Many in the national security community assume deterrence requires an element of threat, but a new approach is necessary. Deterrence via dissuasion holds the best chance for success. Rather than employing a threat-based strategy, a dissuasive strategy focuses on removing the conditions that cause Russian leadership to feel the necessity to employ NSNW in the first place. This strategy targets the adversary with a neutral incentive-based approach and requires a substantial shift in the way military leaders envision the execution of large-scale combat operations. If the US military and its partners engage Russia in armed conflict, they must execute extremely restrained, deliberate, and empathetic operations that pursue minimalist military objectives to achieve the political objective.

I will introduce a new framework here, the Interests, Action, and Misperception (IAM) framework, designed to simplify and improve the deliberate thought process required to account for the fundamental barriers to successful NSNW deterrence. The IAM framework describes how interests and actions interact to generate misperception. After describing and defining the IAM framework, I will apply it to the 1983 NATO exercise Able Archer to demonstrate its utility and will provide considerations for modern Russian NSNW deterrence.

## The Interests, Action, and Misperception Framework

The IAM framework enables analysis of the common foundational variables across deterrence schools of thought. These variables are simplified categories, or bins, of the fundamental barriers that inhibit deterrence. Although derived from many schools of thought, the IAM framework most closely aligns with the tailored deterrence school and assumes that deterring Russian NSNW requires the precise application of tailored deterrence.<sup>1</sup> Tailored deterrence evolved from traditional, cookie-cutter deterrence policy and argues that deterrence strategies must be customized to a specific adversary.<sup>2</sup> The idea is that “if one does not threaten the right target for the right reasons, it may not matter how well one does it.”<sup>3</sup> The IAM framework consists of three variables: Russian interests, US actions, and misperception. The framework captures and simplifies the systems-based approach required to account for the complex state-on-state interactions that inhibit deterrence by breaking those variables down into their fundamental building blocks—interests, actions, and misperception—and then analyzing how those variables interact with one another either to enhance or inhibit deterrence.

The power of the IAM framework lies in its explanatory and general predictive qualities. It is useful in analyzing past occurrences and ongoing or future interactions. At its most basic level, the framework’s utility is that it helps national security practitioners consider whether they truly understand how an adversary may perceive US actions. It is not a catchall framework and is not intended to predict with certainty—however, it can prompt strategists to ask the right questions. The IAM framework does not introduce new concepts to the field of deterrence, but it does provide a straightforward and methodical approach to analyzing if and how specific

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1. M. Elaine Bunn, “Can Deterrence Be Tailored?” *Strategic Forum*, no. 225 (January 2007), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA463735.pdf>.

2. Keith B. Payne, “Nuclear Deterrence in a New Era: Applying ‘Tailored Deterrence,’” *Information Series*, no. 431 (May 2018): 3–4, <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/IS-431.pdf>.

3. Peter Karsten, Peter D. Howell, and Artis Frances Allen, *Military Threats: A Systemic Historical Analysis of the Determinants of Success* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), xii.

US actions and adversary interests interact to generate misperception. The framework is designed for use in bilateral deterrence relationships and has limited but relevant predictive potential for the acute problem of Russian NSNW deterrence.

Figure 1 demonstrates the IAM logic flow. The initial inputs into the framework are Russian interests and US actions. The interaction of these two variables fuels the “IAM Engine” (step 1) and either drives actors toward misperception or proper perception. The interest-action-reaction cycle found in deterrence case studies and literature is the basis of the IAM Engine. <sup>4</sup>What occurs in the IAM Engine box in figure 1 is the core of the framework. The interaction of Russian interests and US actions may generate either misperception, likely leading to miscalculation and inhibited deterrence, or proper perception, likely resulting in successful deterrence (steps 2 and 3). The dashed lines in step 3 indicate that perception and deterrence do not share a perfect relationship and that misperception may lead to successful deterrence, while proper perception may still result in inhibited deterrence.

