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Clothes for Winter?

The U.S. Government's Post-Cold War Views of Nuclear Relations with Russia

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Abstract

This thesis examines the U.S. government's perceptions of its primary and peer-level nuclear competitor, Russia, in the post-cold war era. Drawing on prior research on Russian signaling, and on (nuclear) deterrence in action – the thesis employs deterrence theory and ontological security to examine how U.S. administrations' views have evolved from Clinton to Biden. The thesis concludes that publicly communicated views on Russian nuclear capabilities change from initial optimism to, after Russia's attack on Ukraine 2014, suspicion and even to some extent hostility. Ontological security, combined with deterrence theory, explains how complex narratives are found to be central to understanding how the U.S. government views Russian nuclear postures and capabilities – and while traditional deterrence theory provides a useful foundation for interpreting these evolving views – ontological security allows a more comprehensive understanding of underlying rationality and perceptions.

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Abbreviations and Glossary

ABM: Anti-Ballistic Missile.

Hold at risk: That which you can credibly threaten to destroy with your weapons. For instance, an ICBM may be aimed at a naval base, thus holding it at risk.

ICBM: Intercontinental Ballistic Missile.

MAD: Mutually Assured Destruction.

NC3: Nuclear Command, Control, and Communications.

New START: Reduction of Strategic Offensive Arms. U.S./Russian nuclear weapons treaty (2011–2023).

NPR: Nuclear Posture Review.

NDS: National Defense Strategy, replaced the QDR in 2018.

NSS: National Security Strategy.

QDR: Quadrennial Defense Review.

SLBM: Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile.

SLCM: Submarine Launched Cruise Missile.

SORT: Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, U.S./Russia arms reduction treaty (2002–2011).

START: Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. U.S./Russian arms reduction treaty (1994–2009).

START II: Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms. U.S./Russian arms reduction treaty (never took effect).

1. Introduction

What do you value most? Who do you hold most dear? If these were threatened with assured death and destruction – would you give in to any demand to keep them safe? Would you feel more confident if you could threaten your foe with the same? If your adversary decided to strike, would you respond in kind – even knowing it will do nothing to soften the blow against yourself?

You are unlikely to have well prepared answers to these kinds of questions. There is little reason you should. A nuclear war planner or U.S. president, however, must. Should your enemy choose to launch, most of what you know will be gone within half an hour. You have about half that time to decide how – or if – to retaliate.

1.1 Research Question and Purpose Statement

This thesis examines the U.S. governments perceptions of its nuclear peer Russia in the post-Cold War era. Note that, for this thesis, the term 'post-Cold War era' refers strictly to the examined period of 1994–2022. The thesis achieves this by examining publicly available official U.S. government documents.

By complementing established deterrence theory with a novel application of ontological security, this thesis will provide a new angle to the body of academic works in the field of nuclear deterrence and dynamics, and their role after the Cold War.

The overarching research question is:

How has the U.S. government's public stance on Russia as a nuclear peer evolved since the end of the Cold War?

This question will be answered through three partial ones:

1. How does the U.S. government describe Russia in terms of competition and cooperation?
2. How does the U.S. government describe Russian thinking and capabilities?
3. What values and interests does the U.S. government consider to be at risk?

The primary source material consists of Nuclear Posture Reviews (NPR), National Security Strategy documents (NSS), Quadrennial Defense Reviews. (QDR), and public statements reflecting official policy of the U.S. government.

1.2 Scope and Delimitations

The thesis begins with the Clinton administration's 1994 NPR and ends with the Biden administration's 2022 NPR. The 1994 NPR is the first of its kind, written to re-evaluate U.S. strategic forces after the Cold War's end. This makes it a natural starting point. Likewise, the Biden administration's 2022 strategy documents are the latest available and therefore mark a necessary end point for the thesis. This span of almost three decades, and the selected source material, should sufficiently represent the U.S. governments publicly communicated stance on Russia. It starts with the very first comprehensive, public review of U.S. nuclear forces and ends with the latest one available.

The U.S. of course has many concerns, but Russia is its only nuclear peer and, in that sense, chief strategic threat. While China, Iran, and North Korea have all been pressing matters throughout the examined period, Russia remains the defining peer competitor. By limiting the thesis in this way, conceptions of Russia can be examined at greater depth, improving the validity of the thesis' conclusions. There's also a sense of theoretical continuity in examining Russia. Deterrence theory was largely conceived in the early days of the Cold War as a tool for understanding peer-level nuclear deterrence relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. A focus on U.S. government perceptions of Russia, which remains a nuclear peer to the U.S., therefore, lets deterrence theory be used in its original environment.

1.3 Background

Mutually Assured Destruction, MAD, was a defining term of the Cold War. In a nuclear context it's easy to understand what it means. The well-chosen abbreviation perfectly addresses the insanity of it all. For this thesis, however, it bears closer examination. At just what point is destruction *assured*? How much of what your enemy values must be attacked to achieve this? And for that matter, how do you assure that destruction will be mutual? How do you make sure that you can destroy your enemy even after a first strike has already destroyed you?

U.S. defense secretary Robert McNamara (1961–1968) put it in simple, mathematic terms. Assured destruction was achieved when U.S. nuclear forces, after having survived a first strike, could execute a retaliatory strike against the Soviet Union which would destroy "over one-third of her population and one-half of her industry".[1] One third of the Soviet Union's population,

[1] McNamara, Robert, *Mutual Deterrence*, San Francisco, USA, September 1967.

by 1970, would be almost 80 million people.[2] There have been other, lesser, criteria for assured destruction in U.S. thinking. One such considers that destroying between one and ten major cities would be enough to inflict unacceptable damage. Or estimating that some amount of delivered warheads, 200 is a suggested figure, onto the Soviet homeland would be enough to render it a defunct state. Soviet Cold War thinking seems similar, with a leading school of thought being that they can achieve assured destruction when they can destroy 45–55 percent of an adversary's industry and kill 25–30 percent of its population. The Soviets add that these strikes must also eliminate 100–130 "administrative-political and military targets". The Soviets also considered lesser options, estimating that 150 megatons delivered on the enemy homeland would constitute unacceptable damage.[3]

But the Cold War stayed cold until its eventual end. No nuclear exchange ever occurred. The Berlin wall came down, the Soviet Union collapsed, and its Russian successor state is nowhere near the same kind of threat.

During the Cold War nuclear deterrence was in a sense taken for granted – peace was kept through a balance of terror. Deterrence prevailed. Neither side could move against the other without themselves being destroyed. As the Soviet Union became Russia and great power tensions dissipated questions were being raised. What do we do with nuclear weapons now? Do we need them? If so, how many of them? Was nuclear deterrence ever all that it was said to be?[4] Nuclear deterrence has also been pointed out as ineffective against modern threats from global terrorism. They have no economic centers or critical infrastructure to hold at risk.[5]

There are gaps to be filled in our understanding of deterrence relations and the role of nuclear weapons in modern times. By complementing deterrence theory with a novel theoretical approach with ontological security, this thesis does just that.

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[2] Dewdney, J., C, *Population Changes in the Soviet Union*, Geography, United Kingdom, November 1971, Vol. 56, No. 4, p 328.

[3] Geist, Edward, *Qualities Precede Quantities: Deciding How Much is Enough for U.S. Nuclear Forces,* RAND, USA, September 2023, p 17–19. 1 megaton is equal to 1,000 kilotons. 1 kiloton, in turn, is equivalent to the explosive yield of 1,000 tons of TNT. The Fat Man bomb dropped on Nagasaki had a yield of 21 kilotons, 2.1 percent of a megaton.

[4] Wilson, Ward, 'The Myth of Nuclear Deterrence', *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol 15, No. 3, Routledge, November 2008, p 421–423.

[5] Freedman, Lawrence & Michaels, Jeffrey, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy: New, Updated and Completely Revised*, 4th ed, United Kingdom, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p 606–609.

1.4 Some Nuclear Weapons Essentials

While this thesis is not a technical exploration of nuclear weaponry, some basic knowledge will be necessary for the reader to grasp their significance.

Put simply, a modern thermonuclear device has two components: a primary stage implosion type fission bomb and a fusion fuel secondary. First the primary is detonated, generating very high temperatures and high energy radiation. This compresses the secondary stage, causing nuclear fusion and unleashing extreme amounts of energy. At first there's a fireball, for fractions of a fraction of a second temperatures within it will drastically exceed those at the center of the sun. Anything caught in this is reduced to a plasma. Extreme heat radiates outwards – sufficient to vaporize a person, third degree burns can occur many kilometers away from ground zero. Anyone looking at the explosion, even from many kilometers away, may go blind. Then comes the blast, which can collapse most buildings in a radius of several kilometers.[6]

A nuclear weapons effect will vary greatly depending on yield and burst type, the sequence described above is a general representation. An airburst, that is a detonation at some altitude above the target, maximizes shockwave coverage. This is ideal for soft targets such as cities or industry. If the airburst occurs high enough so that the fireball does not touch the ground, very little, if any, radioactive fallout is created. A ground burst is a detonation at ground level. This creates immense local overpressures and seismic activities, needed to destroy a hardened target such as a heavily reinforced nuclear missile silo. Ground bursts generate very high amounts of fallout.[7]

There are two broad target categories, *counter force* targets and *counter value* targets. Counter force targets are enemy strategic military capabilities, bases, nuclear forces, command, control, and communications, so on. Destroying these render the foe unable to wage war. Counter value targets are economic targets, for instance industry, infrastructure, political and administrative centers. Eliminating these makes the enemy unable to regenerate and recover its warfighting capabilities. These categories are not entirely separate, and certain targets can be both. Consider

[6] Baker, David, *Nuclear Weapons Operations Manual: 1945 onwards (strategic and tactical delivery systems)*, J.H. Haynes and Co, Somerset, UK, 2017., p 56–57; See also lecture by Prof. Bunn, Mathew, Nuclear 101: How Nuclear Bombs Work Part 1/2, Belfer Center, September 2013. https://youtu.be/zVhQOhxb1Mc?si=KGw1hYK61kwCzJFv

[7] U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Matters Handbook 2020 [Revised],* USA, 2020, p 13–14, 104–105.

a civilian airport for instance. If it can service airliners, it can likely service strategic bombers too.[8]

A strict counter force strike, solely striking military targets, would still be devastating. In 2001 the National Resources Defense Council re-created the current U.S. nuclear war plan and simulated the results of a U.S. counter force, and counter value, attack on Russia. Considering deaths from blast, heat, radiation, and fallout, they estimate between 8 to 12 million dead from a strict counter force strike. In their counter value simulation, using the warheads of just one of the U.S.'s fourteen nuclear submarines, fatalities approached 60 million.[9]

A central term is *holding at risk*. This addresses the mutual hostage-taking in nuclear competition. Both parties aim their weapons at what they believe their enemy values, and that they believe they need to be able to destroy to achieve their objectives.[10]

1.5 Prior Research

For the scope and purpose of this thesis, fields of research concerning nuclear deterrence after the Cold War, as well as Russian views of deterrence, are of relevance.

