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Assessing the Nuclear Lessons of the First Gulf War

Rebecca Friedman Lissner¹

How did the conventional military dominance that the United States demonstrated during the First Gulf War shape its post–Cold War nuclear policy? In analyzing the nuclear lessons of the Gulf War, this paper investigates how conventional warfare shapes states’ nuclear postures and strategies more generally. Nuclear-armed states frequently conduct conventional military operations. Yet, in emphasizing the categorical difference between nuclear and conventional weapons, existing scholarship largely overlooks the influence of conventional warfare on nuclear strategy. Based on examination of primary and secondary sources, as well as interviews with participants, I find three types of nuclear lessons learned from the Gulf War. First, the most important nuclear lessons were the danger posed by regional powers’ nuclear proliferation, and the United States’ insufficient tools to counter this proliferation. Second, the Gulf War convinced policymakers that precise conventional systems could increasingly substitute for nuclear systems, though changes in nuclear strategy reflect the end of the Cold War as well as the lessons of Desert Storm. Finally, there is incomplete evidence that the Gulf War changed the United States’ approach to conflict escalation. Cumulatively, these findings substantiate my conclusion that conventional warfare can change the way states view the utility and efficacy of their nuclear arsenals, as evidenced by modification of states’ nuclear posture and strategy.

The First Gulf War broke out at a moment of acute strategic uncertainty for the United States. With the Cold War clearly coming to a close, the grand strategy of containment was no longer an apt organizing principle for U.S. foreign policy. Similarly, the nuclear force posture that supported containment’s aims was no longer necessary to preserve U.S. security in a post–Cold War world. Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait prompted the first major crisis of the “new world order” and provoked U.S. military intervention. Although the ultimate political success of the Gulf War remains contested,²

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its military success was staggering. U.S. conventional warfighting abilities—largely untested in combat since Vietnam—demonstrated the potential of the information revolution, as precision-guided munitions enabled pinpoint strikes against regime targets and global positioning system (GPS)—guided troops maneuvered in the desert with unprecedented coordination. How did the conventional dominance that the U.S. military demonstrated during the Gulf War shape its post–Cold War nuclear policy?

In analyzing the nuclear lessons of the Gulf War, this paper investigates how conventional warfare shapes states’ nuclear postures and strategies more generally. Nuclear-armed states frequently conduct conventional military operations. In emphasizing the categorical difference between nuclear and conventional weapons, however, existing scholarship largely overlooks the influence of conventional warfare on nuclear strategy. Because a nuclear war has never been fought, it is impossible for policymakers to directly assess the validity of their nuclear-strategic calculations; instead, they look to conventional uses of force for information. Consequently, this paper evaluates the proposition that lessons learned from conventional warfare shape the nuclear dimensions of grand strategy in two significant and underappreciated ways: first, by demonstrating the intentions and resolve of adversaries, and, second, by influencing policymakers’ assessments of crisis escalation dynamics as well as the relative utility of nuclear and conventional systems.

Studying the Gulf War illuminates important connections between conventional war and nuclear strategy. Primary and secondary sources suggest that George H. W. Bush’s administration learned important nuclear lessons from the Gulf War. The Gulf War demonstrated that Washington had overestimated the Iraqi threat—and, by extension, that of the Soviet Union and its client states—and underestimated the United States’ own military capabilities. This paper seeks to examine the nuclear implications of these strategic miscalculations. How did the Gulf War change the way U.S. policymakers thought about the role of nuclear weapons in a post–Cold War world, specifically: (1) the nature of nuclear threats in the 1990s and beyond, (2) the relative utility of nuclear versus conventional systems for deterrence and war fighting, and (3) escalation dynamics in likely post–Cold War contingencies?

Based on examination of primary and secondary sources, as well as interviews with participants, I find that the danger posed by undetected nuclear proliferation, and the United States’ insufficient tools to counter this proliferation, emerged as the most important nuclear lessons of the Gulf War. The Gulf War also convinced policymakers that precise conventional systems could increasingly substitute for nuclear systems, though changes in nuclear strategy reflect the end of the Cold War as well as the lessons of Desert Storm. Finally, I find weak support for the proposition that the Gulf War changed the United States’ approach to conflict escalation. Cumulatively, these findings substantiate my conclusion that conventional warfare can change the way states view nuclear weapons, including states’ nuclear posture and strategy.