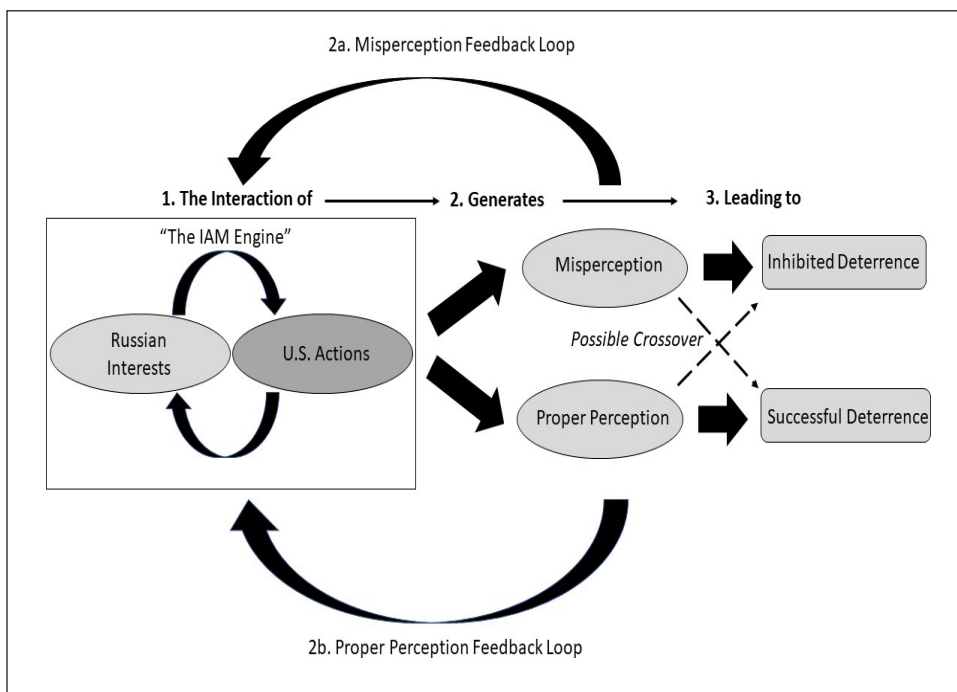


Figure 1. Interests, action, misperception framework (created by author)

4. Michael J. Mazarr et al., *What Deters and Why: Exploring Requirements for Effective Deterrence of Interstate Aggression* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), 6–7, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2400/RR2451/RAND\\_RR2451.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2400/RR2451/RAND_RR2451.pdf).

The two feedback loops shown in figure 1 (steps 2a and 2b) depict how an initial interaction of interests and actions that generated misperception or proper perception can loop back and change the dynamic within the IAM Engine to generate additional perception outcomes. The process could be repeated multiple times. This article will primarily focus on the Misperception Feedback Loop (step 2a) to demonstrate its inherent dangers. The Misperception Feedback Loop begins after the IAM Engine's initial interests and actions relationship works to generate misperception. This initial misperception is fed back into the IAM Engine and alters or enhances either one of the variables to generate further misperception. Unless proper perception is restored, inhibited or failed deterrence can result at any point throughout this feedback process. Each iteration of the Misperception Feedback Loop creates a more unmanageable and unpredictable situation because an actor's interests or actions are repeatedly based on misperceptions that move further and further away from reality each time. For example, in the introductory scenario, the Misperception Feedback Loop began when the Russian leader misperceived NATO's intent in the deployment of defensive forces to eastern Europe. This misperception fed back into the IAM Engine, and the Russian leader's subsequent decision to invade Estonia was based on a perception that was not grounded in reality. The initial misperception of Western aggression continued to feed back into the IAM Engine, exacerbating Russian security interests and culminating in NSNW use. The feedback loop mechanism is a way to conceptualize and account for iterative complex interactions affecting perceptions in specific circumstances.

Misperception will not always generate a negative outcome and may in fact lead to a positive unintended coercive effect. Yet, designing policy or taking actions to generate misperception intentionally to attain a specific deterrent effect is risky. Communicating to generate proper adversary perception is already fraught with uncertainty and difficulty, and seeking successful deterrence via misperception is even more unpredictable. At best, a positive outcome from misperception would be a happy accident, and a deterrent strategy should remain grounded in the more predictable arena of generating proper perception.

The next section applies the IAM framework in its explanatory role to analyze US-Soviet activity during the Able Archer 83 Exercise. The IAM framework will highlight how US actions interacted with Soviet interests to generate an extreme misperception that severely strained deterrence. As scholars continue to uncover the extent of the Soviet reaction,

the degree of Soviet paranoia and misperception generated by US actions becomes more foreboding.<sup>5</sup>

## Exercise Able Archer

It is an especially grave error to assume that since we know the U.S. is not going to start World War III, the next leaders of the Kremlin will also believe that—and act on that belief.<sup>6</sup>

During a period of heightened Cold War tensions in 1983, NATO began its annual military exercise Autumn Forge, which culminated in Able Archer, an annual command post exercise that exercised nuclear release authority in response to a notional Soviet attack. The eight-day exercise took place in early November at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe and included small personnel movements throughout Europe. Able Archer was meant to test command post operations and escalation procedures and to exercise nuclear release authority functions. Although the United States had designed deliberately proactive exercises earlier in the 1980s, it did not intend for Able Archer to elicit an alarmist Soviet reaction.<sup>7</sup> By itself, Able Archer was a routine exercise, but when combined with a long list of intentionally provocative US actions and increasing paranoia in the Soviet leadership, Able Archer had an outsized impact on Soviet strategic perceptions.<sup>8</sup> The routineness of Able Archer collided with a strategic atmosphere of heightened tensions, mutual distrust, and Soviet vulnerability and paranoia, which resulted in one of the most profound Soviet misperceptions of the Cold War: that the Reagan administration considered an unprovoked surprise nuclear first strike as an option to win the Cold War.

