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Conference report

**Towards global nuclear order: deterrence,  
assurance and reductions**

Wednesday 10 – Friday 12 July 2013 | WP1211

In association with:

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## Conference report

### **Towards global nuclear order: deterrence, assurance, and reductions**

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This conference assessed the evolving role of deterrence, assurances, and reductions in addressing the threat of nuclear weapons in the 21st century. Discussions debated the future criteria for successful deterrence of real and potential adversaries, as well as assurance to allies. It assessed the concept of global nuclear order as well as whether, and how, deterrence can coexist alongside a process of nuclear reductions and in a strategic environment with a variety of nuclear actors. The possible consequences of the evolving political events in the Middle East for regional security, the trends in nuclear latency, and the sources of deterrent strategy were also assessed. The implications of these events for the future shape and viability of deterrence and assurance strategies for bordering regions were considered as well.

“There appears to be no prudent or viable alternative to deterrence for the time being. However, more thinking needs to be done about the possible features of a world free of nuclear weapons”

#### **Key points**

- A new, complex global web of nuclear relationships is developing and changing the nuclear order inherited from the Cold War. Untangling regional knots is challenging because shifts in one relationship potentially impact on another. More thought needs to be given to how strategic stability can be maintained and promoted, and how disarmament can be advanced, in these new circumstances.
- Nuclear weapons are no longer the sole objects of concern. New domains (cyber and space) and systems (ballistic missile defence and advanced conventional weapons) have become integral parts of the strategic equation. Cross-domain issues have already begun to complicate efforts to improve strategic relations between nuclear states, as well as arms control initiatives. This trend will likely continue and may have to be accounted for in future arms control agreements.
- There are questions about whether numerical parity, which has been a major focus in arms control, is still relevant today. It is unclear, however, what should take its place. Should it be a broader conception of parity that takes quality or conventional forces into account? What are the potential challenges for arms control with modifying concepts of parity?
- The desirability of military nuclear transparency as a universal norm is questionable. While such measures can contribute to enhancing strategic stability, there are circumstances under which they could be counterproductive and work against nonproliferation and disarmament goals, in Asia for instance. This is an area which requires in-depth study.
- Too little is known about Chinese nuclear thinking, making it difficult to gauge how Beijing would react to the future moves of other nuclear players. If the United States and Russia continue to trim their arsenals, would China sprint to

parity? What will Beijing do if India continues to build its warhead and fissile material stockpiles? How will developments in ballistic missile defence or advanced conventional weapons impact on Beijing's strategic calculations?

- The five nuclear weapon states recognised by the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) must balance their need to make good on their disarmament obligations with their perceived need to modernise their aging nuclear arsenals. Research needs to be conducted on whether these two goals can be pursued.

There appears to be no prudent or viable alternative to deterrence for the time being. However, more thinking needs to be done about the possible features of a world free of nuclear weapons.

“While the desirability of nuclear disarmament as a *direction* is generally agreeable, the desirability of a nuclear-weapon-free world as the *destination* is much more hotly contested”