1.5.1 Nuclear Deterrence

Nuclear weapons and their deterrent value have, as mentioned, been considered to have a major role in shaping the Cold War and great power relations. The efficacy of deterrence, nuclear or not, is however very hard to evaluate. Deterrence is considered successful if nothing happens, and of course if nothing happens there's always room for argument *why* that truly is. Maybe war was averted because of nuclear weapons, maybe despite them.[11]

Professor Jan Ludvik published a book with a set of case-studies in 2017, examining instances of deterrence dynamics at play during the Cold War. He studies the U.S. and China (1959–1966), the Soviet Union and China (1969), Israel and Iraq (1977–1981), the U.S. and North Korea (1994), and the Cuban missile crisis (1962).[12] His overarching conclusions, which he says are tentative, are that nuclear weapons have a lesser role than one might think. In part because states with nuclear weapons seem very reluctant to use them – for fear of consequences and political cost. Ludvik stresses that the taboo of nuclear use cannot be relied upon too much,

[8] Walton, Dale C, (2016) 'Weapons of Mass Destruction: Nuclear Weapons' in *Understanding Modern Warfare 2nd Ed*, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, p 418.
[9] McKinzie, Matthew G., Cochran, Thomas B., Norris, Robert S., Arkin, William M., *The U.S. Nuclear War Plan: A Time for Change,* National Resources Defense Council, USA, June 2001, p 112, 126.
[10] Freedman & Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, p 560.
[11] Freedman, Lawrence, *Deterrence*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, 2004*, p 43–45.*
[12] Ludvik, Jan, *Nuclear Asymmetry and Deterrence*, Routledge, London & New York, UK & USA, 2017.

however. When Israel destroyed Iraq's nuclear production facilities in 1981, and the U.S. planned to destroy North Korea's in 1994 – Israel and the U.S. had adequate conventional forces to achieve these objectives. It's an open question how they might have acted and planned had their conventional capabilities been insufficient.[13]

Ludvik in particular challenges underlying deterrence theory assumptions of rational actors. For someone to be deterrable it is assumed they must be rational, they must have things they value which can be held at risk. He points to a paradoxical state of being. For deterrence to hold both the deterred and the deterrer must rationally wish to avoid confrontation. However, both parties must also believe that the other side will retaliate if attacked. Retaliation is not itself rational, there's little to gain in destroying someone else as your final act before being destroyed yourself. Yet the one you wish to deter must believe you have the irrational resolve to retaliate in kind. Ludvik points to how during the Cuban missile crisis, advocates for striking Soviet missiles in Cuba argued that the Soviet Union, as a rational actor, would know better than to let matters escalate to general war.[14]

Georgetown professor Keith B. Payne wrote a similar re-evaluation of Cold War deterrence in June 2001, also challenging the presumed rationality of nuclear deterrence. He argues that U.S. assumptions of what is rational, and assumptions that other actors share these assumptions, are unfounded.[15] He states that the U.S. cannot define what is or is not rational for other states to do. Other states might make choices that from their point of view are perfectly logically consistent and rational given their policy objectives. Given these objectives, war might be a rational alternative.[16]

Payne writes specifically about potential deterrence dynamics between the U.S. and China in case of conflict over Taiwan but makes some general points and recommendations of interest for this thesis.

After the Cold War, he points to regional deterrence scenarios, such as China and Taiwan, and questions if U.S. deterrence can succeed. Chinas resolve over Taiwan is likely far greater than the U.S.'s, will U.S. nuclear weapons be able to deter China from regional actions, with conventional and/or nuclear weapons?[17] With the Soviet Union gone, Payne calls for

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[13] Ludvik, *Nuclear Asymmetry and Deterrence*,, p 167–169.
[14] Ibid, p 169–170.
[15] Payne, Keith B., *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction*, University Press of Kentucky, Kentucky, USA, 2001, p 17–18, 169–170.
[16] Ibid, p 8–9.
[17] Ibid, p 185–186.

empirically grounded examination of receivers of U.S. deterrence. These should not just be viewed from a simple rational actor perspective but be holistically examined. What is their domestic political situation? How do they perceive their national honor? What values do they hold most dear and how tolerant to costs and risk might they be? Traditional deterrence theory and thinking, he argues, fails to account for many of these things and in so doing leave decision makers with simplified and skewed perceptions.[18]

1.5.2 Russian Views on Deterrence

To understand how the U.S. government might think on the issue of nuclear competition with Russia, it's first necessary to understand Russian signaling and deterrence in the post–Cold War era. In its 2022 report *Understanding Russian Coercive Signaling* the RAND Corporation gives valuable insight.[19]

This report analyzes events between 2010 and 2018 and attempts to interpret Russian actions and understand their objectives – though the authors note that Russia rarely explains itself and that there's no direct analogue to the western term *signaling* in Russia's strategic vernacular. There are however two similar concepts of 1) taking actions to cause an opponent to show restraint and, 2) taking action to demonstrate capabilities.[20] The report concludes that Russia takes a wide range of actions in accordance with the Russian concept of *sderzhivanie*, actions "causing the adversary to act with restraint". The main adversary being the U.S.[21] The report hypothesizes several motives for Russia's actions, and the authors find strong support that Russia wishes to 1) influence adversary military actions and activates (such as ongoing exercises), 2) influence its adversary's patterns of behavior, for instance to discourage future drills or further positioning of troops and materiel near Russia, 3) deter adversaries from taking aggressive actions. The authors also find moderate support for hypothesis that Russia wishes to compel negotiations on favorable terms, and that Russian actions are meant to make adversaries acknowledge Russia's status as a prominent power. Moderate support is also found that some actions which may be perceived as coercive, are instead the result of unprofessional or unauthorized behavior, for instance a Russian pilot might unintentionally fly closer to another nations airspace than ordered.[22]

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[18] Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*, p 188–190.
[19] Charap, Samuel et al., *Understanding Russian Coercive Signaling*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, USA, 2022. While the report was published after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the report's research cut-off date was in May 2021.
[20] Ibid p v-viii.
[21] Ibid p 105.
[22] Ibid, p 106.

The RAND report describes Russia's actions as largely being "symmetrical responses", where they operate geographically close to U.S. and its allies, in ways meant to dissuade similar acts in the future. When U.S. airpower operates in Europe, Russian activities increase to match. In the Black Sea, for instance, Russian naval activities increase by seven times whenever the U.S. Navy has a presence in the area. When NATO hold drills in nations bordering Russia, the authors note that exercises in western Russia increase threefold.[23] The report finally concludes that Russian signaling should be understood as intended to shape desired behaviors from the U.S. and its allied nations. They find that Russia's actions are mostly in response to what it considers western encroachment on its borders and interests. Russian deterrence, such as nuclear deterrence patrols and its long-range aviation activities, are intentionally kept predictable to not needlessly stoke tensions. Russia will however act belligerently and unpredictably in response to U.S. and NATO drills or activities in its surrounding area.[24]

Russian strategic signaling is further explored in Dima Adamsky's 2023 book *The Russian Way of Deterrence*.[25] Adamsky largely agrees with the RAND-report's conclusions. He talks of *deterrence á la Russe* and says that Russia has a more holistic view of deterrence and coercion than western nations.

Russian thinking on deterrence is younger than in the west, intellectual development on the topic kicking into high gear after the Soviet Union collapsed. It encompasses nuclear, non-nuclear, and non-military components – such as cyberoperations and (dis)information campaigns. Adamsky points out that while western deterrence is framed as deterrence through denial (our forces prevent you from being able to do x) and punishment (if you do x you will be punished), Russian deterrence is framed in terms of force and non-force measures.[26] Adamsky also, however, says that Russian theory runs ahead of its capabilities. Conceptually Russians are at least on par with the U.S. and its allies, if not ahead. Russian thinking calls for a "cross domain" deterrence force. Where nuclear, non-nuclear, and information operations are all employed in an intricate way to affect different adversaries. Practically Russia's forces are ageing, and its strategic arsenal is no exception, so it's doubtful to what extent Russia is *capable* of operating in these highly complex ways.[27]

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[23] Charap, Samuel, et al., *Understanding Russian Coercive Signaling*, p 107.
[24] Ibid, p 108–110.
[25] Adamsky, Dima, *The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, UK, 2023.
[26] Ibid, p 125–127, 134–135.
[27] Ibid, p 128–130.

As mentioned above the RAND report considers Russia to often act without explanation. Adamsky paints different picture, where Russian coercive and deterrent actions should be understood as very much intentional and well considered. Belligerent flying or snap exercises is a form of language, communicating dissatisfaction. It puts in the minds of adversary decisionmakers that Russia can, and will, respond to activities that it feels infringe on its interests or borders. Whether its flying aggressive bomber patrols, army drills, or propaganda, these actions should all be understood as Russian attempts to shape the strategic environment and as deliberate choices to create better conditions for Russian security.[28] Perceptions are reality in this sense. So even if, for instance, Russia only has a very limited arsenal of cutting-edge weaponry, the way that these weapons are put on display for adversaries may still achieve a significant deterrent effect. However, Adamsky points to how Russian strategists often seem to take for granted that their intent will be understood correctly. While they often feel certain of *what* they want to communicate, and *how* they want to do it, they rarely consider the lens through which the receiver will interpret things.[29]

Russian coercion, from Russia's point of view, hit its stride in the mid 2000's and culminated with the Crimean annexation 2014. Russia achieved several objectives and considered it a success that they re-established themselves as a credible competitor in U.S., and wester-at-large, thinking. Since then, and particularly since 2022, Russian coercion has been far less effective and has if anything had an opposite-than-desired effect.[30]

1.6 Theory

As briefly mentioned in the purpose statement, this thesis uses two theoretical schools of thought: deterrence theory and ontological security. In this section the two theories will be introduced and their application for this thesis explained.