NUCLEAR THREATS IN THE 1990S AND BEYOND

The most decisive lesson that the Bush administration took from the Gulf War was the danger posed by aggressive regional powers armed with nuclear weapons. The war highlighted the danger of such rogue nuclear states because, during Desert Storm and afterward, inspectors found that the Iraqi nuclear program was substantially more advanced than U.S. intelligence previously indicated. Although proliferation was a concern prior to the Gulf War, “disclosure of Iraq’s clandestine nuclear weapons program and its use of ballistic missiles during the Gulf War accelerated the expansion of nuclear doctrine.”

The U.S. intelligence community’s underestimate of the progress of Iraq’s nuclear weapons program came as a shock, highlighting the risks of undetected nuclear proliferation. The post-war Gulf War Air Power Survey stated these conclusions starkly:

> The Iraqi nuclear program was massive, for most practical purposes fiscally unconstrained, closer to fielding a nuclear weapon, and less vulnerable to destruction by precision bombing than Coalition air commanders and planners or U.S. intelligence specialists realized before Desert Storm. The target list on 16 January 1991 contained two nuclear targets, but after the war, inspectors operating under the United Nations Special Commission eventually uncovered more than twenty sites involved in the Iraqi nuclear weapons program; sixteen of the sites were described as “main facilities.”

The miscalculation was all the more alarming to policymakers because of the specific method Iraq used to create fissile material. The Iraqi facilities employed electromagnetic isotope separation to enrich uranium, a process that required vast quantities of electricity to power. Bush administration officials were confounded—and alarmed—that U.S. intelligence had not picked up on such intensive energy usage.

Moreover, after-action reports revealed that the U.S.-led bombing campaign had failed to substantially degrade the Iraqi nuclear program as well as Saddam Hussein’s arsenal of Scud missiles. Even the much-lauded precision systems, famously capable of penetrating individual building windows in Baghdad, made few inroads on key weapons of mass destruction (WMD) targets. To quote the Gulf War Air Power Survey’s findings:

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5. Kristensen and Handler add, “The war had just ended when Secretary Cheney issued the post–Gulf War top secret Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy (NUWEP) which formally tasked the military to plan for nuclear operations against nations capable of or developing weapons of mass destruction.” Hans M. Kristensen and Joshua Handler, Changing Targets: Nuclear Doctrine from the Cold War to the Third World (Amsterdam: Greenpeace International, 1995), 4.


7. Author interview with George H. W. Bush administration Department of Defense (DoD) official, April 2015.

The Iraqi nuclear program’s redundancy, advanced status on the eve of the war, and elusiveness, in conjunction with the extraordinary measures the Iraqis took immediately after Desert Storm to conceal its extent by destroying certain facilities, led the United Nations to conclude that the air campaign no more than “inconvenienced” Iraqi plans to field atomic weapons.9

Difficulties in destroying Iraqi Scuds and chemical weapons caches further undermined policymakers’ confidence that rogue states’ nuclear weapons programs could be degraded militarily—even with new, high-end systems.10

As a result of these revelations, counterproliferation rose to the top of the Bush administration’s strategic objectives. Nolan wrote, “In the aftershock of Operation Desert Storm, the redefinition of proliferation from a diplomatic priority to an urgent military priority became a central preoccupation of policymakers.”11 Nuclear proliferation was the most extreme concern because nuclear weapons would provide aggressor states with the capability to counter superior U.S. forces asymmetrically, threatening emergent U.S. hegemony as well as myriad regional interests.12

Such conclusions extended beyond the Bush White House to Democrats who later staffed the Clinton administration at the highest levels. For example, Representative Les Aspin—who was then the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee but would go on to serve as President Bill Clinton’s first secretary of defense—offered Saddam Hussein’s Iraq as the template for future “threat driver[s].”13 Indeed, other pariah states with potential WMD programs were measured against Iraq as a “threat yardstick” to determine the extent of their aggressiveness, as well as the military resources necessary to counter them.14 By the mid-1990s, “‘countering’ the acquisition and use of weapons of mass destruction by regional proliferators . . . [became] a central focus of [U.S.] nuclear strategy.”15

Lessons from Iraq also galvanized interest in bolstering the nonproliferation regime. Beginning in 1993, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) initiated an effort to supplement the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) with extra safeguards against secret nuclear programs.16 Although Iraq had been a party to the NPT, it exploited a loophole in the NPT that limited inspections and monitoring of declared facilities. The Additional Protocol, formalized in 1997, sought to identify