### Able Archer's Strategic Setting

Ronald Reagan assumed office in 1981 and immediately increased pressure against the Soviet Union. He believed he could force changes

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5. Nate Jones, ed., *Able Archer 83: The Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War* (New York: New Press, 2016), 25–26.

6. President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB), *The Soviet "War Scare"* (Washington, DC: White House, February 15, 1990), <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21038-4-pfiab-report-2012-0238-mr>.

7. Peter Schweizer, *Victory: The Reagan Administration's Secret Strategy That Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994), xvi.

8. "Spike Callendar," *1983: The Brink of Apocalypse*, produced by Taylor Downing (transcript of televised documentary, United Kingdom: Channel 4/Discovery US2008), 3–4.

in Soviet behavior through strength and sought to “rearm America.”<sup>9</sup> To these ends, he embarked on aggressive policies intended to place the Soviets under extreme political, diplomatic, economic, and military pressure to achieve a lasting peace favorable to the United States. Reagan attacked the foundations of the Soviet Union, calling it an “evil empire” and claiming that Soviet society “wantonly disregards . . . the value of human life.”<sup>10</sup> Simultaneously, the US military significantly increased spending and ramped up exercises. Between 1981–83, the US military conducted operations specifically designed to test Soviet responses, expose vulnerabilities, and put pressure on Soviet leaders.<sup>11</sup> These actions were exacerbating tensions in Moscow when two additional actions took place just days before Able Archer began.

The US invasion of Grenada and the Beirut barracks bombing occurred one week before Able Archer. These events and their fallout were unrelated to any US policies directly targeting the Soviet Union, yet Soviet intelligence took notice. The United States conducted Operation Urgent Fury to restore a US-friendly government in Grenada. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was incensed by the incursion into a Commonwealth nation and exchanged a series of secret communications with Washington to express her disapproval. Soviet signals intelligence monitored the increased flurry of encrypted activity between the two nuclear-armed allies on the eve of Able Archer. The second US action occurred in response to the barracks bombing in Beirut. Immediately, US government facilities and military installations around the world increased their security postures.<sup>12</sup> The heightened security would be obvious even to casual observers, and Soviet intelligence undoubtedly reported the widespread, abrupt change in US force posture. As these unrelated actions aggregated with the United States’ earlier provocative actions, they exacerbated Soviet security interests and generated the misperception that, under the right circumstances, the United States would launch a surprise

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9. George C. Wilson, “Weinberger, in His First Message, Says Mission Is to ‘Rearm America,’” *Washington Post* (website), January 23, 1981, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1981/01/23/weinberger-in-his-first-message-says-mission-is-to-rearm-america/6da4406e-1857-45b7-97fa-8755a5e77c1f/>.

10. Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, FL” (speech, Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals, Orlando, FL, March 8, 1982), <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-annual-convention-national-association-evangelicals-orlando-fl>.

11. Ben B. Fischer, *A Cold War Conundrum: The 1983 Soviet War Scare*, intelligence monograph CSI-9710002 (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, September 1997), 64–65, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB426/docs/3.The-1983-War-Scare-in-U.S.-Soviet-Relations-circa-1996.pdf>.

12. Taylor Downing, *1983: Reagan, Andropov, and a World on the Brink* (New York: De Capo Press, 2018), 209–11.



strike to end the Cold War. These concerns culminated with the perfect cover to initiate such a strike—a NATO command post exercise designed to exercise nuclear release authority.