1.6.1 Deterrence Theory

The basics of deterrence are simple to understand – it is actions taken to discourage and frighten off unwanted actions from another.[31] In practice it's hard to get right, one must convince the receiver that one has both the capability and intent to follow through. The deterrence must also be signaled in such a way that it's understood without giving rise to misunderstandings. Say for instance that the country you wish to deter never had any hostile intentions, then the deterrence

[28] Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence*, p 130–133.
[29] Ibid, p 134–135.
[30] Ibid, p 134–136.
[31] Freedman, *Deterrence*, p 7–9.

you consider defensive might by them be seen as aggression, encouraging the very response you wished to deter.[32]

Lawrence Freedman considers deterrence as a coercive strategy. Ideally, this deterrence works with consent – where the agent you wish to deter ultimately agrees not to do certain things. Conversely there is compellent coercion, where you try to force an agent to take some action you wish them to take. Freedman highlights strategic deterrence and internalized deterrence. Strategic deterrence is achieved from overt threats, meant to show either that an act cannot succeed (deterrence by denial) or that the act will lead to unacceptable cost and losses (deterrence by punishment).[33] Internalized deterrence is different, and hard to measure. It doesn't necessarily require a clear strategy or course of action from the deterrer. It happens when the deterred makes assumptions of what might happen if they act in certain ways. Freedman describes it as a situation where country A, unknowingly, influences country B in certain ways. In this scenario B has constructed ideas of A's capabilities, intents, red lines, and then acts according to these beliefs. Elements of this way of thinking can be seen in all deterrence, where ultimately the recipient must decide how fearsome and credible they find the sender. Strategic and internal deterrence can work in conjunction – Freedman compares it to parents telling their children to be home before bedtime or be grounded. Eventually, the parents might not have to explicitly threaten this measure anymore, as the children have learnt the lesson.[34]

Freedman further posits four ways in which threats are constructed. These will be used later when analyzing the source material. One is denial and punishment, which has already been discussed. The remaining three are:

Narrow and broad deterrence: This describes how ambitious your deterrence objectives are. With narrow deterrence here, Freedman means deterring specific military actions or operations in an ongoing war. For instance, A doesn't use its chemical weapons, so long as B doesn't use its. Broad deterrence aims at preventing war altogether – for instance intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM's) or submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBM's) threatening nuclear retaliation.[35]

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[32] Sörenson, Karl, *Kort om avskräckning*, Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), Stockholm, Sweden, 2023, p 1–3.
[33] Freedman, *Deterrence,* p 26–28.
[34] Ibid, p 29–32.
[35] Ibid, 33–34.

Second is *extended and central deterrence*. Central deterrence is how you deter aggression against your core values, your homeland, population, economy, so on. This is widely considered to be a credible type of deterrence – the U.S. would probably respond in kind to a nuclear attack on its homeland. Extended deterrence is a cornerstone for NATO and U.S. allies. The U.S. pledges to retaliate, with nuclear weapons if needed, in defense of its allied nations. The credibility of extended deterrence has always been a topic of debate. Is the U.S. ready to use nuclear weapons, and face the consequences that might follow, in defense of others? Whether or not an allied nation truly is a critical enough interest to warrant nuclear weapons employment is still debated today.[36]

Finally, *immediate and general deterrence*. Immediate deterrence deals with actions taken during crisis. Changes in force posture, displays of power, elevating readiness are steps a state can take to show its intent to prevail. General deterrence is a state of affairs that can last years or decades, where A and B keep each other in check. They threaten each other, they posture against one another, but without either one being immediately concerned about an impending attack. Indeed, neither side might seriously consider attacking the other. The Cold War can mostly be seen as a state of general deterrence between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, with moments of immediate deterrence arising intermittently.[37]

Thomas Schelling, another key figure in U.S. deterrence thinking, postulated a *threat which leaves something to chance*. This will be the final deterrence factor used in this thesis. Uncertainty and risk are made key to deterring an opponent. Schelling, in 1959, noted that war may break out over a mistake, a mechanical failure, or miscalculation. This, he argued, did not strictly have to be a bad thing. This inherent risk that a stressed or even insane officer or malfunctioning equipment, might instigate a nuclear exchange, could serve to temper actions.[38] This high-stakes game would present the adversary with a constantly escalating risk in case of aggression. In case of a limited war in Europe, for instance, NATO conventional forces would not have been sufficient to hold back the Soviet advance. As hostilities go on, as NATO keeps being battered, the probability of unintentional nuclear escalation mounts. The Soviets would be aware that this might happen regardless of what the U.S. or other NATO allies want. Even if U.S. resolve falters, escalation to general nuclear war could still occur.[39]

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[36] Freedman, *Deterrence*, p 35–36.
[37] Ibid, p 40–42.
[38] Schelling, Thomas, *The Threat that Leaves Something to Chance*, RAND Corporation, 1959, p 3–4.
[39] Ibid, p 7–9.

On this topic, the *stability–instability paradox* must be mentioned. Let's say A and B are nuclear powers in competition, they neither trust nor like each other. They have nuclear arsenals to deter the other from aggression. This drastically decreases the likelihood of war between them. But, at the same time, it sets a conflict ceiling of sorts. After all, neither state finds nuclear war palatable, so they'll both do the outmost to avoid it. This state of being establishes that anything short of nuclear-level war, is fair game of sorts. Proxy wars, covert actions, maybe even border skirmishes probably fall well below the nuclear threshold. For nuclear deterrence to be credible, therefore, there has to be an element of instability and *chance* to it. If both A and B credibly pledge to never use nuclear weapons unless the other side does so first, those same nuclear weapons do nothing to prevent conventional war. So nuclear stability increases but conventional stability decreases. If A and B make credible threats that they will use nuclear weapons against conventional attack, conventional stability would increase, but nuclear stability decrease. If either state is too specific with when it might employ nuclear weapons, they implicitly say that anything other than that won't lead to nuclear retaliation – harkening back to the value of chance.[40]

1.6.2 Ontological Security

Deterrence theory, as has been discussed, has shortcomings. It makes simplified rational actor assumptions and has come under academic scrutiny for being out of date in the modern era. Through ontological security these issues can be addressed. Using this theoretical framework underlying narratives and rationalities can be exposed and studied. How nuclear weapons are thought of and what role they play, beyond the obvious threat they pose, can be accessed by exploring national narratives. Payne asked how nuclear weapons might matter for perceptions of national honor and ontological security provides inroads for just that.

With ontological security, rationality also doesn't have to be taken for granted in the same way that it does in deterrence theory. Abstract factors that matter for a nation's rationality, such as a state's view of itself, its role in the world, and the nature of its adversaries and how these fit within views of self, are important too. Deterrence theory makes a traditional assumption concerning states is that they value physical survival above all else and that a certain rationality can be taken for granted. Ontological security doesn't strictly deny the importance of survival, but focuses instead on ideas of self, identity, and continuity. From a perspective of ontological

[40] Kapur, S. Paul, 'Stability-Instability Paradox', in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Political Behavior*, SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, USA, 2017, p 1–5. (See: https://nps.edu/documents/105858948/106279825/Kapur_Sage+Encyclopedia_Stability-Instability_OCt17/c7952c37-2f5d-4462-9630-5bff04f6cd8f)

security then, a state doesn't consider itself *safe* just because it has sufficient capabilities to ensure its survival. But rather when it feels it has stability and continuity in its perceptions of self. An important part of this is recognition from other states.[41] In ontological security, narratives and constructions of identities become central – how does A describe B? How does A describe their relationship? How does A describe itself?[42]

To be physically secure is to survive, to be sovereign and unmolested. A state must survive, continue to be, to do anything else after all. Assuming that this basic requirement is met, agents, including states, have many other things to worry about. Brent J. Steel writes of the importance of self and identity. States wish to avoid shame and disgrace in the eyes of other states. States have a sense of self through international recognition, though public opinion and media, through history.[43]

Steel suggests four components of state-level ontological security; 1) reflexive and material capabilities, 2) crisis assessment, 3) biographical narrative, 4) discursive framing by co-actors.[44] These four factors will make up the thesis' framework for ontological security analysis.

Reflexive and material capabilities pose an interesting dilemma, especially for great powers. A great power, such as the U.S., has considerable potential to affect the world. They can intervene globally. Ostensibly this would give a great power tremendous freedom of action, but this doesn't have to be the case. Precisely because they can act, they are expected to act. Inaction becomes an act in and of itself. When there's a humanitarian crisis, few would question why Croatia isn't helping – they don't have the means to do so. If the U.S. stays absent there will be both domestic and international pressure on them to intervene in some way or other. If they do not, it might be considered shameful, a dereliction of duties. From an ontological standpoint, then, the shame of non-action might be costlier than an intervention – in that it strikes at the great powers sense of self and the continuity of its own righteousness.[45]

A crisis is not seen as an objective sequence of events which are threatening, but rather a constructed perception. A state might consider something a crisis if whatever is happening can be linked to the "national Self", that is the state's ideas of what it is, and what is of value to it.

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[41] Kinnvall, Catarina & Mitzen, Jennifer, 'An introduction to the special issue: Ontological securities in world politics' in *Cooperation and Conflict*, March 2017, Vol. 52, No. 1, Special Issue on Ontological Security, SAGE Publishing, p 3–4.
[42] Ibid, p 5–6.
[43] Steel, Brent J., *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*, Routledge, London & New York, UK & USA, 2008, p 54–56.
[44] Ibid, p 68–69.
[45] Ibid, p 69–70.