10. Ibid., 81, 83, 89.
and deter construction of secret nuclear sites ("undeclared facilities") by giving the IAEA inspectors broader inspection authority.17

RELATIVE UTILITY OF NUCLEAR AND CONVENTIONAL SYSTEMS

The United States’ conventional preponderance in the Gulf War convinced U.S. strategists that high-tech conventional weapons could increasingly substitute for nuclear weapons in underwriting the security of the United States and its allies. U.S. military performance in the Gulf War substantiated the administration’s view that, in the words of Secretary of State James Baker, "precision guidance enables the conventional weapons of today to destroy targets that in years past were assigned primarily to nuclear weapons."18 Moreover, the Gulf War experience suggested that conventional weapons could successfully deter adversaries armed with unconventional weapons, like Iraq’s chemical and biological arsenal.19 Indeed, shortly after the war, the Bush administration announced its willingness to forswear the U.S. chemical arsenal.20

The precise role played by nuclear threats in deterring Iraqi chemical weapons use during the Gulf War remains contested. Many contemporaneous sources laud the apparent success of nuclear threats in deterring Iraq from employing missile-launched chemical weapons, indicating that nuclear weapons remained useful against regional adversaries.21 After the war, some analysts highlighted the deterrent effect of President Bush’s eleventh-hour letter to Saddam, delivered to Tariq Aziz, Iraq’s foreign minister, by Secretary of State James Baker in Geneva, which affirmed Washington’s willingness to employ “all means available” in retaliation for Iraqi chemical weapons


Especially in the pinpoint accuracy of the most advanced systems, conventional weapons displayed a capacity for discrimination that no system dependent on nuclear explosions could ever hope to reach—not only because of the side effects of even low-yield nuclear weapons, but still more because of the enormous psychological shock of any nuclear attack.

20. Ibid., 280.
use. Yet others have questioned the role of U.S. nuclear threats in deterring Iraqi unconventional weapons. One former policymaker recalls that the administration’s expectation was that Saddam would use chemical weapons only if his regime survival depended on it; thus the president’s decision to leave Saddam in power was more determinative than his nuclear threats. Moreover, intelligence assessments publicized after the war indicate that Iraq may have been technically incapable of fielding Scud-delivered chemical warheads.

Ultimately, regardless of their actual deterrent value, “assessments of the coalition victory against Iraq helped legitimate the importance of nuclear threats in deterring Saddam Hussein from launching chemical and perhaps biological weapons against Western forces and allies.” In the context of policy debates at the time, these conclusions undermined advocates for a no-first-use policy.

Moreover, U.S. policymakers continued to see a role for nuclear weapons in the post–Cold War world—a role substantially informed by their perceived utility against future Iraq-like regional contingencies. According to Arkin, the Gulf War bolstered the credibility and utility of nuclear threats in the eyes of the Pentagon, contributing to a “post–Gulf war doctrine that assigns expanded roles to nuclear forces, specifically to deter the use of WMD, including chemical and biological weapons.” Indeed, nuclear weapons were perceived as useful against the proliferation threats highlighted by Iraq’s nuclear weapons program. The commander of Strategic Command (STRATCOM), General Lee Butler, advocated for a conception of nuclear deterrence that encompassed nuclear proliferation. Butler’s was not an isolated view; in 1992, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney issued a Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy, which “formalized procedures for nuclear operations against countries with the potential to develop weapons of mass destruction.” The strategy of maintaining nuclear capabilities as a hedge against future contingencies endured through the Clinton administration’s major nuclear policy statements, specifically the 1993 Bottom-Up Review, 1994 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), and Presidential Decision

23. Author interview with former George H. W. Bush policymaker, April 2015. This claim is possibly belied by a February 24 Situation Report from Central Command (CENTCOM), cited in Arkin, which stated: “We expect Iraq to initiate chemical operations within 24 hours” of the ground war’s commencement. Arkin, “Calculated Ambiguity,” 7.
25. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 64–65.
Directive 60 in 1997. Similarly, the George W. Bush administration’s 2002 NPR emphasized threats from “terrorists or rogue states armed with weapons of mass destruction” and the Obama administration’s 2010 NPR, which made “preventing nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism” its top objective.