## The deterrence-stability-disarmament nexus

1. There is presently no consensus in the expert community about the meaning and interaction of "deterrence," "stability," and "disarmament". Regarding deterrence, in today's world, it is not clear from official rhetoric *what* the West wishes to deter with its nuclear forces: unfavourable behaviour, conventional aggression, general use of weapons of mass destruction, or just nuclear war? In the same vein, it is not clear *who* the West is deterring. Is it Russia? China? North Korea? Moreover, in this evolving threat environment, deterrence is increasingly being conducted with non-nuclear means. Though it is obvious that there must be some specialisation of function between nuclear and non-nuclear deterrence, the practical boundaries are hazy. Has the importance of nuclear deterrence been offset by the emergence of new mechanisms for deterrence? Discussion on these points highlights an even more fundamental area of contention: whether deterrence has worked and is working. Was the world merely lucky in the Cold War? Is there evidence that nuclear weapons were a stabilising factor, and if so, what lessons can be drawn from these experiences?
2. Much debate also surrounds the concept of strategic stability. Various understandings have been promulgated: for instance, does it describe maintenance of the status quo, or does it refer to a degree of predictability in a state's security relationships? Affected by those diverging understandings is one's stance on the desirability of stability. Some have suggested that certain nuclear states may benefit from instability in other nuclear-armed or nuclear-aspirant countries.
3. Finally, the meaning of disarmament is enigmatic. According to Article VI of the NPT, the P-5 are committed to reducing their arsenals and leading the process to eventually rid the world of nuclear weapons. Yet while the desirability of nuclear disarmament as a *direction* is generally agreeable, the desirability of a nuclear-weapon-free world as the *destination* is much more hotly contested. Some participants expressed concerns that war could be more likely in such a world. In addition to other complicating factors, this debate throws the way forward for the disarmament process into question. At some stage, the complexity of global nuclear relationships will demand the involvement of non-NPT nuclear-armed nations in disarmament discussions. Further consideration of when and how this might be achievable is necessary.
4. Recently, a new approach to nuclear disarmament has gained prominence. Launched by a conference held in Oslo in 2013, its focus is on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear use. Proponents of this approach contend that it is the only way to remove the "security/prestige myth" associated with these weapons and truly examine what these weapons do. This is important, they argue, because policymakers too often focus on "strategic calculations" rather than the disastrous global implications of nuclear weapons use, tending to think of those weapons as political instruments. The humanitarian consequences initiative is far from being universally accepted. The P-5, for instance, chose not to participate in the Oslo Conference, arguing that it diverges from a proven and agreed-upon step-by-step approach to disarmament.
5. The United Kingdom continues to consider its nuclear arsenal an essential guarantor of

national security. London is at present officially committed to ensuring the effectiveness, survivability, and continuity of its nuclear forces – a stance outlined in the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review. However, the United Kingdom faces an imminent decision over whether it should procure four new SSBNs to replace its current *Vanguard-class* in an age of defence cut-backs and broader austerity. Catalysed by the recently released 'Trident Alternatives Review' – a Cabinet Office study mandated in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition agreement – the UK debate has shifted from platforms (namely, ballistic missile or cruise missile submarines) to posture. Alongside this debate, the UK government faces continual pressure to demonstrate that it is the most disarmament-oriented nuclear weapon state. As a result, the United Kingdom will continue to explore ways to trim the size of its arsenal and reduce the role of nuclear weapons in national doctrine. This is a process with which the United Kingdom is already intimately familiar, having made unilateral reductions numerous times over the past two decades. Moreover, the United Kingdom has been active in nuclear disarmament research, as exemplified by the UK-Norway Initiative on Nuclear Warhead Dismantlement Verification.

6. The nuclear community is divided over the question of "nuclear bargains." There is a split between those who favour swift advances towards nuclear disarmament and those who believe that the focus should be nuclear deterrence and assurance. It may be that the era of relatively straightforward nuclear reductions is behind us and reductions will be considerably more complex now. If so, some argue that disarmament needs to be taken out of the equation and, in an age where many states are actively modernising their nuclear arsenals and delivery vehicles, emphasis should be placed on deterrence and assurance. Others argue that there is a relationship between the goals of disarmament and deterrence/assurance and that both goals can be advanced simultaneously. This is particularly the case if 'disarmament' is viewed more broadly than merely numerical reductions – other related measures can be actively and securely pursued in the present climate. Deterrence can continue to be the key operating concept until the conditions for disarmament are created. Japan, for instance, is a staunch supporter of nuclear disarmament but would be worried if the United States currently decided to make deep cuts to its arsenal, because this could be misinterpreted as a sign of weakness by China. Of note, there was no consensus at this conference over the centrality of the NPT concerning the debate over "nuclear bargains"; it however, recognised that the treaty was increasingly under stress.

"Parity may no longer be the goal. Rather, reciprocity may become the new operating concept"