Finally, when the state wishes to end this crisis, it will choose policy options to do so. If the crisis has been construed to have a military character, force is a likely choice.[46]

Third comes the biographical narrative. This is the process through which a state *creates* itself. Who am I? Why am I that way? What made me so? A state's biographical narrative tells a lot about why it believes things happen, what causal factors are most relevant in the world. Through biographical narratives states give meaning to these events, how and why they matter to the state – and what, if anything, should be done to address them. The more powerful the state, the more matters it can address. A smaller state might look at a given situation and simply accept its inability to influence events. In this way great powers again might be *more* susceptible than smaller ones, powerful states cannot be as laconic. Because they can act, they will be expected to act.[47]

Finally, discursive framing by co-actors. A state can be persuaded to do things it otherwise might not have done. But what arguments might a state be open to entertaining? One set of arguments might convince the U.S. but might be entirely ineffective in China. Other states, or non-state actors, can use combinations of shame and praise to lobby a state into action. From a perspective of ontological security, you might expect a state to be persuaded if the action being lobbied for fits well with the states self-identity, its biographical narrative. Steel highlights western, liberal, democratic values being used to call western states to action – appealing to their humanitarian spirit. Likewise, an issue could be sold as being of strategic importance, where inaction would thereby cause harm to the states own interests and values.[48]

1.7 Marrying Deterrence and Ontology

There is one crucial point of intersection for deterrence theory and ontological security; *perceptions*. Everything comes back to perceptions. When the U.S. dimensions its deterrence forces, postures them, signals with them, it must do so based on several hard to verify assumptions and perceptions. It must take its own perceived security needs into consideration and must assume what an adversary (say Russia) perceives these needs to be. It must consider its allies and the extent to which they depend on U.S. capabilities and postures. They must assume what their adversaries value and how they can hold such values at risk – in a credible way that is deterring, without being aggressive. And of course, the U.S. must be wary of its international status and in what ways its actions *might* influence other nations. Any action to

[46] Steel, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, p 71.
[47] Ibid, p 72–73.
[48] Ibid, p 74–75.

change the U.S. nuclear arsenal and its posture might entail profound consequences for the international security order as we know it. Disarm too much and too fast and alienate allies and partners, clash with your own identity as a world power. Re-arm too much and too fast and recklessly frighten adversaries, clash with your identity as a responsible actor. The U.S. must tow many fine lines all at once, all while seeking deterrence and status quo vis-à-vis challengers and adversaries.

Deterrence theory is instructive in understanding U.S. strategic interactions with states it is suspicious of. However, as shown through Ludvik's and Payne's works especially, it lacks nuance and makes simplified assumptions of rationality and values. This is where ontological security fills the gap. Payne talked in terms of better informing U.S. policymaking – not the purpose of this thesis. His recommendations however, that U.S. policy will be better informed by accounting for identity factors like national honor, can reasonably be applied to the academic study of U.S. nuclear policy as well. Given these deficiencies noted with traditional deterrence thinking, an ontological perspective is warranted. For instance, when considering how the U.S. government views Russian nuclear modernization, deterrence theory alone would suggest this is an escalatory measure which decreases U.S. security and power, warranting a similar reaction. This view is not strictly speaking wrong but leaves something to be desired. When considering U.S. priorities and views in the context of the nation's biographical narrative and discursive framing however, the matter becomes clearer. U.S. inaction is easier to understand when considering how post-Cold War administrations have reframed Russia and nuclear weapons. Ontological security provides a useful way of modernizing and nuancing deterrence theory in the ways prior research has called for.

Deterrence theory provides a foundation of sorts in examining how adversarial views of Russia are. Ontological security, however, gives a deeper understanding of *why* the U.S. government might describe Russia as it does. Ontological security is especially helpful when examining cooperative efforts. Deterrence theory presumes a certain adversarial state which ontological security does not.

1.8 Methodology

In section 1.1 three questions were posited:

1. How does the U.S. government describe Russia in terms of competition and cooperation?
2. How does the U.S. government describe Russian thinking and capabilities?

3 What values and interests does the U.S. government consider to be at risk?

In this section it will be explained how these questions will be operationalized in the empirical examination. In 1.6.1 several aspects of deterrence theory were introduced, especially four ways deterrence threats are made. Deterrence by punishment or denial was first touched on and is unlikely to be a large factor in this thesis. Nuclear deterrence has always rested on punishment – the U.S. cannot stop Russian missiles or destroy them before they're launched, merely retaliate.

The remaining four deterrence factors will lay the foundation for this thesis' deterrence analysis:

1) narrow and broad deterrence, 2) extended and central deterrence, 3) immediate and general deterrence, 4) the value of creating risk by uncertainty and by leaving something to chance when making deterrence threats.

Table 1 below is an attempt to illustrate the relationship between these factors and the three questions. Note that this table is just for illustration and that the relationship between the factors and the questions are complex.

Table 1: Illustrative table of relationship between deterrence factors and questions.

	Factor	Broad and narrow deterrence	Extended and central deterrence	Immediate and general deterrence	Risk and uncertainty
Question					
Cooperation or competition		**X**	**X**	x	**X**
Russian thinking and capabilities		x	x	**X**	**X**
Values at risk		**X**	**X**	x	x

Note: X shows strong indication, x shows some indication.

How broad or narrow U.S. objectives are for its strategic forces will be telling. If the U.S. sets lesser objectives for its strategic forces this would indicate increasing trust. If objectives are expanded this would indicate higher tensions and less trust. This would contribute especially to questions 1 and 3.

Extended and central deterrence also pertains mostly to questions 1 and 3. Does the U.S. government see its homeland as bring at risk? Or does it seem more concerned about reassuring allies and partners? As tensions with Russia mount after 2014, can any changes in nuclear considerations be seen? Tracking immediate and general deterrence should indicate how the U.S. government views Russian developments and measures they take to respond. Is more strategic deterrence needed at the general level? More regional nuclear forces in Europe?

Finally, the matter of risk and uncertainty. This is an overall indicator of trust. If the U.S. government gets more specific and restrictive with when it might employ nuclear weapons it indicates less worry over Russian capabilities and actions. If the language is harshened, if red lines are drawn and if nuclear employment is made more prominent however, it shows that the U.S. government wants to present Russia with more risk.

From ontological security, four factors were introduced in 1.6.2: 1) reflexive and material capabilities, 2) crisis assessment, 3) biographical narrative, 4) discursive framing by co-actors. Table 2 below serves the same purpose as Table 1 in giving an overview of the factors' relationship to the questions. Again, note that the table is a simplified representation of a complex set of relationships.

Table 2: Illustrative table of relationship between ontological factors and questions.

	Factor	Reflexive and material capabilities	Crisis assessment	Biographical narratives	Discursive framing
Question					
Cooperation or competition		x	**X**	**X**	x
Russian thinking and capabilities		**X**	**X**	**X**	x
Values at risk		x	**X**	**X**	**X**

Note: **X** shows strong indication, x shows some indication.

Reflexive and material capabilities are key to U.S. views on Russian thinking and capabilities. The U.S. is a superpower, with a large and sophisticated nuclear arsenal and they have pledged to protect their many allies around the world with it if necessary. This goes to all three questions, but especially question 2. Precisely because the U.S. has the role it has, and the arsenal it has,

it will likely be expected to react to Russian thinking and capabilities lest it face shame from its allies.

Crisis assessment and biographical narrative are both expected to play an important role for all questions. They are close linked when examining how the U.S. government views the role of its nuclear weapons, Russia's nuclear weapons, the nature of its relations with Russia and what sort of threat Russia might pose.

Discursive framing by co-actors goes to U.S. allies and how the U.S. government views their needs and expectations. Credibility with allies is a value Russia can hold at risk. To maintain its expansive global network of partners and alliances the U.S. must consider these countries when shaping its nuclear posture and strategy. Russia as a threat is central to the U.S.'s many European allies. Examining how reassuring these allies colors the U.S. governments reasoning regarding Russia is therefore of value.

The empirical analysis is done chronologically administration by administration. Each sub-section will in turn be split into four categories, one for each of the three questions and then a summary. The examination uses the same type of source material from each administration, and then treats the material in the same way by asking the same questions and using clearly defined theoretical terms in analyzing them. By organizing the analysis this way, change over time becomes visible and examinable. This dispositive consistency surfaces evolution and change over time.

1.9 Sources

As mentioned, this thesis examines the U.S. government's view of Russia as a nuclear peer after the Cold War. This is done using publicly available official documents. Specifically, *Nuclear Posture Reviews (NPR), National Security Strategies (NSS), and Quadrennial Defense Reviews (QDR).* In 2018 the QDR changed name to the *National Defense Strategy (NDS).* In combination these documents give a good overview of U.S. nuclear posture, why it considers some given posture necessary, and crucially, they give insight into how the U.S. governments view of Russia evolves.

The NPR is a comprehensive review specifically about U.S. nuclear forces. While the NPR is not a definitive nuclear policy, it shows what the government considers the U.S. nuclear arsenal should do, what its purpose is, and where it should go. The NSS's and QDR's are much broader in scope and examine U.S. strategy in general – but they provide useful insights into U.S. views on Russia and the state of nuclear affairs between them. The first two NPRs are problematic to

study. The first one was produced in 1994 by the Clinton administration. The Cold War had ended, and the president wanted a comprehensive review of U.S. strategic forces. The work was plagued by infighting between military staff and the defense secretary, and in the end just a few pages of text and several presentation slides were released.[49] This can however be supplemented by congressional transcripts and press releases relating to the report. In 1994 the Clinton administration also released an NSS, and in 1997 a QDR which together create a clear picture of the U.S. governments public stance at the time.

The 2002 NPR by the Bush administration is classified. It was however leaked to media and academic outlets through which it can be reached. So to examine this document secondary sources have been used. A report from the Swedish Defence Research Agency written based on leaks,[50] a writeup by a scientist at the Nuclear Threat Initiative,[51] as well as a paper from the U.S. Army War College.[52] The Bush administration also released NSS's in 2000, 2002, and 2006 – along with QDR's in 2001 and 2006. Even though the NPR is unavailable, the source material as a whole is more than adequate.

Obama's administration released an NPR in 2010, NSS's in 2010 and 2015, and a 2010 QDR. The 2010 NPR is different from its predecessors, it's much more verbose and provides a more analytical perspective on why the U.S. government thinks as it does and elaborates on the reasoning for U.S. policy objectives.

This trend continues with the Trump administrations 2018 NPR, which is supplemented by a 2017 NSS, and a 2018 NDS. Finally, the Biden administration released an NPR, NDS, and NSS all in 2022.

These public and official documents speak to the U.S. governments views and are appropriate sources for examining the U.S. governments changing public perception of Russia as a nuclear peer. However, an obvious question to ask is what might remain unsaid, and what might be said only in classified documents. First, this thesis only claims to examine the U.S. governments *public* view as it's communicated through public documents.

[49] Kristen, Hans M., *The 1994 Nuclear Posture Review*, The Nuclear Information Project.