In 1983, the senior Soviet leaders were best described as vulnerable and paranoid. They understood that the West was gaining a strategic edge. In March 1983, a Soviet official admitted, “We cannot equal the quality of US arms for a generation or two. . . . We will never be able to catch up with you in modern arms.”<sup>13</sup> Leading up to Able Archer, US military exercises also exposed glaring holes in Soviet detection and interception capabilities.<sup>14</sup> The paranoia ingrained in the senior Soviet leaders from their formative experiences also increased their security concerns. A senior KGB official remarked,

[Barbarossa] was sort of embedded in their . . . mindset—that we must not allow this to happen again . . . do not overlook, do not just miss when they are going to attack, do not repeat again June 22nd of 1941 . . . that was part of the Russian political culture . . . it was almost an obsession.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, neither General Secretary Yury Andropov nor KGB Chief Vladimir A. Kryuchkov—notorious for his paranoia about the West—had visited the West and rarely interacted with its leaders.<sup>16</sup> Soviet experiences in World War II, the increasing disparity in the US and Soviet economies and technological abilities, and the Soviet awareness of their military vulnerabilities led Soviet leadership to consider the worst as they observed an aggressive US administration ratchet up pressure they could not realistically compete against. The Reagan administration had no knowledge of these internal Soviet fears and continued to blunder toward a crisis. Soviet interests ran at direct odds with US actions, and this volatile combination culminated with the Able Archer exercise.

None of the military planners involved in Able Archer considered that their actions were having an outsized effect on Soviet perceptions and never contemplated that it may be especially provocative.<sup>17</sup> Yet, the Soviets responded just as a fearful but vulnerable actor would—by increasing intelligence

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13. Leslie H. Gelb, “Foreign Affairs; Who Won the Cold War?,” *New York Times*, August 20, 1992, as cited in Bryan Leese, “The Cold War Computer Arms Race,” *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 14, no 2 (Fall 2023): 102, <https://doi.org/10.21140/mcu.j.20231402006>.

14. “Vladimir Kryuchkov and Stanislav Petrov,” *Brink of the Apocalypse*, 1–11, 16–19, 40.

15. “Oleg Kalugin,” *Brink of the Apocalypse*, 31–32.

16. Downing, 1983, 35, 45.

17. “Spike Callendar,” *Brink of the Apocalypse*, 51.

and reconnaissance efforts, quietly readying selected units while stopping short of a general alert, and by positioning key leaders in wartime headquarters. Their air force grounded all training flights and flew an unprecedented 36 reconnaissance flights in one week while also placing fighters on strip alert.<sup>18</sup> Moscow sent frantic messages to KGB offices in Western nations asking for indications of imminent military action.<sup>19</sup> While intelligence efforts went into overdrive, Soviet nuclear forces also prepared for a potential US first strike.

Soviet nuclear forces were placed on heightened combat alert for the duration of the exercise. Additional personnel, likely KGB enforcers, were added to missile silos, and five times the peacetime amount of mobile nuclear launchers were deployed. The missile force commanders also assumed positions in their wartime headquarters.<sup>20</sup> Soviet Chief of the General Staff Marshal Agarkov spent the final night of Able Archer in the central wartime command bunker.<sup>21</sup> While Able Archer's NATO training audience blindly continued ahead in the routineness of the exercise, it appears many Soviet leaders were anxious about the exercise's real purpose. Fortunately, despite detecting increased Soviet military activity, NATO leaders correctly perceived that the reaction was likely a response to Able Archer and did not reciprocate the heightened alert levels.<sup>22</sup> Had NATO increased readiness levels during the culmination of Able Archer, it would only have exacerbated an already anxious Soviet military and intelligence community. Ultimately, the exercise concluded without incident, and Soviet alert levels returned to normal.

### Soviets Interests, US Actions, and an Extreme Misperception

The Soviet response must be analyzed in its strategic context. Soviet leaders already feared Western aggression, knew their early warning capabilities were unreliable, and observed three years of aggressive US military posturing. Able Archer was exactly the kind of exercise that could be used for a first strike, and the combination of US actions and heightened Soviet vulnerability generated a perfect scenario for Soviet paranoia to translate into misperception. While "Reagan was not Hitler, and America does not do Pearl Harbors," US officials at the time committed the cardinal sin of deterrence—mirroring what one knows to be objective reality on an adversary's perception of that

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18. PFIAB, *Soviet "War Scare,"* 70–73.

19. "Rainer Rupp," *Brink of the Apocalypse*, 22.

20. "Victor Yesin," *Brink of the Apocalypse*, 6–7, 15, 26–27.

21. "Vladimir Kryuchkov," *Brink of the Apocalypse*, 20.

22. Leonard H. Perroots to the special assistant to the president and executive secretary and to the PFIAB chairman, memorandum, "End of Tour Report Addendum," January 9, 1989, Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Agency, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/tj8i2n-7auqn/Perroots%20Censored%20by%20CIA.pdf>.

reality.<sup>23</sup> Only after Able Archer did Reagan realize the extent of the Soviet misperception, stating that he “began to realize that many Soviet officials feared us not only as adversaries but as potential aggressors who might hurl nuclear weapons at them in a first strike.”<sup>24</sup> Western leaders never considered that the Soviets would believe them capable of a surprise nuclear strike because they themselves never considered it a realistic option.