### **Nuclear reductions: the US-Russia context**

7. There is widespread recognition that the next round of arms control negotiations will (and should) continue to be between the United States and Russia given the disproportionate size of their nuclear arsenals compared with other nuclear-armed states. At issue is what the next treaty should look like. Should it no longer limit itself to strategic nuclear weapons and address new classes of weapons, i.e. tactical and non-deployed nuclear weapons, as recommended in the 2010 US Nuclear Posture Review Report? One possibility would be for both parties to tackle all classes of weapons and negotiate a "big treaty." Another possibility would be to proceed along parallel tracks: one track would focus on strategic nuclear weapons, the other on tactical and non-deployed weapons. In principle, the United States is prepared to start negotiations and discuss options for next steps. The big question, at this stage, is whether the Russians are willing to engage, particularly on tactical nuclear weapons, which they see as strategic assets. (The Russian position is clear: negotiations will not start before the United States removes its forward-deployed tactical nuclear weapons from Europe and before it stops military exercises with its European allies.) Other question marks include the sensibilities and perceptions of US European allies over tactical nuclear weapons and, not surprisingly, verification issues, given the absence of any arms control experience in dealing with these classes of weapons. Ultimately, of course, the future treaty (or treaties) would have to be ratified by the US Senate and the Russian Duma,

which should not be assumed in view of the difficulties (particularly in the US Senate) surrounding ratification of the much more "straightforward" 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).

8. While the United States and Russia still have significant room to proceed with bilaterally-negotiated nuclear reductions, the question of the multilateralisation of arms control talks is becoming relevant. As the United States and Russia downsize their nuclear forces to lower levels, they will increasingly worry about other nuclear-armed states, notably those which are quantitatively and qualitatively investing in their weapons programs, chiefly China. When considering options to multilateralise arms control talks, one possibility would be to only bring in China as a start, before including other nuclear-armed states. Another possibility is to proceed through the P-5 diplomatic process, which has met on a regular basis since 2009. Regardless of the form that the multilateralisation of arms control talks ends up taking, it will be a long, difficult exercise and progress will depend on the evolution of major power relations. Although numerical reductions are likely to continue to matter for the foreseeable future, both because of political and symbolic reasons (even for states with small nuclear arsenals), the multilateralisation of arms control talks will gradually lead to a shift in focus from nuclear reductions to mutual restraint at lower numbers. In other words, parity may no longer be the goal. Rather, reciprocity may become the new operating concept. This will raise important questions about transparency and the relationship between numbers and upload capability.
9. One difficulty that comes with the multilateralisation of arms control talks is the growing problem of geographical entanglement. The United States, Russia, and China have deterrent relationships with one another (and Russia is not only concerned by the US arsenal, but also by the UK, the French, and the 'NATO' arsenals). Yet China, for its part, worries not only about the US and Russian arsenals, but also increasingly about India's. Meanwhile, Pakistan has been rapidly building up its own arsenal in response to India's nuclear and conventional capabilities. This suggests that the US-Russia-China strategic triangle is intrinsically linked, through China, to the China-India-Pakistan strategic triangle and that what happens in one triangle is likely to have significant implications for the other. If India were to counter Pakistan's nuclear build-up, for instance, a nuclear arms race in South Asia could follow, which would likely drive China to respond. This, in turn, could impact US and Russian calculations and put a serious damper on future bilateral nuclear reductions. Making arms control work in these conditions, therefore, promises to be extremely challenging.
10. In addition to the problem of geographical entanglement, the problem of technological entanglement is gradually surfacing. Once the sole object of arms control negotiations, nuclear weapons have been joined by new types of strategic weapons - missile defenses and advanced conventional strike capabilities. And new domains have gained prominence in the debate surrounding strategic stability, namely the cyber and space domains. This is further complicating the process of arms control talks, which has become more complex in the past decade.

"The greater risk is the emergence of a small-scale political or military crisis on the Korean Peninsula or in the East or South China Seas that unpredictably escalates"

### **Strategic stability in Northeast Asia**

11. In Northeast Asia, the meaning of strategic stability has changed considerably since the end of the Cold War. Significantly, the goal is no longer the prevention of war (nuclear war, in particular), but escalation control and crisis management. In the current regional security environment, the outbreak of all-out war, while not impossible, is relatively unlikely. Pyongyang, for instance, knows that launching a massive attack against Seoul or Tokyo would lead to its demise. The United States and China, despite their cautious relations, similarly have no interest in another large-scale military confrontation on the Korean Peninsula or elsewhere. The greater risk is the emergence of a small-scale political or military crisis on the Korean Peninsula or in the East or South China Seas that unpredictably escalates. Pyongyang has steered short of launching massive

attacks against its neighbours, but it has conducted low-level yet deadly attacks against the South, and in view of the Japanese-Chinese standoff over the Senkaku/Daiyou Islands, it is possible to imagine that intervening variables or miscalculation could worsen the situation. It was concluded that if escalation control is to today what war prevention was to yesterday, then policymakers should invest in robust crisis management strategies and mechanisms.