[50] Wigg, Lars & Andersson, Per., *Nuclear Posture Review – En analys av USA:s kärnvapenstrategi,* Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), Stockholm, Sweden, November 2004

[51] Ferguson, Charles D. *Nuclear Posture Review*, Nuclear Threat Initiative, Washington DC, July 31, 2002. https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/nuclear-posture-review/ (Retrieved 2024-05-05).

[52] Stein, Lawrence J., *The 2002 Nuclear Posture Review: A First Step in Transformation or Just a Paper Tiger*?, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, USA

Second, both deterrence theory and ontological security give credence to this approach. Deterrence has many audiences, abroad and domestically. To deter someone, they must know that they are being threatened after all. For U.S. allies to feel assured they'll want written and public pledges. And for the American public to feel safe they'll want to know that their leaders consider the threats they might face and plan accordingly. While operational details and specific war plans may be kept secret, there is a clear interest in communicating overarching goals and strategies to friends and foes alike.[53] From ontological security, making a promise public is seen as committing to them. If the U.S. makes public promises to allies, partners, and adversaries regarding nuclear capabilities, they commit to these courses of action. If they then fail to follow through, they face the shame of accusations of betrayal.[54] So these public documents are a well-motivated choice for examining the U.S. governments public stance, and there is good reason to think that the government means what it says.

2. Analysis

This section will be divided into five sub-sections. Each sub-section will examine one U.S. administration in chronological order – starting with Clinton and ending with Biden. In each section the source material will be briefly introduced and then discussed according to the analytical concepts discussed in 1.8. The thesis' three questions will guide these discussions.

2.1 The Clinton Administration (1993–2001)

When Bill Clinton took office in January 1993 he became the first post-Cold War president. As mentioned, his administration published the first ever NPR in 1994, published two NSS's in 1994 and 2000, as well as a QDR in 1997. As a reminder, the 1994 NPR is very brief and in-and-off itself lacks substance, so the document is complemented by transcripts from congressional hearings and a press conference.

The 1990's were an especially optimistic time for nuclear disarmament. Tensions decreased, and the U.S. and Russia started meeting on cooperative terms to discuss arms reduction. Even as Russia felt unease at NATO expansion and U.S.-led interventions in the Balkans, the U.S. government saw less of a role for its nuclear deterrent. By 2002 the U.S. nuclear arsenal was explicitly shifted away from being dimensioned to destroy Russia.[55]

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[53] Freedman, *Deterrence*, p 47–48.
[54] Steel, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, p 72.
[55] Freedman & Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, p 565.

When introducing the NPR at a press conference, defense secretary Perry said: "Now it's time to change the way we think about nuclear weapons, and the Nuclear Posture Review was conceived to do just that".[56]

The 1994 NPR confirmed the administration's desire to sharply reduce U.S. nuclear forces. Some nuclear submarines, and many bombers, were to be cut and sub-strategic weapons were drastically reduced. The U.S. took nuclear bombers off high alert and stopped all nuclear weapons modernization programs.[57] Disarmament was well under way in the U.S. and Russia. The 1991 Treaty on the Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms, the START Treaty, was about to take effect. The Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms, or START II, had been negotiated and ratification was expected soon.[58] The 1994 NPR projects that the U.S. force of almost 9,000 nuclear weapons in 1992, would be cut to less than 4,000 warheads by 2003.[59] Warmer relations with Russia obviously play a big role in arms reduction, but economic factors matter too. Nuclear weapons are very expensive and there's an opportunity cost to keeping skilled scientists and engineers occupied with weapons production rather than something with more economic value.[60]

2.1.1 Cooperation or Competition

Broadly speaking the U.S. government is highly optimistic about its nuclear relationship with Russia at the time. The NPR explicitly states that the U.S. government is confident in Russia's progress in disarmament and political reform in general.[61] The U.S. even feels comfortable with leading on disarmament and dismantling many nuclear weapons before Russia does so.[62]

Concerns are raised however, but they are phrased as hypotheticals. While the government is confident in Russia's progress and heading, should this change, the government preserves a 'hedge' capability. That is, if Russia's political leadership were to take an authoritarian turn and stop working for disarmament in good faith, the U.S. maintains the option to re-activate warheads and increase its nuclear inventory in a rapid surge.[63]

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[56] U.S. Department of Defense, *Press Conference with Secretary of Defense William J. Perry, General Shalikashvili, Deputy Secretary of Defense John Deutch, Mr. Kenneth H. Bacon*, Washington DC, September 22, 1994, p 2.
[57] U.S. Department of Defense, *DoD Review Recommends Reduction in Nuclear Force*, Washington DC, September 22, 1994, p 2–4.
[58] U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Matters Handbook 2020 [Revised],* p 151–153.
[59] Department of Defense*, DoD Review Recommends Reduction in Nuclear Force*, p 18.
[60] U.S. Department of Defense, *Press Conference*, 1994, p 1.
[61] Department of Defense, *DoD Review Recommends Reduction in Nuclear Force*, p 7–8, 39.
[62] U.S. Congress, *Briefing on Results of the Nuclear Posture Review*, September 22, 1994, p 6–9.
[63] U.S. Department of Defense, *Press Conference*, 1994, p 2.

The type of deterrence the U.S. government seeks against Russia is broad. At the strategic level U.S. nuclear forces deter Russian nuclear forces. The U.S. is actively dismantling narrower deterrence options, such as its sub-strategic nuclear forces. During the cold war nuclear tipped cruise missiles were meant to give an option to respond with regional weapons rather than intercontinental, strategic ones. This type of weapon and this kind of regional deterrent capability is planned to be scrapped with the 1994 NPR.[64] This way deterrence is made more central, where options for regional and extended deterrence are removed. Deterrence is also made less immediate and more general, with alert bombers standing down and some nuclear delivery options being removed. The U.S. reduces risk too, with reducing the number of potential avenues to nuclear escalation.

2.1.2 Russian Thinking and Capabilities

The Soviet Union has collapsed, and Russia is a far weaker state than its predecessor. Russian capabilities are in decline and the U.S. government views Russian intentions favorably. As mentioned, the concerns are mostly hypothetical, if Russia takes a wrong turn the U.S. government wishes to maintain options to re-activate parts of its nuclear stockpile.

With regards to its thinking on Russia, reflexive and material capabilities don't seem to weigh in much. Now that circumstances have changed the U.S. government is more than willing to slash its arsenal, even to lead the way in doing so. Crisis assessment and biographical narratives are interesting in the same way. The U.S. reduces its ability to respond to nuclear crises, even if as mentioned a hedge is maintained. Suspicions linger, clearly, and the U.S. government still perceives a feeling of safety from having options to return to larger nuclear forces. The U.S. government seems to show a strong willingness to leave past animosities behind in favor of cooperation.

In the 1997 QDR Russian capabilities are briefly touched on – they are attempting to significantly modernize its nuclear and conventional forces. This is however mentioned in mere passing, and emphasis is on engaging with Russia and negotiating treaties between NATO and Russia on European security.[65] The U.S. government expresses a desire for more disarmament past current commitments. At this point Russia has still not ratified START II, and the U.S. is unwilling to go further until Russia ratifies.[66]

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[64] U.S. Department of Defense, *Press Conference*, 1994, p 16.
[65] Department of Defense, *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review*, Washington DC, May 1997, p 22. (Note: exists in many versions, this thesis uses: https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/32542/qdr97.pdf)
[66] Ibid, p 59.

2.1.3 Values and Interests at Risk

The QDR sticks to the same positive notes. Russia is a "former adversary", and cooperation is working better than ever. The U.S. government also specifies the core values of "representative democracy" and "market economics" as spreading in the world – empowering peace and prosperity as they do.[67] In the 1994 NSS much the same language is seen. Again, the government emphasizes the end of the Cold War and warmer relations with Russia. They no longer need to contain communist expansion and aggression. Russia is becoming more democratic, a market economy, its engaging constructively with NATO. The government is hopeful that the two nations can work together to combat the threat of nuclear weapons proliferation. Nuclear war is far more unlikely now than just a few years before. But Russia is also pointed out as having an uncertain future.[68] The existential threat that was the Soviet Union is no more, the government therefore seems inclined to focus on other threats. This fits well as a biographical narrative of the U.S. as a benign superpower – working for peace, liberty, and prosperity. The government seems to see a chance to lead the way for the world, maybe especially for the post-Soviet states in Eastern Europe.

The QDR affirms the core tasks of the U.S. nuclear deterrent as preventing aggression against it, it's forces abroad, and its allies. U.S. nuclear forces must be sizeable enough so that no one can feasibly get an advantage over them. Russia, again, is not seen as much of a threat at all, only in a hypothetical future. As Russia disarms there seems to be little concern over reassuring allies, or even protecting the U.S. homeland. The U.S. government certainly remains aware of its allies and its extended deterrence obligation but does not in any meaningful way seem to worry about negative reactions from them as it cuts its arsenal. Showing that U.S. commitments are firm is pointed out as crucial to U.S. security, but fewer weapons will do the job.[69] A smaller and general deterrent will suffice, and U.S. values and interests are better protected by reducing risk for Russia than by increasing it.

2.1.4 Summary

The Clinton administration faced a new world. No Cold War, no great power competition, the U.S. had won. The government is more than willing to break with the past – it wishes to disarm, and it wishes to co-operate. Deterrence is not gone, but the need for it is significantly reduced.

[67] Department of Defense, *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review 1997*, p 19.
[68] The White House, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement,* July 1994, Washington DC, p 1, 5–9.
[69] Department of Defense, *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review 1997*, p 29–30.

Russia is a good faith partner, while some risks remain the U.S. government is far more hopeful than skeptical.

As for the four deterrence factors; 1) deterrence is broad and reliance on nuclear deterrence against Russia is significantly reduced, 2) deterrence is made more central with several nuclear delivery systems getting retired and scrapped, 3) general deterrence is heavily promoted over immediate deterrence even if some options are retained, 4) risk is reduced along with the nuclear arsenal and as the nuclear posture is relaxed – less is left to chance.