Applying the IAM framework to this event reveals how the Soviets reached such an extreme misperception. The framework’s iterative process began years before the exercise occurred, as Reagan applied intense military pressure to an increasingly vulnerable Soviet Union. Soviet actions and statements pointed to a growing concern of a possible US first strike well before Able Archer. The security-conscious Soviet Politburo and intelligence services believed that as the West gained real and perceived strategic power advantages, the likelihood of a US first strike increased, and this misperception generated a genuine concern that it was in the interest, if not the intention, of the United States to launch a surprise first strike. The Soviets were already multiple cycles deep in the Misperception Feedback Loop when Able Archer began, and each time they made a decision under the assumption that the United States was considering a first strike, they moved the conceptual boundaries of their decision-making process further from reality. America’s actions exacerbated this cycle and contributed to the Misperception Feedback Loop. Oblivious to the effect they were having inside the Soviet Union, the Reagan administration and NATO’s actions severely inhibited deterrence.

Historians disagree on the degree and even the existence of a Soviet war scare during Able Archer. Due to a problematic lack of Soviet archival evidence, Western sources and interviews of Soviet officials provide the bulk of available documentation of the Soviet reactions to Able Archer.<sup>25</sup> Some claim they were never concerned with an imminent nuclear strike and that the Soviet leadership engineered the crisis for political purposes. They explain that the alarmist Soviet rhetoric was primarily a propaganda campaign to gather domestic support while weakening the Reagan administration’s standing in the West to prevent the deployment of intermediate-range nuclear missiles to Europe.<sup>26</sup> These motivations are not mutually exclusive, and they can exist in tandem

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23. See Fischer, *1983 War Scare*.

24. Ronald Reagan, *An American Life: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 588–89.

25. Simon Miles, “The War Scare That Wasn’t: Able Archer 83 and the Myths of the Second Cold War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 22, no. 3 (Summer 2020): 103, 116, [https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws\\_a\\_00952](https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_a_00952).

26. Vojtech Mastny, “How Able was ‘Able Archer?’: Nuclear Trigger and Intelligence in Perspective,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 11, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 117–18, 120, <https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2009.11.1.108>.

with genuine concerns over an increasingly aggressive US administration. Although the war scare should not be overstated, the truth likely lies somewhere between the opposing views on the subject. With the current information available, it is difficult to grasp the degree and levels of government at which the war scare occurred. Yet, the evidence suggests there was a degree of Soviet concern that a surprise strike was a viable option for the United States.

The fact that Soviet leaders believed, to any degree, that the United States would launch nuclear weapons without provocation or preemption was a years-long US foreign policy blunder and represented a complete breakdown in strategic messaging and empathy. Able Archer leads to three unsettling conclusions for US deterrence strategists. The first is that regardless of how far from reality a course of action may be, if the United States possesses the capability to take an action and does not communicate intent effectively, then an adversary may perceive the United States will take that action, given the right circumstances. The second is that deterrence is globally connected, and unrelated actions in one region can impact deterrence in another. The third is that while it is dangerous to overestimate the coercive influence of US power in an adversary's mind, it is equally dangerous to underestimate the destabilizing effect that threatening overwhelming power can have on a weaker, insecure adversary. The events that culminated in Able Archer demonstrate clearly that ill-conceived US actions can have a radioactive interaction with adversary interests and generate extreme misperception that results in inhibited deterrence. Able Archer demonstrates the interests/action IAM Engine generating misperception and highlights the dangerous role the Misperception Feedback Loop can play. The concluding section carries forward these observations and applies the IAM Framework to a future conflict between Russia and NATO.

## Conclusions for Russian Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons Deterrence

There are ways of conquering that quickly transform  
victory into defeat.<sup>27</sup>

The following conclusions derive from the application of the IAM framework and lessons from the Able Archer incident to a future NATO-Russia armed conflict. The first two conclusions are specific to nuclear armed adversaries, while the final two deal with deterrence more broadly, but all are applicable to Russian NSNW deterrence. The main takeaway is that denial and punishment deterrent strategies will not be effective under the conditions that would likely trigger Russian NSNW use. A strategy of dissuasion grounded in empathy

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27. Raymond Aron, *The Century of Total War* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 158.

and carried out through judicious military restraint will be the most effective approach to deterring Russian NSNW while in conflict.