12. Two important challenges are the problems of decoupling and the stability-instability paradox. In Northeast Asia, North Korea's nuclear weapons development and China's growing military build-up are creating the risk that the United States might decide not to defend an ally because its own homeland is becoming vulnerable to an attack (decoupling). It is also creating the risk that North Korea (and China) become more assertive at the conventional level as a result of the cover provided by their improved nuclear capability (stability-instability paradox). To meet deterrence and assurance goals in these conditions, continued coupling of the United States to Japan and the ROK is essential, hence the importance of investing in the recently created extended deterrence bilateral consultative mechanisms. Also important is to send clear and coordinated messages or warnings that conventional escalation will not be tolerated. Looking to the future, most participants stressed that trilateral cooperation between the United States, Japan, and the ROK ("trilateral coupling") would be a positive development. This development, however, would have to accommodate China, i.e. ensure that it is not antagonizing Beijing or that it does not set back the progress made towards enhanced US-China strategic reassurance.

“The Middle East is a complex strategic knot. It is one in which strategic instability can beget political instability”

### **Political stability and strategic stability in the Middle East: what is the relationship, how complementary are they?**

13. Like Northeast Asia, the Middle East is a complex strategic knot. It is one in which strategic instability can beget political instability; fear of Iranian subversive activities in Gulf States have pushed governments in a more authoritarian direction, for instance. Conversely, the region's strategic stability is also heavily influenced by domestic political and military developments. Syria remains in a state of civil war, with a strong sectarian colouring, a consistent cross-border dimension, and perhaps even fresh international involvement. The removal of the elected Morsi government in Egypt has again thrown that country into turmoil, while highlighting the importance of government legitimacy as a determinant of political stability.
14. What happens domestically is of great concern elsewhere in the region and strategic threats in the Middle East are often seen as manifesting themselves through domestic channels. For instance, the implications of the situation in Syria, including Iranian involvement and possible instability in Lebanon, are perceived as having regional strategic significance. Morsi's ousting and the ensuing reactions from regional governments foreshadowed higher-level tensions with Qatar and perhaps Israel and Iran. In the same vein, the growing number of political actors and voices on the scene in Egypt, Syria, and other Middle East and North African states is likely to become a factor affecting regional and inter-regional strategic relations. Yet compared to these new or underlined factors affecting strategic stability, the military balance may be diminishing in relevance. Iran, for its part, is an actor of great strategic importance, but makes up an underwhelming fraction of Middle Eastern defence spending.
15. Domestic turmoil has not only broad strategic significance, but also specific significance for efforts to enhance the nuclear nonproliferation regime. It is often feared that the Middle East is the region most loosely attached to the NPT. Egypt has been an extremely vocal player in NPT meetings, and a consistent hurdle to consensus. Its behaviour at future meetings will likely be affected by developments at home. Civil unrest, political instability, and economic difficulties will likely result in a further de-prioritisation of nuclear issues within the domestic agenda. Furthermore, amidst high-level political turnover, bureaucrats have remained largely unchanged. Their positions

in multilateral nuclear fora could go on auto-pilot, with megaphone diplomacy continuing to be a modus operandi of choice. However, a genuine change in stance requiring senior interest and acquiescence is unlikely to be witnessed. The same might be said for other, albeit traditionally less vocal, countries in the region that are undergoing political shifts.