The ontological factors: 1) the U.S. reduces its capabilities and wants to go further still. The strategic arsenal does not need to be as large as it used to, and the U.S. government displays large freedom of action and willingness to act to break with the past. Reflexive and material thinking does not seem to bind the U.S. Government to its nuclear arsenal, 2) Russia remains a threat, but not nearly on the scale of the Soviet Union – it certainly also helps that it is no longer a communist state. The government no longer sees Russia as crisis threat like before, 3) the government shapes a new narrative for itself as the responsible and benevolent lone superpower, proudly working for peace after 'winning' the Cold War against its communist adversary, 4) the government frames world progress in terms of steps towards a liberal, capitalist, democratic order. Arguments which in terms of discursive framing have clear appeal to the U.S. government and probably the western world at large.

Deterrence theory and ontological security align well under the Clinton administration. Deterrence needs decrease and the government can easily justify nuclear disarmament in its new narrative as victor of the Cold War. Physical security is less important with a drastically diminished threat, and abstract values take a large role.

2.2 The Bush Administration (2001–2009)

"The great struggles of the twentieth century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom—and a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise."[70] So begins President George W. Bush his foreword to the 2002 NSS.

[70] The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington DC, September 17, 2002, foreword.

While Clinton was the first post-Cold War president, Bush was the first president to inherit post-Cold War security and defense policies. The Clinton administration, to some extent, had to start fresh, while the Bush administration got to build on previous work.

As mentioned there are problems with examining the Bush era, the 2002 NPR is classified. An executive summary and some press notes are public. This unfortunately means that some information regarding this period's thinking is unavailable. However, the administration published two NSS's in 2002 and 2006, as well as two QDR's in 2001 and 2006. Additionally, insights from the classified 2002 NPR can be gleamed through leaks – where some academics and journalists were able to read the whole document and write about it.

It must also be noted that the Bush administration had to handle 9/11 and the ensuing global war on terror. While such matters fall outside the scope of this thesis the attention such an event would require from the government must be understood to affect its strategic thinking on other matters – like Russia.

2.2.1 Cooperation or Competition

The 2001 and 2006 QDR's barely mention Russia by name. The 2001 QDR, while being very brief on the topic, essentially repeat the Clinton administration's view. Russia has potential as a co-operative partner, but some risks remain. The report merely refers to Russia some policy objectives which are contrary to that of the U.S., without elaboration.[71] The report also notes that it was mostly completed prior to 9/11, meaning this is not a result of a shift in focus.[72] The 2006 QDR is similarly terse, but a shift in tone is evident. Again, a desire to co-operate with Russia on issues like non-proliferation (and many other topics) is expressed, but with more reservation than before. The government expresses concern over democratic decline and weapons exports. The report talks more of fears of nuclear terrorism, and emerging nuclear states like Iran, and rogue states like North Korea [73]

The NSS's are more instructive here. The 2002 document is overall highly appreciative of Russia, seeing them as a valued partner in the post-Cold War world. They can work together against new threats from global terrorism and rogue state actors. The U.S. government wishes to help integrate Russia in the world economy through World Trade Organization membership.[74] The report further proclaims that the two countries are no longer strategic

[71] U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Report*, Washington DC, September 30, 2001, p 4–5.
[72] Ibid, p V.
[73] U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, Washington DC, February 6, 2006, p 28–29.
[74] The White House, *The National Security Strategy 2002*, p 13–14, 18.

adversaries at all and that progress on arms reduction proves as much.[75] The 2006 NSS largely echoes these sentiments, pressing on cooperation and opportunities. Both reports mention concerns regarding slides in Russian democracy and free market values – but stick to encouraging talk of working together with the Kremlin to right such developments.[76]

Overall, the Bush administration affirms the Clinton administration's cautiously optimistic views on Russia.

2.2.2 Russian Thinking and Capabilities

From the public foreword to the 2002 NPR, it is clear the U.S. government wants more nuclear options and capabilities.[77]

Secondary sources largely consider the 2002 NPR to align with the 1994 NPR on disarmament and arsenal reduction. Much like the Clinton administration, Bush seeks cooperation with Russia and considers the Cold War era tensions a thing of the past. But the report notes how it cannot be ignored that Russia is the only state on earth capable of destroying the U.S. The NPR also suggests some new nuclear capabilities be developed – but these are aimed at terrorists and rogue states. Concerns about lack of democratic progress in Russia does lead the government to want to increase the pace at which the U.S. could re-activate stockpiled warheads and resume nuclear testing if needed.[78] The 2002 NPR is dominated by terrorist threats and regional actors, states like Iran or North Korea. The U.S. government, resting on Cold War experience, feels it knows how to deter Russia already. The U.S. government is not necessarily worried about current Russian capabilities but remains concerned over where the country might head.[79]

From a deterrence perspective nothing substantial changes. The U.S. government still seeks cooperation and wishes to reduce its arsenal. Deterrence against Russia is kept general and broad, and the government wishes to keep risk low. However, immediate deterrence sees a resurgence as the U.S. government wishes more options to quickly expand its arsenal if the need arises. Ontologically this can also be seen as the U.S. government placing Russia as more of a potential crisis to confront than before, even if done softly it is a slight break with the previous administration.

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[75] The White House, *The National Security Strategy 2002*, p 26.
[76] The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington DC, March 2006, p 39.
[77] U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report Foreword*, Washington DC, 2002.
[78] Ferguson, *Nuclear Posture Review*, Nuclear Threat Initiative. & Stein, *The 2002 Nuclear Posture Review: A First Step in Transformation or Just a Paper Tiger*?, p 6–7.
[79] Wigg & Andersson, *Nuclear Posture Review – En analys av USA:s kärnvapenstrategi*, p 5.

2.2.3 Values and Interests at Risk

As mentioned the Bush administration points out Russia as the sole state able to threaten the U.S. existentially – but that's nothing new since several decades. The interesting question is the one of values. This sub-section started with a quote from President Bush which quite clearly sets the tone. American values of freedom, capitalism, and democracy must prevail. And when evaluating the state of relations with Russia it is social and political values that take center stage. It is a Russian slide away from these values that causes the Bush administration to feel the need to retain more strategic options in case the situation worsens. But even here it should be noted that the Bush administration largely intends to continue the Clinton era arsenal reductions.[80] Considering the risk from terrorists and rogue states, the Bush administration was willing to withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, which limited what missile defenses the U.S. and Russia could have. The Bush administration wanted significantly better ABM capabilities, for the U.S. and allies alike.[81] The U.S. government would of course have known that withdrawing from this treaty might upset the Russians but did so anyway. Even though Russia is recognized as the only existential threat, the U.S. government chose to prioritize, existentially speaking, far lesser threats. Even at the risk of upsetting the balance between the U.S. and Russia.

The Bush administration was able to negotiate the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, SORT, with Russia even after START II collapsed. While SORT set impressive goals for further arms reductions, it lacked verification and control mechanisms, and either party was free to withdraw on three months' notice. In essence SORT was ambitious but toothless.[82]

2.2.4 Summary

Bush, like Clinton, contended with a rapidly changing world. 9/11, global terrorism, and rogue states set the agenda.

To review the factors, deterrence first: 1) deterrence remains broad, while some new nuclear capabilities are considered they are not strictly meant for Russia. 2) deterrence also remains mostly central, the U.S. nuclear arsenal is not expanded to more cover allies than before, 3) immediate deterrence sees a comeback, as mentioned the Bush administration wants more of a hedge than previously to guard against potential downturns in the state of Russia's young

[80] Stein, *The 2002 Nuclear Posture Review: A First Step in Transformation or Just a Paper Tiger*?, p 3.
[81] Wigg & Andersson, *Nuclear Posture Review – En analys av USA:s kärnvapenstrategi*, p 7–9.
[82] Kimball, Daryl G., The Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) At a Glance, Arms Control Association, Washington DC, USA. https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/sort-glance (retrieved 2024–05–10).

democracy, 4) risk is somewhat further reduced by commitment to arms limitation, but U.S. immediate deterrence and the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM treaty simultaneously increase risk.

In ontology: 1) the Bush administration acts reflexively to reassure the U.S. population, and its allies, in the face of emerging terrorist threats and rogue states. The U.S. government certainly acted in response to 9/11, but regarding Russia the course is mostly held firm from the prior administration, 2) Russia is no longer a strategic adversary, but is still seen as being a potential military–strategic crisis and the U.S. government takes actions to address these concerns in seeking a stronger nuclear hedge, 3) the U.S. government very much continues the biographical narrative of itself as the force for good, in contrast to evil states and terrorists. Russia however becomes a lesser part of this narrative. In part U.S. 'goodness' derives from defeating communism, but that's old news now that new enemies have emerged, 4) much like the Clinton administration progress is framed in social and political terms, there is a preferred world order to strive towards. This appeals to the U.S.'s discursive framing. At least ostensibly, this explains much of what the U.S. government does and wants to achieve. Russia is seen as having good potential to become a cooperative and democratic, free market country, but that falls short of expectation. Therefore, suspicion of them arises.

Largely, the Bush administration does as the Clinton administration, but contends with a more complicated strategic situation. Russia simply isn't framed as a crisis anymore and the administration therefore risks upsetting the power balance by withdrawing from the ABM-treaty, other threats warrant this. From deterrence theory the Bush administration acts expectedly by taking some (mild) steps to preserve nuclear capabilities in case Russian democracy fails to progress. Ontological security helps explain this risk-taking, Russia is not framed as a threat anymore, their defeat in the Cold War is part of the U.S. biographical narrative. Why the U.S. would risk upsetting Russia, which is still capable of destroying the U.S., becomes understandable when established that Russia isn't defined as existentially threatening anymore. While deterrence theory alone would suggest the U.S. government acts inconsistently with its own interests, ontological security fills the gap.

2.3 The Obama Administration (2009–2017)

"A few months ago, when asked what's the biggest geopolitical threat facing America, you said Russia. Not al-Qaida. You said Russia. And the 1980's are now calling and asking for their foreign policy back." – Barack Obama to Mitt Romney in 2012 presidential debate.[83]

The Obama administration sources mark a shift from Clinton and Bush. They are more verbose and clearer in their reasonings. The administrations 2010 NPR, 2010 and 2015 NSS', as well as 2010 and 2014 QDR's, are all publicly available in full. Since the 2010 NPR is so much more elaborate than its two predecessors, it will be relied upon to a greater extent than the 2010 NSS and QDR.