To address the anticipated threats of the 1990s, in the wake of the Gulf War, U.S. nuclear posture and strategy adapted to and integrated with new conventional systems for maximal efficacy. The creation of STRATCOM cemented the convergence of nuclear and conventional missions. As the nuclear mission refocused away from the Soviet Union and toward regional threats, STRATCOM assumed responsibility for rapid and flexible targeting—a major change from the single integrated operational plan (SIOP) that had characterized nuclear targeting during the Cold War. According to Nolan:

> As General Lee Butler, commander of STRATCOM, saw it, the design of small nuclear options that could be retargeted quickly as the need arose would bring nuclear weapons into closer conformity with conventional forces and make their potential utility on the battlefield more credible. The restructuring of [Strategic Air Command, known as] SAC into STRATCOM transferred responsibility for planning regional nuclear options from the regional commanders to STRATCOM, allowing it to take over target planning for strategic and nonstrategic forces against states with weapons of mass destruction. Using adaptive planning and the reserve force, STRATCOM could implement a variety of attack options against regional threats in a matter of hours.

An approach emphasizing nuclear flexibility in response to regional contingencies persisted into the Clinton administration and beyond. The 2002 NPR, for example, introduced the concept of a “new triad,” one leg of which constituted “offensive strike systems (both nuclear and nonnuclear).”

The greater integration of nuclear and conventional war planning, combined with the fall of the Soviet Union, precipitated important changes to U.S. nuclear posture. While the end of the Cold

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32. Gabel, “The Role of U.S. Nuclear Weapons after September 11.” 185. Additionally, Arkin writes that during 1993 discussions about the Nuclear Posture Review, “there was a strong [belief] . . . underscored by the Gulf ‘experience,’ that the threat to use nuclear weapons could deter undesirable enemy actions, and that nothing should be done to undermine that deterrent effect.” Arkin, “Calculated Ambiguity,” 13.


War likely had the greatest role in inspiring Bush’s Presidential Nuclear Initiative, it seems plausible that the Gulf War shaped the administration’s confidence in the determination that tactical nuclear weapons were no longer necessary to defend South Korea, and the decision to cease “normal” deployment of tactical nuclear weapons on surface ships, attack submarines, and naval aircraft. Ultimately, nuclear weapons remained important to U.S. national defense, but their significance lessened with the end of the Cold War and the performance of advanced conventional systems in the Gulf War; as a result, defense procurement priorities swung decisively toward conventional systems.

ESCALATION DYNAMICS

While the greater substitutability of conventional and nuclear weapons had implications for conflict escalation dynamics, the precise effect is difficult to capture empirically. Because the United States spent most of the past 25 years fighting unconventional wars against non-state actors, the necessity of climbing the escalatory ladder remained blessedly remote. Nevertheless, primary and secondary sources suggest a few ways in which the Gulf War may have shaped U.S. strategists and planners’ thinking about wartime escalation dynamics.

First, the fact that the Gulf War never escalated beyond conventional forces signaled that nonuse norms would persist in the post–Cold War world. President Bush explicitly rejected nuclear use in December 1990, prior to commencement of the air campaign against Iraq. The timing of this decision is significant because the president expected a tough fight against Saddam’s million-man army, but nevertheless ruled out nuclear use. The military was apparently unaware of the president’s decision; while war plans that included nuclear weapons were proposed, they were not seriously considered.

Second, the demonstrated efficacy of conventional weapons may have pushed nuclear options farther up the escalatory ladder. For example, Bill Perry, who later became secretary of defense, wrote in 1992 that the conventional capabilities demonstrated in the Gulf raised the nuclear threshold for the first time since the 1950s; advanced-technology weapons might prove more effective deterrents, he argued, because unlike nuclear weapons these conventional systems were

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42. Ibid., 83–94.
The result was that “the United States would no longer need to extend its nuclear forces to deter nonnuclear attack” on allies—a conclusion that never became declaratory policy but nevertheless shows the important nuclear lessons drawn by influential elites from conventional warfare in the Gulf.