16. Iran carries special significance for nonproliferation efforts. Its nuclear programme is arguably the greatest strategic issue presently facing the Middle East. Debate continues over whether Iran seeks a nuclear weapon or a high degree of nuclear latency, though most experts coalesce around the latter goal. The risk of, and timelines for an Iranian breakout will be a growing concern. Iranian efforts to earmark nuclear material for conversion to fuel, thereby refraining from expanding its stock of fissile material that could be further enriched, demonstrates that Tehran is conscious of international attention to its breakout potential. Whether any time and patience created by Iranian restraint can be translated by the country's new President, Hasan Rouhani, into a more comprehensive E3+3 nuclear deal remains to be seen.
17. Debate also persists on the implications for Iranian behaviour and regional strategic stability if Iran does move beyond nuclear latency. Though claims of Iranian irrationality are widely dismissed, disagreements persist over whether a nuclear weapon would embolden Iran conventionally. Its economic dependency on Gulf Cooperation Council countries and a passable Strait of Hormuz may elicit restraint in Tehran. How it would interact with its existing proxies or confront Israel – rhetorically or otherwise -- is similarly contested. The ability of the West to contain and deter a nuclear Iran is yet another point of continuing consideration. Though containment of Iran has been pursued for decades, it remains a costly option. It would require the United States to form closer ties with regional governments that it may not otherwise have warmed to.
18. Finally, the likelihood that Iranian attainment of a nuclear weapon would spark a regional proliferation cascade is hotly contested. Concerns abound that, in this scenario, Saudi Arabia might seek closer cooperation with Pakistan. Other potential nuclear weapons aspirants include Turkey and Egypt – though its current domestic situation casts doubt that resources for a nuclear programme could be adequately mustered. However, a regional cascade of hedging states may unfold if Tehran stays at a high degree of latency rather than seeking a bomb. The scale of nuclear energy programmes that have already been initiated in the region, namely in select Gulf states, hints at this possibility. Numerous latent states might exacerbate existing mistrust and carry substantial strategic implications.

“States need on the one hand to formulate nuclear weapons policies that reflect current strategic realities, and on the other hand, modernise their aging nuclear complexes and arsenals”

### **Building mutual security in the Euro-Atlantic region**

19. One of the greatest security challenges facing the Euro-Atlantic region is the need for states to on the one hand, formulate nuclear weapons policies that reflect current strategic realities, and on the other hand, modernise their aging nuclear complexes and arsenals. The United States is planning to modernise its B61 nuclear warheads deployed in Europe, among other portions of its nuclear force. Some European basing states, for their part, will soon need to begin procuring new delivery platforms if NATO's nuclear capabilities are to keep their current shape, as decided by the 2012 Deterrence and Defence Posture Review. France is mid-way through its own efforts to update its nuclear forces. The recently released Trident Alternatives Review in the United Kingdom highlighted that country's ongoing debate over nuclear platforms and posture. And Russia, too, is pursuing a large-scale nuclear modernisation programme.
20. These developments stand in contrast to a radically changed geostrategic picture from that of the Cold War. As a result, the price tag of nuclear weapon modernisation programmes has risen to the forefront of public debates. Publics increasingly ask whether these large investments can be justified. This scrutiny is most heavily applied to NATO tactical nuclear weapons, of which approximately 200 remain stationed in Europe. The price, safety and utility of these weapons have been called into question

most vocally in Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands.

21. These weapons, like those belonging to Russia, have remained outside of bilateral arms control agreements to date. Washington has already stated its preference that tactical nuclear weapons be included in the next round of bilateral arms control with Russia. The NATO Deterrence and Defence Posture Review further clarified that 'reciprocity' from Russia will be key if the shape or size of the NATO nuclear force is to change. Despite Russia's international pledges in the 2010 NPT Review Conference to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in its national doctrine, Russia's conventional military deficiencies have prevented its grasp on tactical nuclear weapons from relaxing. On the NATO end, several member states still view the European-deployed Russian tactical nuclear arsenal as directed at them, and therefore value US bombs stationed on NATO territory.
22. Organisations such as the European Leadership Network and the co-chairs of the 'Building Mutual Security' initiative have argued that reciprocity should not be a firm requirement for reducing US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. It calls for an "immediate 50 percent reduction in U.S. tactical nuclear weapons now stationed in Europe, to be consolidated back to the United States and eventually eliminated. Russia could take reciprocal steps...". However, this move would likely be considered a direct dismissal of the collective alliance decision captured in the 2012 NATO Deterrence and Defence Posture Review.
23. De-alerting of nuclear forces, or the maximisation of leadership decision-making time, is another area in which near-term measures might be taken. Many components of the deployed US and Russian arsenals of the have an excessive launch readiness status, allowing for 'launch on warning' or 'launch on attack'. In the United States and Europe, there is growing consensus that maximising the time a leader has to launch a nuclear weapon would not undermine strategic stability. Many have also argued this would increase the chances that an accidental or unauthorised launch procedure be noticed and stopped before it was carried out. However, not all are convinced that wholesale, or even phased de-alerting of nuclear forces would be wise. Some fear that governments might be tempted to rapidly return their forces to launch-ready in a crisis. Others contend that there is limited political will to take such steps, particularly in Russia. As a result, focusing on de-alerting might come at the expense of efforts to reduce numbers of deployed and non-deployed nuclear weapons.
24. One broader approach to tackling challenges to mutual security in the Euro-Atlantic region might be to create a new dialogue between senior officials, military officers, and experts from the United States, Europe and Russia. Such a forum would tackle a broad range of issues: nuclear weapons, missile defences, prompt-strike and conventional forces and cyber security and space. However, more efforts will have to be made to convince political leaders that existing mechanisms are unable to make practical recommendations in these areas.