Both previously examined administrations wanted to reduce U.S. nuclear forces and explore new avenues of cooperation with Russia. President Barack Obama took this ambition further than them both. The top priority for the nation was no longer existential deterrence, but rather preventing nuclear terrorism and nuclear proliferation. While he acknowledged it might not happen in his lifetime, Obama stated his ambition to see a nuclear free world. Indeed, the administration put reducing the size of its strategic arsenal as a higher objective than strategic deterrence itself.[84]

The Obama administration shifted focus entirely – nuclear terrorism was the largest nuclear concern – more so than any state. Global nuclear disarmament became an explicit policy objective of the U.S. government.[85] President Obama fundamentally saw nuclear weapons as little more than a deterrent against nuclear attack.[86]

President Obama made several attempts to reduce the U.S. nuclear stockpile and to milden the posture of U.S. strategic forces, with some success. Under his administration the New-START treaty was negotiated with Russia, capping deployed nuclear warheads at 1,550. Obama also made unsuccessful efforts to negotiate a further reduction to 1,000. Objections from U.S. allies and a lack of interest from Russia killed those plans. He also floated the idea of pledging no first use of nuclear weapons, which also never manifested after political and diplomatic pressure.[87]

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[83] Obama, Barack, *October 22, 2012 presidential debate v Mitt Romney*. See for 15 seconds at 9 minutes, 7 seconds in: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCi4WHx3yDA
[84] U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, Washington DC, USA, April 2010, p i–iii.
[85] Geist, *Qualities Precede Quantities: Deciding How Much is Enough for U.S. Nuclear Forces*, p 633–634.
[86] Lonsdale, David J., "The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review: A Return to Nuclear Warfighting?" in *Comparative Strategy*, 2019, vol 38, No 2, Routledge, p 98–99.
[87] Freedman & Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, p 653–655.

2014 is noted as a chock event, Crimea was annexed, and Russian strategic forces were on high alert and flying aggressive nuclear deterrence missions. The Russian leadership spoke bluntly of nuclear consequences for those that might interfere. U.S., and western thinkers in general, were given a jolt.[88]

2.3.1 Cooperation or Competition

"Russia and the United States are no longer adversaries", establishes the 2010 NPR, drawing the same conclusion as the previous administration. The U.S. faces two major threats, nuclear terrorism, and nuclear proliferation. Strategic deterrence against Russia is a relic of sorts – still there and still active, yet considered less important. The government acknowledges that Russia is modernizing its nuclear forces and that there are policy differences between the nations but stops short of expressly criticizing this. It is noted that Russia and the U.S. are cooperating on nuclear terrorism and non-proliferation issues.[89]

As mentioned, the START II arms reduction treaty failed to take effect when the U.S. withdrew from the ABM treaty under Bush. Obama's top priority with Russia is the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, New START. This treaty limits either side to having, at most, 1,550 strategic warheads deployed on no more than 700 strategic delivery vehicles. Obama also emphasizes his will to mobilize wider international support for global nuclear disarmament efforts.[90]

The 2010 NSS echoes the sentiments of the NPR. Russia could, and should, be a partner for the U.S. in curbing proliferation and de-nuclearizing the world. Russia's influence is noted as rising in the world, with only mild critique of Russian's human rights record mentioned.[91]

Even the 2015 NSS, after Russia's invasion of Crimea and Donbass, emphasizes that the U.S. remains committed to global nuclear disarmament.[92] Russia's attack on Ukraine certainly changed things for the administration, but not to the point of a complete course change. The 2015 NSS calls out sanctioning Russia, and reassuring worried European allies, yet states that "we will keep the door open to greater collaboration with Russia in areas of common interests, should it choose a different path".[93]

[88] Freedman & Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, p 639–640.
[89] U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review 2010*, Washington DC, USA, April 2010, p iv–v.
[90] Ibid, p vii, ix,
[91] The White House, *National Security Strategy,* Washington DC, USA, May 2010, p 16, 23.
[92] The White House, *National Security Strategy,* Washington DC, USA, February 2015, foreword.
[93] The White House, *National Security Strategy 2015*, p 25.

2.3.2 Russian Thinking and Capabilities

In the 2010 NPR the Obama administration expresses some concern over Russian nuclear modernizations, specifically the lack of transparency surrounding these. While the administration calls for clearer communication from the Kremlin on this topic, in return the U.S. offers to better explain its ABM program and wishes to alleviate Russian concerns that it might upset the strategic balance.[94]

It cannot be said that Russian nuclear weapons, in 2010, were a non-concern, but they were a far lesser concern than ever before. The Obama administration did not author a new NPR following Russia's annexation of Crimea or attacks on the Donbass, but the 2014 QDR and 2015 NSS give no indications that Russian nuclear weapons are an increased concern. The 2014 QDR was published in March 2014, just a few weeks after Russia's invasion of Crimea, most of it would surely have been finished by the time the attack occurred. While the report expresses worry over Russian modernization and military action against its neighbors, it ultimately highlights that the U.S. government wishes to cooperate and engage with Russia on topics of mutual interest.[95] The 2015 NSS meanwhile does at several points call Russia out as an aggressor state, raises the value of deterring further aggression against other European countries, economic sanctions, and European dependencies on Russia for energy.[96]

2.3.3 Values and Interests at Risk

Obama wanted to abolish nuclear weapons, but the 2010 NPR nonetheless states that so long as there are nuclear weapons, the U.S. will maintain an arsenal to deter attacks on itself and its allies. Nuclear weapons are declared less relevant than ever for deterring non-nuclear attack, U.S. conventional forces can shoulder that role instead.[97] Reassuring European NATO-allies, however, remains important, and the Obama administrations maintains its commitment to store nuclear weapons with NATO-member nations as a regional deterrent (against Russia).[98]

In the 2010 documents little risk is seen in Russia's nuclear forces, or indeed Russia as a whole. The possibilities for cooperation far outweigh the risks. When Crimea is attacked the existential calculus is not meaningfully changed. The U.S. government does not propose nuclear re-armament or expansion, quite the opposite. But reassuring allies and maintaining U.S.

[94] U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review 2010*, p x.
[95] U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review 2014*, Washington DC, USA, March 4, 2014, p 5–6.
[96] The White House, *National Security Strategy 2015*, p 2–5, 16.
[97] U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review 2010*, p vii–viii.
[98] Ibid, p xii.

credibility is a high priority. In the 2015 NSS the Obama administration affirms its commitment to NATO and collective defense.[99] The 2015 NSS takes time to establish *why* the U.S. is a desirable leader internationally. American values are to be projected and protected, ranging from liberal democracy to LGBTQ issues. While not stated explicitly, the NSS seems to imply that totalitarian states such as Russia stand opposite to these desirable western values which the U.S. champions.[100]

2.3.4 Summary

The Obama administration started with unbridled optimism, seeking deeper cooperation with Russia than ever before. These aspirations were doused by Russia's attack on Crimea, but they didn't extinguish. The U.S. government kept attempting to engage with Russia for nuclear disarmament, cooperation against potential nuclear terrorism and non-proliferation.

Again, first we review deterrence; 1) deterrence is broad, and its scope is reduced significantly. The nuclear arsenal is to be cut and fewer options to be maintained, 2) before 2014 deterrence is central, after Russia attacks Ukraine reassuring allies becomes a greater priority, even if little is done in concrete terms, 3) Bush's immediate deterrence is set aside, as mentioned the arsenal is reduced and only an interest in general strategic deterrence remains, 4) the government attempts to cut risk further with arms limitation treaties and increased transparency between Russia and the U.S.

Ontologically the Obama administration did some interesting things, 1) the government wanted to lead the charge on nuclear disarmament and took efforts to do so, this is interesting in that the superpower works to dismantle its most powerful destructive tool – a reverse of reflexive and material thinking of sorts, 2) there is no crisis thinking at all regarding Russian nuclear capabilities, even as the administration acknowledges Russian nuclear modernizations they see this as an issue to be solved by talks and transparency. This thinking seems to hold mostly true even after 2014, 3) the previously proposed biographical narrative of the U.S. as a benevolent superpower continues and is further enhanced. The Obama administration wishes the U.S. to be a morally righteous leader on matters of peace and security and makes nuclear disarmament a keystone of this agenda. This hope remained after Crimea, showing the strength of the government's commitment, 4) discursive framing by co-actors is seen most clearly after 2014 when the U.S. makes declarative statements aimed at reassuring European allies. The

[99] The White House, *National Security Strategy 2015*, p 19, 25.
[100] Ibid, p 19–22.

administration does not want to completely change course on nuclear cooperation with Russia, this key interest seems to weigh heavy, but does risk the cooperation to impose sanctions and strengthen allied confidence.

Under Obama a disconnect seems to emerge. Russia acts aggressively in Europe and modernizes its nuclear forces. Yet the government sticks to disarmament and desires for cooperation. Only mild efforts are made to enhance extended deterrence and even after 2014 the Obama administration doesn't significantly reevaluate its views on Russia. Deterrence theory would suggest this is irrational. The expected outcome would be for the government to match Russian escalation. This seemingly counterintuitive inaction is not so strange ontologically. The government still prioritizes nuclear disarmament the most, a return to the Cold War is not desired in the slightest and the Obama administration is committed to existing biographical narratives and resists material reflexivity and discursive framings of Russia from European allies. Nuclear disarmament fits with the narrative of national honor the Obama administration is committed to.

2.4 The Trump Administration (2017–2021)

The most interesting thing about the Trump administrations 2018 NPR is what it says it isn't. The document explicitly states that it is *not* a return to "nuclear war-fighting",[101] a Cold War concept of employing nuclear weapons at theater level to achieve objectives and 'win' a nuclear war. Expert evaluation suggests the NPR indeed does not *quite* return to this concept but is a very large step in that direction.[102]

Even while making some clear breaks with the past, the 2018 NPR re-affirms a desire to see a nuclear weapons-free world. But for the present moment, the U.S. identifies competitors posturing with their nuclear arsenals – in ways that require a response.[103]

The reader is reminded that the Quadrennial Defense Review, QDR, has changed names to the National Defense Strategy, NDS. The 2018 NDS is classified, with a longer summary released publicly.