From the Western perspective, it is true that the United States “does not do Pearl Harbors,” but it is unlikely that Vladimir Putin, a man raised in Kryuchkov’s notoriously paranoid KGB and surrounded by sycophants, holds such a benign view of the West.<sup>28</sup> If the sources of information that fed Putin failed so dramatically to provide him with a proper perception of the reality in prewar Ukraine, his perception of future realities—especially in a time of extreme crisis or conflict—may be inaccurate. Putin’s assessment of the threat to Russian interests at play will inform his perceptions, which are critical to analyzing the interaction of those interests alongside US actions. Russian vital interests remain relatively unchanged since the time of Able Archer and revolve around sovereignty, regime survival, and territorial integrity.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the relationship between US restraint, or the lack thereof, and Russian interests and misperception is the key to a successful dissuasive strategy.

### Deterrence via Dissuasion

Deterrence via dissuasion is the best strategy for vulnerable, security-fixated adversaries like Russia. Dissuasion is the overarching strategy that must originate with civilian leadership and permeate military contingency planning. A paranoid, embattled, vulnerable, and besieged Russian leader may misperceive NATO actions and rationally determine that NSNW are the best answer if Russian conventional forces are decisively defeated. “Winning too big” must be a critical concern for US leaders. Therefore, the best way to deter Russian NSNW use is to remove Russian leaders’ perception of the necessity to use them in the first place. This is the strategy of dissuasion.

Dissuasion targets an actor’s need to conduct an action to attain a benefit. Whether through positive persuasion, restraint, distraction, or reward, dissuasion seeks to make an action no longer necessary for the target of deterrence.<sup>30</sup> For Russia, restraint should be the method of dissuasion employed. Punishment and denial approaches rely on an adversary perceiving that he or she has some benefit to gain or lose. It is unlikely that NATO

28. Strobe Talbott, “The Making of Vladimir Putin,” *Politico* (website), August 19, 2014, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/08/putin-the-backstory-110151/>.

29. Jason Castillo, John Schuessler, and Andrew Natsios, *Policy Briefs from Russia Policy under the Next U.S. President* (College Station, TX: Albritton Center for Grand Strategy and Scowcroft Institute of International Affairs at the Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University, October 15–16, 2019), 2, 11–13, <https://bush.tamu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Russia-Policy-Under-the-Next-US-President05.pdf>.

30. Stephan De Spiegeleire et al., *Reimagining Deterrence: Towards Strategic (Dis)Suasion* (Brussels: Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, March 2020), 17, 47–50.

can deny the defensive utility of NSNW on the battlefield, and for a Russian leader, the perceived benefits of sovereignty and regime survival will likely outweigh the costs of punishment resulting from limited NSNW use. The war in Ukraine makes it clear that Russian leaders value asserting territorial sovereignty over the acceptance of international norms or immediate economic prosperity. Focusing on the negative incentive-based approaches of punishment and denial can lead to the detrimental exclusion of neutral or positive incentive-based approaches that are more suitable for the tailored strategy required. Nonetheless, dissuasion requires willingly foregoing many of the strengths that the US military has enjoyed for decades.

### Application of Military Power

The deliberate and measured application of military power is necessary when confronting a nuclear-armed Russia. Decisive NATO military operations in eastern Europe will threaten Russia's vital interests to the point where their leaders may perceive NSNW employment as their only recourse. The US military must execute extremely restrained, deliberate, and empathetic operations that pursue minimalist military objectives to achieve a limited political end. The US proclivity for decisiveness and quick victory will make exercising restraint difficult during large-scale combat operations with Russia, but undisciplined decisiveness may prove even more catastrophic to national ends.

The Russian Federation released a comprehensive nuclear policy in 2020 outlining the circumstances in which nuclear weapons would be employed. Among other conditions, this policy states that Russia reserves the right to transition to the use of nuclear weapons “in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy” or in the event of an “attack by [an] adversary against critical governmental or military sites of the Russian Federation, [the] disruption of which would undermine nuclear forces response actions.”<sup>31</sup> Decisive, large-scale NATO operations could easily trigger one or both of these conditions.

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31. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (MID), “Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence,” MID (website), June 8, 2020, [https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign\\_policy/international\\_safety/disarmament/-/asset\\_publisher/rp0fiUBmANaH/content/id/4152094](https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/disarmament/-/asset_publisher/rp0fiUBmANaH/content/id/4152094).