Yet, a third, contradictory lesson may also have emerged about the utility of nuclear weapons in certain contingencies. Advances in conventional technologies created the possibility of smaller-scale nuclear strikes, possibly making nuclear weapons more usable. To some extent, this change reflects diminished fears of mutually assured destruction given that most-likely contingencies entailed regional powers with little or no nuclear arsenals. Yet, coupled with advances in low-yield nuclear weapons technology, the precision revolution augured by the Gulf War may have lowered the threshold for nuclear use over the long term by diminishing the anticipated destruction of a nuclear detonation. Indeed, Kristensen and Handler contend that proliferation anxiety after the Gulf War inspired the U.S. military to pursue new, low-yield miniature and “exotic” nuclear options.45

**IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND SCHOLARSHIP**

The preceding discussions demonstrate that U.S. policymakers did learn nuclear lessons from conventional warfare in the Gulf War of 1990–1991. Specifically, policymakers took the following lessons:

- Nuclear proliferation by regional powers can be difficult to detect and poses a threat to vital U.S. national interests. Counterproliferation is thus a top national security priority.
- High-tech conventional systems, such as those demonstrated in the Gulf War, can increasingly substitute for nuclear systems, but a role remains for nuclear weapons in deterring and countering WMD use and proliferation.
- Given existing technology, new conventional systems raise the threshold for nuclear use, but precision-strike technology holds the potential for introducing low-yield nuclear weapons that might ultimately lower the threshold for nuclear use.

To conclude I ask whether, in light of the past 25 years of international politics, these lessons have proven correct.

**Nuclear Threats**

In the realm of nuclear threats, covert nuclear proliferation by regional powers remains a primary national security concern. Given the United States’ global interests, as well as its continued conventional military superiority, nuclear weapons are an attractive asymmetric tool for states

45. Kristensen and Handler quote George Miller, Lawrence Livermore associate director, drawing direct connections between the Gulf War’s “revelation” of Iraq nuclear capability as well as its demonstration of precision delivery, which together suggest the possibility of low-yield nuclear weapons directed at counterproliferation targets. Kristensen and Handler, Changing Targets, 13–14.
threatened by U.S. power. Yet the nuclear-alarmist predictions of the 1990s have not been realized, and nuclear proliferation has posed less of a threat to American interests than many imagined.46

Indeed, alarmism led to some significant foreign policy blunders. In contemplating the 2003 invasion of Iraq, George W. Bush administration policymakers—many of whom had also served during the first Gulf War—extrapolated from previous experience and assumed that the Iraqi nuclear program was farther along than intelligence indicated. Yet the 2003 Iraq War demonstrated that Saddam Hussein had an incentive to strategically misrepresent the progress of the Iraqi nuclear program because of domestic-political imperatives as well as regional power dynamics—even though this misrepresentation ultimately provoked war with the United States.47

More broadly, the nonproliferation regime seems to have advanced U.S. interests in countering the spread of WMD more effectively than U.S. nuclear saber rattling. At the same time as the military was developing new operational concepts for countering WMD, U.S. diplomats led Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) signatory states in extending the NPT indefinitely at the 1995 review conference. In addition to its normative value in affirming the nuclear taboo—a taboo that would be undermined by American use of nuclear weapons to counter nuclear proliferation—the NPT provides a framework for deterring prospective proliferators through cost-imposing strategies.48 Recent academic research finds that sanctions, like those imposed on states in violation of their NPT obligations, are remarkably effective in deterring nuclear proliferation.49

Relative Utility of Nuclear and Conventional Systems

In spotlighting the threat of nuclear proliferation, the Gulf War provided support to those who argued that nuclear weapons would remain a necessary component of the U.S. defense posture in the post–Cold War world. At the same time, the war’s demonstration of advanced conventional capabilities augured a new era of warfare in which the nuclear threshold could be substantially higher.

The command performance of new military technologies in the Gulf War prompted widespread triumphalism, only somewhat tempered by postwar revelations that the air war had not been as effective as originally thought. Strategy documents written after the Gulf War highlight U.S. technological superiority as an advantage that the United States must maintain. Some argue, however, that the United States did not go far enough in pursuing advantages offered by the military-technical revolution enabled by the information age. Analysts associated with the Defense Department’s Office of Net Assessment argue that “most observers had lost interest in the revolution in

military affairs by 2002 or 2003,” most likely because the counterinsurgency wars in Afghanistan and Iraq demanded different materiel. As a result, the promise of the precision-strike regime did not fully “mature.”

