

The 21st century Cold War is heating up

The Cold War of the 21st century, delayed by the brief bonhomie that accompanied the demise of the previous version, and distracted by the “uni-polar moment” and the so-called “global war on terror”, is now well upon us. Several recent pronouncements, including the releases by the Donald Trump administration of its National Defence Strategy, the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), and the Worldwide Threat Assessment (WTA) report, coupled with the State of the Union address by Vladimir Putin and China’s reaction to the US documents, are evidence that the new Cold War is heating up. This despite the tantalizing mirage of rapprochement on the Korean peninsula, where the sincerity of Seoul’s overtures is mismatched by the insincerity of Pyongyang’s intent and Trump’s showmanship.

The 21st century Cold War is distinct from the original one in several ways. First, while the 20th century Cold War was characterized by a bi-polar world where two superpowers faced off against each other, the new Cold War will not be confined to a simple dyad. There may be a series of dyads, where different pairs of countries face off against each other, such as the US versus Russia, the US versus China, and the US versus North Korea. While the dyad might be the preferred scenario for nuclear planners, they might be confronted with alliance among nuclear-armed states that may pit, say, the US against an informal China-North Korea-Pakistan axis. In the latter case, will the nuclear deterrence concept—built around a classic dyad—still be viable?

Second, along with the traditional state-versus-state nuclear confrontation, today there are also risks of nuclear, biological, chemical and cyber-attacks from non-state actors and terrorist groups. So far no nuclear-armed state has come up with a viable doctrine to deter such attacks. Third, some states, like Pakistan, pose a hybrid threat emanating from both state and non-state actions. As the WTA report avers: “Pakistan will continue to threaten US interests by deploying new nuclear weapons capabilities, maintaining its ties to militants, restricting counterterrorism cooperation, and drawing closer to China”. How will traditional nuclear deterrence operate then?

The Trump NPR, while reflecting significant continuity with the 2010 Barack Obama NPR in terms of capabilities and doctrine, seeks to address these scenarios and “calls for the diverse set of nuclear capabilities” to provide “flexibility to tailor the approach to deterring one or more potential adversaries in different circumstances”. However, it fails in this endeavour and merely sets a hawkish tone in terms of deployment and threshold of use.

In an effort to enhance flexibility and range of its “tailored deterrence options”, the NPR retains all of Obama’s modernization plans and, in addition, seeks new low-yield weapons and delivery systems (including a proposed submarine-launched cruise missile, which is unlikely to be fielded for the duration of the Trump administration). Simultaneously, the NPR looks to integrate nuclear forces along with “conventional forces and other instruments of national power (read cyber-attacks) ...towards deterring aggression and preserving peace”. This, instead of being fit for purpose for 21st century challenges, is very reminiscent of the limited nuclear war concept propounded during the original Cold War. Yet, quixotically, the NPR argues that these developments are not intended to enable “nuclear-war-fighting”. As one cynical scholar tweeted: “1980 called and wants its nuclear posture back”.

Semantically, the Trump NPR also sounds like one written by a weaker nation, rather than the world’s leading power, which is decades ahead of its closest adversary. Indeed, several experts have argued that were the US to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in its arsenal, it might actually have greater flexibility in addressing the range of threats that it faces with its conventional capabilities.

The US, however, is not the only country that has failed to transcend the Cold War thinking and develop doctrines for the new scenarios. Russia, as evident from Putin's slick State of the Union presentation of five new nuclear weapons is equally unable to adapt to the emerging challenges. The animations, including an "invincible" nuclear-powered intercontinental cruise missile—provocatively aimed at Florida (the locale of Trump's Winter White House)—and nuclear torpedoes, reflect that Russia is still only capable of playing the old Cold War's nuclear deterrence game. Like its predecessor, this Cold War is likely to be accompanied by an arms race. This, coupled with the absence of any substantial dialogue, is inexorably increasing tensions.

There are several ways that the leading nuclear armed states can lower the temperature. First, they need to revert to basic nuclear deterrence where nuclear weapons are meant to deter only other nuclear weapons. Second, given that deterrence relationships are likely to include one or more adversary, it is crucial to establish discussions among all the major potential nuclear adversaries to determine a mutual concept for strategic stability and also to carry out arms control. Third, these discussions might also examine the role of emerging technologies on nuclear deterrence. Finally, nuclear-armed states also need to explore ways to move towards a nuclear weapon free world.

The heating up of the new Cold War has shown that as the prospect of a world free of nuclear weapons recedes into the distant horizon, the peril of a nuclear war—either deliberate, inadvertent, or by accident—has loomed dangerously closer into view.

W.P.S. Sidhu is professor at New York University's Centre for Global Affairs and non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

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