"Conventional and nuclear advancements by Beijing and New Delhi have perpetuated bilateral suspicion and increased the potential for arms racing"

### **Prospects for a bilateral nuclear order: China-India**

25. The China-India bilateral strategic dynamic appears stable. Communication and interaction between the two nations is regular and growing. China and India have identified a variety of confidence-building measures on their shared border. The Chinese Prime Minister visited India in May 2013 and signed a joint statement on nuclear energy cooperation – a possible starting point for broader dialogue. In terms of their respective nuclear weapon postures, stability might flow from their shared preference for 'minimum' nuclear deterrents, forces on low alert, and 'no first use' policies. However, despite this reassuring picture, regional political and military developments could erase progress, and the China-India relationship to destabilise.
26. The seeds of mutual distrust already exist. Though both have other notable nuclear-armed competitors – the United States for China and Pakistan for India – conventional



and nuclear advancements by Beijing and New Delhi have perpetuated bilateral suspicion and increased the potential for arms racing. China continues to contest maritime boundaries in the South and East China seas, often involving military assets as visible demonstrations of its claims. This pattern of behaviour, when coupled with the country's slowly advancing ballistic missile submarine programme and broader nuclear modernisation efforts, is a source of uncertainty and concern in New Delhi. It has propelled India to create a comprehensive deterrent strategy, which includes increased military spending, improved border infrastructure, ballistic missile defences, and new nuclear capabilities. Even engagement is part of an Indian strategy to deter the type of Chinese aggression that Beijing has exhibited towards others in Asia; is India 'engaging with what they hope will be a cooperative China, but preparing for an aggressive and assertive one'?

27. Chinese analysts vary in their threat assessments of a nuclear rivalry with India. 'Alarmists' warn that India has great power aspirations which are filtering into the nuclear realm. India is pursuing a submarine leg for its nuclear deterrent, and is making conventional military port calls in China's sphere of influence. The imminent entry into service of its Agni-V missile, which will be capable of carrying multiple warheads onto Beijing, is seen as a development aimed squarely at deterring China.
28. Yet 'dismissists' reject the possibility of more open nuclear competition with India on the grounds of its military -- including nuclear -- inferiority. Chinese stocks of fissile material have also been mentioned by analysts of that country as a reason not to fear its southern neighbour: China could easily increase its nuclear arsenal if necessary. In short, for this group, India does not pose a threat to China. Regardless, it is clear that expert discourse within China about India's nuclear capabilities is evolving. Phrases such as 'offensive deterrence' and 'containment deterrence' are used to describe New Delhi's nuclear strategy. Language used for India is becoming similar to that used for the United States – China's primary nuclear competitor.
29. New factors could prove substantially destabilising to the China-India strategic relationship. Closer China-Pakistan cooperation, particularly in the nuclear realm, could be one example; it is thought that China views the disparity in Indian and Pakistani military capabilities as a concern, but any effort to assist in rectifying this could similarly damage the India-China relationship. A lack of transparency in military intentions as the nuclear programmes of both India and China advance could have the same effect. Yet, conversely, increased transparency, particularly in terms of nuclear weapons or fissile material stockpiles, could expose the gap between the two nations as notably different from what military planners may have thought. This may come into contact with either's national pride in the perceived relative size of their own nuclear capabilities.

**Andrea Berger and David Santoro**

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