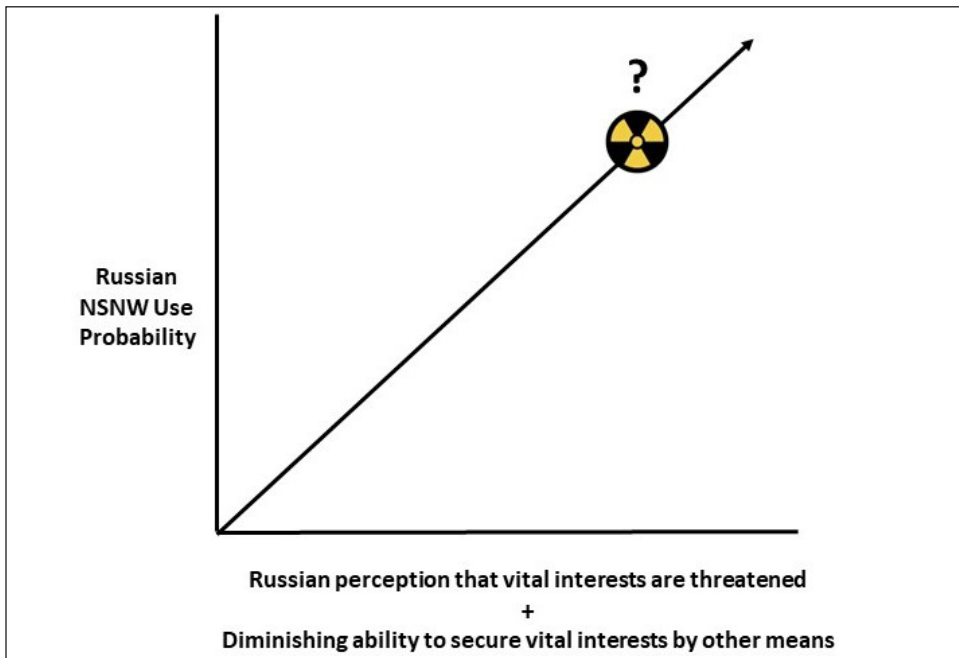


Figure 2. Russian NSNW probability (created by author)

Russian military doctrine and professional military writings also categorize conflict into types and roughly align military actions and conflict escalation considerations with each type.<sup>32</sup> The type of limited war likely resulting from a Russian *fait accompli* of NATO territory is termed “regional war” in Russian doctrine. Professional Russian military writings establish that the use of NSNW is an acceptable option in regional war but also stress the limited nature of their use and intent.<sup>33</sup> The exact conditions in which Russia would employ NSNW cannot be known with certainty, but these documents bring greater clarity to both the conceptual winds of Russian thinking on nuclear use and its likely triggers. The probable conditions for Russian NSNW become clear after combining declared Russian nuclear policy with its military doctrine and professional military writing. Generally, the likelihood of Russian NSNW use is positively correlated to a perceived threat to their vital interests combined with a diminishing ability to secure those interests through conventional means. Put another way, as the decisiveness of NATO’s victory increases, the decisiveness of Russia’s defeat increases, and Russia’s ability to secure vital interests via nonnuclear means diminishes (see figure 2). Still, this situation is only a concern if Russia perceives that its vital interests are threatened.

32. Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, and Jeffrey Edmonds, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts*, DRM-2019-U-022455-1Rev (Arlington, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, 2020), 6, 16, 19, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1102855.pdf>.

33. Kofman, Fink, and Edmonds, *Russian Strategy*, 19, 23, 25, 40, 49.



The IAM framework is useful for analyzing Russian misperception resulting from the interaction of Russian interests and US military actions. In accordance with its doctrine, a US-led NATO will plan to conduct operations quickly, decisively, and with minimal loss of life.<sup>34</sup> Russia's interests and NATO's actions are likely to result in severely strained, if not failed, NSNW deterrence. For example, as NATO counterattacks to rollback a Russian *fait accompli*, its forces will first seek to establish local air superiority to enable joint maneuver. Fires from multiple domains will suppress and then destroy Russia's integrated air defense network by penetrating and disintegrating enemy anti-access, area-denial systems. This goal requires not only destroying the weapon delivery systems, but also the network of command-and-control nodes and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems deep inside Russian territory.<sup>35</sup> As Russia loses both its ability to contest the air and see the battlefield, NATO ground forces will decisively maneuver to destroy and expel Russian forces from the contested territory. The simultaneous effect of stripping Russia's anti-access, area-denial systems hundreds of kilometers into their territory, restricting their situational awareness by destroying strategic reconnaissance assets, and decisively defeating their ground forces may generate the misperception that NATO forces are pursuing broader objectives than those being communicated by NATO states' political leadership. Deterrence will fail as Russian leaders perceive the necessity to employ NSNW to secure territorial integrity or national sovereignty.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, military leaders must balance the amount of destruction required to achieve the political end with the risk of escalation resulting from decisive military actions that generate or exacerbate Russian vulnerabilities.