Initially, the shock and awe of the Gulf War seems to have convinced potential competitors that the United States’ technological advantage was unbridgeable. The Russian military was reportedly quite impressed with U.S. capabilities, and the Gulf War made a similarly strong impression on the Chinese. Yet, rather than deterring competition, this realization elevated the importance of nuclear weapons for conventionally weak states. After the Gulf War, India’s chief of army staff famously summarized the lesson of the war for the rest of the world: “Don’t fight the Americans without nuclear weapons.” Indeed, in 2008 an analyst observed “a commonly expressed U.S. view inside and outside the Bush administration that overwhelming U.S. conventional capabilities have provided a stronger driver for nuclear proliferation than nuclear weapons.” The example of U.S.-sponsored regime change in Iraq in 2003 made this imperative all the more acute for states deemed “rogue” by the U.S. government. For those states that cannot afford a conventional hedge against U.S. military power, nuclear weapons appear the best asymmetric options; states that can afford to compete conventionally, like China, have pursued precision-strike capabilities alongside nuclear modernization.

In addressing the increased salience of nuclear weapons, the United States has performed fairly well. As mentioned above, nonproliferation has succeeded to a greater extent than many thought possible in the early 1990s. Yet the U.S. national security establishment has only begun to grapple with the prospect of reentering a world in which wartime nuclear detonations are plausible. Despite the greater salience of nuclear weapons, the United States was correct in pursuing the revolution in military affairs to the extent that it did; these capabilities, together with nonproliferation efforts, meaningfully advanced U.S. goals in stopping the spread of nuclear weapons to new states.

Over the past five to ten years, however, the renewed specter of great-power rivalry has introduced a troubling category of challenges. Alongside diplomatic strategies, competing with prospective challengers like Russia and China requires that the United States continue to maintain its conventional edge, perhaps by pursuing the precision-strike regime to full maturity. Additionally, the need to enhance deterrence may militate in favor of the continuation of nuclear modernization policies pursued by the Obama administration, such as delivery systems like the long-range...
standoff (LRSO) nuclear-armed cruise missile, and refurbished weapons like the recently tested B61-12, which reportedly provides greater accuracy and variable yield.\(^{54}\)

**Escalation Dynamics**

Over the past 25 years, strategic thought about nuclear escalation has more closely reflected the lessons of normative constraint and elevated nuclear thresholds. Overall, the United States has seen its interests aligned with advancing the nuclear taboo—though Washington’s commitment to the taboo has never been tested in a major crisis—and the NPT. For reasons described above, this lesson seems to have been a valid one. For normative as well as strategic reasons, the nuclear threshold remains very high. U.S. military planners do not seem to have identified missions with solely nuclear paths to success. Increasingly, conventional options can fulfill nuclear missions, a prospect illustrated by ongoing debates over conventional prompt global strike.

While these same advances in precision strike might have been leveraged for nuclear systems, the low-yield options that some anticipated in the wake of the Gulf War have been slow to materialize. Between 1994 and 2004, Congress banned research and development on nuclear weapons of fewer than five kilotons in the Spratt-Furse precision low-yield weapon design (PLYWD) provision to the fiscal year (FY) 1994 National Defense Authorization Act. Though Congress repealed this provision in 2004, advocates of expanding low-yield options contend that the U.S. military remains ill-equipped in that domain.\(^{55}\) Despite its 2010 NPR commitment not to build new nuclear weapons, the Obama administration has worked to enhance the flexibility of existing nuclear weapons. As mentioned above, modifications included in the B61-12 Life Extension Program seem to finally fulfill the post–Gulf War prediction that precision guidance would ultimately be married with lower-yield bombs. The B61-12 has an internal guidance system for targeting, as well as four yields—0.3, 5, 10, and 50 kilotons—according to media reports.\(^{56}\) While the nuclear threshold ought to remain very high, changes in the geopolitical environment substantiate the deterrent value of maintaining a range of nuclear options for the president.

As Thomas Schelling elucidated, nuclear politics are strategic: they necessarily entail dynamic interactions between two or more players.\(^{57}\) Assessing the nuclear lessons that the United States learned from the Gulf War is thus incomplete without a parallel assessment of the lessons learned by current and prospective competitors. American strategists were correct when they recognized that the United States emerged from the Cold War as the world’s sole superpower, militarily

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unrivaled and diplomatically dominant. But far from implying a holiday from history, this exceptional position requires great effort and shrewd strategy to maintain. With the reemergence of great power politics in Asia and Europe, it is time for policymakers to revisit the lessons of the Gulf War and to assess whether prevailing assumptions about nuclear policy remain appropriate to the present international security environment.