

Panel Explores Challenges of Deterring Limited Nuclear War

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On October 15, 2018, IDA hosted a panel discussion on the challenge the United States faces in formulating a strategy that accounts for the potential for limited nuclear war. The discussion focused on *Limited Nuclear War: The 21st Century Challenge for the United States*, a July 2018 monograph published by Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory's Center for Global Security Research. John Harvey, Jr., IDA's Director of Strategy, Forces and Resources Division, opened the event, followed by a presentation from John K. Warden of IDA, the author of the monograph, and comments from former IDA researcher Brad Roberts, now Director of the Center for Global Security Research. William A. Chambers of IDA moderated the discussion.



“This topic is back...with a vengeance. Your interest points to the growing importance of nuclear issues and, in particular, the challenge posed by the potential for the limited use of nuclear weapons by a U.S. adversary.”

—John Harvey, Jr.

John Warden pointed to evidence that Russia, China, and North Korea are preparing for nuclear weapons use on a limited scale, and said the U.S. and its allies need “plans to be able to fight and win those conflicts...while still persuading the aggressor not to cross the nuclear threshold,” even on a limited scale.



“If limited nuclear war is never to be fought, then the United States and its allies must prevent adversaries from thinking it can be won.”

—John Warden

Warden explained that potential aggressors might think they could prevail with a strategy of controlling limited nuclear war through tacit bargaining about the types or locations of nuclear strikes. This strategy could raise the level of warfare above conventional weapons while letting the U.S. and its allies know that further escalation is not intended. Aggressors might pursue this strategy by using nuclear weapons only in the region of the conflict or in ways that limit non-combatant casualties (for example, in space, at sea, for EMP effect, or against an isolated target).

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In response, the U.S. and its allies should seek what Warden called *nuclear-use stability*, a condition in which adversaries see an acceptable alternative to nuclear escalation during conflict and doubt that nuclear employment would improve their prospects. This could be attained by (1) presenting acceptable off-ramps to adversary leaders, (2) reducing the vulnerability of U.S. conventional operations and forces to nuclear strikes, and (3) credibly threatening conventional and nuclear escalation in response to nuclear use.

Warden concluded by stating that his research is but a starting point. Further study is needed to tailor these concepts for applicability to individual potential adversaries. Only then, can definitive decisions be made about the capabilities, strategies, and doctrines the United States needs.

In his comments, Brad Roberts said that the three potential adversaries have set out to demonstrate their competence in this area by centralizing their thinking about the problem. The adversaries seem to believe that asymmetry of geography, of stake, and of societal structures give them the credibility they need to threaten the United States in this way. But Roberts pointed out that what they are talking about is a *nuclear theory of victory*, not a *theory of nuclear victory*. In other words, they are not espousing a theory of fighting and winning a nuclear war, but a theory of victory in persuading the United States to back down in a regional context.



“For each of the main actors we talk about, I don’t think they are eager to put this theory to the test. They’d like us to admire its perfection and be deterred by their confidence in their theory and its coherence.”

—Brad Roberts

Roberts characterized Warden’s catalog of concepts as a good model that permits a nuclear escalation calculus that will help frame a responsive U.S. strategy. In addressing this “problem of strategic conflict in the twenty-first century,” the United States may be making a strategic mistake by viewing unlikely scenarios (nuclear war) as implausible, while focusing attention on more likely scenarios (conventional war), which seem plausible.