### Adversary Perceptions of US Capabilities

If the United States possesses a capability, an adversary may regard the use of that capability as probable, under the right circumstances. Regardless of how remote the possibility of an action may be from the US perspective, an adversary's assessment of that likelihood could be very different. The severity of the destabilizing effects that misperception has on adversary decision making should not be underestimated. Experts contend that within the contemporary Russian mind there is "always a lingering fear of strategic surprise, and that if escalation is likely, then Russia should take

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34. NATO, *Allied Joint Doctrine for Land Operations*, edition B, version 1, Allied Joint Publication 3.2 (Brussels: NATO Standardization Office, February 2022), 3.2, 3.9, 3.14, [https://www.coemed.org/files/stanags/01\\_AJP/AJP-3.2\\_EDB\\_V1\\_E\\_2288.pdf](https://www.coemed.org/files/stanags/01_AJP/AJP-3.2_EDB_V1_E_2288.pdf).

35. Department of the Army, *Operations*, Field Manual 3-0 (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, October 2022), 6–9, [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/ARN36290-FM\\_3-0-000-WEB-2.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN36290-FM_3-0-000-WEB-2.pdf).

36. MID, "Nuclear Deterrence State Policy."



the lead.”<sup>37</sup> As in 1983, fears of an Operation Barbarossa–like attack may remain embedded in the Russian security apparatus psyche. Western society and leaders may know with certainty that they will never take an action, but that does not mean that a Russian leader with unique culture- and history-based assumptions, perceptions of an ever-tightening (if self-induced) NATO noose, and imperfect information from reality-distorting advisers will come to the same conclusion regarding Western intentions.

### Global Deterrence

In a globally connected world, deterrence is connected globally. Unrelated actions in one region can impact deterrence in another region. To account for the multipolar nature of modern deterrence, the whole-of-government approach envisioned in integrated deterrence must ensure that isolated or unrelated actions are not unintentionally inhibiting deterrence in another location or domain. National security strategists must avoid the pitfalls of Grenada and Beirut in 1983 as America navigates the uncharted waters of adversarial nuclear peer tri-polarity. Managing deterrence within such a complex environment requires a high level of fidelity regarding adversary interests, a great degree of interagency coordination, and strategic thinkers able to view the world with mirror-free strategic empathy. Who is integrating integrated deterrence and campaigning globally? The answer is ambiguous and unsettling. One organization must possess the responsibility, authority, and resources to coordinate whole-of-government efforts across combatant commands. Seams between and within combatant commands are ripe for exploitation by adversaries and are also vulnerable to our own blundering. A national-level organization is required to coordinate unified action effectively to avoid generating unintentional misperceptions.

### Deterrence through Perception

In armed conflict, Russian interests and US actions will interact to generate either proper perception or misperception. Applying the IAM framework to Russian NSNW deterrence strategy yields conclusions that are at odds with traditional deterrence and require a reevaluation of how the United States and its allies will conduct large-scale combat operations against a nuclear adversary. Despite US leaders’ clarity and understanding of their own strategic objectives, Russian leaders may have a different assessment

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37. Michael Kofman and Anya Loukianova Fink, “Commentary – Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment in Russian Military Strategy,” *War on the Rocks* (website), September 19, 2022, revised and updated, originally published June 23, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/09/escalation-management-and-nuclear-employment-in-russian-military-strategy-2/>.

of US intentions. A combination of Russian interests, the decisive application of Western military power, or even unrelated US actions may fuel this misperception. Accounting for these variables enables a US strategy focused on removing the fundamental need that drives Russian NSNW use. A strategy of dissuasion accounts for the historical, cultural, and personality-driven attributes that influence Russian interests and demands a military approach to armed conflict that requires civilian and military leaders to consider how their actions might impact Russian perceptions.

The most effective way to deter Russian NSNW use is to remove Russian leaders' *perception* of the necessity to use them in the first place. This goal can be accomplished by executing extremely restrained, deliberate, and empathetic military operations that pursue minimalist military objectives to achieve a political end. Applying military doctrine deliberately and judiciously will enable military leaders to attain the political end without stumbling into strategic failure. Let T. R. Fehrenbach's warning remain at the fore: "To make a war, sometimes it is necessary that everyone guess wrong."<sup>38</sup>

A counterinsurgency adage states that the more secure you are the less safe you are. The more a force protects itself in opaque armored vehicles and alienates itself from the population, the less safe the force may become in the long run and the less effective it will be in achieving the political objective. A similar concept may be applied to war with Russia. The more decisively NATO wins at the tactical and operational level, the less decisively NATO may win at the strategic level. After all, "there are ways of conquering that quickly transform victory into defeat," and the use of even one Russian NSNW likely means strategic failure for NATO.<sup>39</sup>

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38. T. R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: The Classic Korean War History* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1994).

39. Aron, *Total War*, 158.

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