When Donald Trump took office in 2017 nuclear disarmament was effectively killed, and the U.S. nuclear arsenal was again reframed as having a broader role in U.S. military planning. President Obama had toned down the role of nuclear weapons entirely, and tried to deprecate

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[101] U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review,* Washington DC, USA, February 2018, p XII.
[102] Lonsdale, *The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review*, p 98.
[103] U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review 2018,* p V.

smaller, sub-strategic weapons. President Trump wanted a more flexible arsenal, with more options for employment. Nuclear re-armament and modernization was again being considered.[104]

2.4.1 Cooperation or Competition

The 2018 NPR promises to be a "pragmatic" evaluation of things as they are. Russia has returned to great power competition thinking and forces the U.S. to do the same. The NPR states that the U.S. government still wishes to constructively engage with Russia on nuclear disarmament and transparency, but points Russia out as posing a challenge to the progress made since the end of the Cold War.[105]

The NPR puts it concisely: "…Russia has rebuffed repeated U.S. efforts to reduce the salience, role, and number of nuclear weapons."[106] Cooperation is no longer presented as a realistic option, even if it's still a hope. And the Trump administration blames Russia for making it so.

The 2017 NSS says much the same. Russia is not called an outright adversary, but a challenger who the U.S. government considers to be actively working to counteract U.S. interests and values. Russia is described as revanchist and revisionist – working to restore former great power glory.[107] Russia as well as China do not just challenge American power and influence, but also seek to bind nations and economies to themselves – harming freedom and fairness.[108]

2.4.2 Russian Thinking and Capabilities

The 2018 NPR makes numerous references to new and improved Russian nuclear capabilities, and how the Trump administration sees that Russia is giving its nuclear arsenal a larger role in its operational and strategic planning. The government responds by taking several measures. They'll enhance their nuclear sharing with NATO, they propose to equip a small number of submarine-launched cruise missiles (SLCM) with nuclear warheads – a capability the Obama administration scrapped.[109]

It should be noted that the Trump administration makes clear it does not wish to lower the threshold for nuclear weapons employment, it sees these actions as a necessary response to Russia's perceived readiness to use nuclear weapons. The government also does not wish to

[104] Freedman & Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy,* p 654–655.
[105] U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review 2018*, p VI.
[106] U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review 2018*, p 10.
[107] The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington DC, USA, December 2017, p 25.
[108] Ibid, p 2.
[109] The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 2017, p XII–XIII.

increase the number of active warheads in the U.S. arsenal but modernize and diversify its weapons delivery options. The new SLCM is a direct response to Russia withdrawing from a treaty (the INF treaty) limiting so called intermediate range nuclear forces in Europe.[110]

Beyond these immediate reactions to Russia, the government also seeks wide modernization of U.S. nuclear forces, nuclear weapons design and manufacturing infrastructure, weapons life cycle, and nuclear command and control systems.[111] This is not just in response to Russia, the U.S. arsenal is pointed out as being old and in need of overhaul. China is also a rising concern, but Russia remains the nuclear peer. Even if the NPR does not explicitly call Russia an adversary, the document does talk a lot about the importance of deterring "potential" adversaries. Russia must be considered as one of these. The NPR also adds language that's been downplayed by the previous examined administrations, that the U.S. nuclear arsenal must be able to "[achieve] U.S. objectives if deterrence fails".[112]

2.4.3 Values and Interests at Risk

The 2018 NPR considers previous attempts by the U.S. to lead the charge on nuclear disarmament a failure. Russia, China, and North Korea have all expanded and/or modernized their nuclear arsenals anyway.[113] The NPR concludes that Russia perceives the U.S. and NATO as threats and that Russia is shaping its nuclear posture accordingly. The government considers that Russia has a relatively low bar for nuclear employment and wants to dissuade Russia from notions that using nuclear weapons will bring it favorable outcomes. The U.S. government points to Russia developing new intercontinental weapons as well as shorter range ones – to give itself "escalation advantage" against the U.S. and NATO.[114]

In the 2018 NDS the Trump administration says that Russia is a strategic competitor, again short of an adversary. It goes on to elaborate that Russia wishes to reshape its periphery in an authoritarian way and that Russia unduly tries to influence its neighbors. It also attacks NATO cohesion and western interests and influences in the Middle East.[115] Nuclear weapons are not specifically called out in the NDS, but "long-term strategic competitions with China and

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[110] U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review 2018*, p *XII.*
[111] Ibid, p XIV–XV.
[112] U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, p VII.
[113] Ibid, p 8.
[114] U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review 2018*, p 9.
[115] U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, Washington DC, USA, 2018, p 2.

Russia" are made the top priorities for the Defense Department.[116] Especially with Russia, nuclear weapons must be understood as playing a key role in this competition.

The above, taken in conjunction with the governments proposed general nuclear modernization efforts, can be seen as feeling strategically vulnerable. The U.S. homeland is again existentially held at risk by a quickly modernizing Russian nuclear arsenal.

2.4.4 Summary

The Trump administration pivots away from prior administrations nuclear plans. The government still wants to disarm and move away from nuclear weapons but deems this path untenable.

This administration brings back to life a lot of traditional deterrence thinking, 1) broad and narrow deterrence are expanded. Strategically deterring Russia is still the top priority, but the administration seeks lesser nuclear options for regional and sub-strategic use to more locally deter Russia, 2) central and extended deterrence are also expanded as the U.S. wishes to deploy more capable nuclear delivery systems in Europe while also overhauling its strategic weapons, 3) general and immediate deterrence are to be enhanced in the longer term with more modern weapons, infrastructure, and nuclear command, control, and communication (NC3), 4) the government increases risk for Russia by giving its nuclear arsenal a bigger role, and doing it directly in response to how it perceives Russian actions.

Examining the Trump administration ontologically, we see that, 1) the government indeed responds, arguably with material and reflexive capabilities. The Trump administration responds in kind to perceived Russian nuclear posturing and aggression with nuclear posturing of its own, 2) Russian capabilities, intentions, and actions are defined as a crisis of sorts and the government makes it clear that it is a strategic challenge requiring strategic solutions. Obama's calls for transparency and deepened dialogue are largely rejected in favor of engaging with Russia through tit-for-tat nuclear modernization, 3) the biographical narrative certainly shifts. As the 2018 NPR states, it is a pragmatic re-evaluation, a shift with the naïve past. The government breaks with the benign superpower narrative and returns to a Cold War era concept of the U.S. as the stalwart of the west. A break with the recent past and return to the more distant, 4) the government clearly wants to set itself apart from totalitarian and revisionist states

[116] U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, p 4.

like Russia, it discursively frames itself as a desirable, liberal, counterpart. Someone to rely on against a repressive Russia.

The Trump administration does largely what is expected from a deterrence theoretical perspective as deterrence needs increase. U.S. reactions are understandable as a reaction to Russia, but it's through ontological security that unveils underlying reasons. The Trump administration breaks with the post-Cold War biographical narrative and its increase of U.S. nuclear deterrence posture correlates with crisis reassessment of Russia. Deterrence theory might suggest that this is a return to rational thinking by the U.S., ontological security shows how things are far more complex than that.

2.5 The Biden Administration (2021–)

President Joseph Biden is the incumbent president of the Unites States, and his administration is the final one to be examined in this thesis. The European security order has deteriorated under his Presidency and the Biden administration is forced to deal with an ongoing war in Europe.

The Biden administration essentially completely affirms the previous administrations set of objectives for the U.S. strategic arsenal; deterring attack, assuring allies, and achieving objectives if deterrence fails. The Biden administration however cuts nuclear weapons from having a hedging role, where a large stockpile could relatively swiftly be re-activated if needed.[117]

2.5.1 Cooperation or Competition

Much like Trump, the Biden administration stops short of calling Russia an adversary. But Russia is referred to as both a threat and a challenge. Russia is an irresponsible state waging unjustified wars of aggression against its neighbors in Europe.[118] This is interestingly put in contrast to China, which is singled out as the U.S.'s "pacing challenge". Russia is clearly considered a competitor, but one which the U.S. will handle with European allies as an acute problem whereas China is the new, overarching strategic competitor. Russia simply no longer has the economic base required to compete at that level.[119]

The 2022 NPR does however express significant dismay at Russian nuclear signaling during its invasion of Ukraine. The NPR makes it clear the U.S. will resist any attempts at nuclear

[117] U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review,* Washington DC, USA, 2022, p 7.
[118] U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington DC, USA, October 2022, p III–IV.
[119] Ibid, p III, 2.

coercion.[120] Again, the Biden administration does not outright name Russia an adversary, but this seems like mere semantic formality given how Russia is talked about. They are named as a nuclear "rival" and while some lip-service is paid to wishing for a return to cooperation, they are framed as a strategic issue to address.[121]

Still, the ultimate ambition of a nuclear weapons-free world remains. If at all possible, the U.S. government still wishes to engage with Russia for further arms limitation talks.[122]

2.5.2 Russian Thinking and Capabilities

The Biden administration agrees with the Trump administration on Russian capabilities and on the need to overhaul the U.S. nuclear arsenal. The Biden administration however scraps the Trump-proposed SLCM, considering it expensive and of dubious military value.[123] This is interesting as the Trump administration saw the SLCM as a regional deterrence, and the Biden administration says that it sees deterring Russia from limited nuclear use to win a regional war as a priority.[124]

The Biden administration instead wishes to use F35 aircraft in Europe for NATO's nuclear missions and introduce a new short to medium range missile to create risks for Russian decision makers. The U.S. government wants to make it clear to the Kremlin that the U.S., and by extension NATO, can respond with nuclear force at the regional level. This could be seen as the U.S. government lowering the nuclear-use threshold, but the intent is to in fact heighten the threshold by creating uncertainty and risk to dissuade any Russian temptation to employ nuclear weapons against Ukraine.[125] Concerned about Russian intentions and capabilities the U.S. government pledges to further enhance NATO capabilities in Europe, with F35's and more nuclear exercises.[126]

2.5.3 Values and Interests at Risk

The Biden administration puts it very plainly, Russia's nuclear arsenal is an existential threat to the U.S. and its allies.[127] While all previous administrations have in some way or other

[120] U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, p 2.
[121] Ibid, p 11.
[122] Ibid, p 16.
[123] Ibid, p 20.
[124] Ibid, p 5.
[125] Ibid, p 2.
[126] Ibid, p 14.
[127] Ibid, p 4.

acknowledged this reality, the Biden administration is the first one to speak so plainly on the topic.

The U.S. government also signifies that it takes its extended deterrence commitments seriously and that it will defend allies with nuclear weapons if called for.[128]

2.5.4 Summary

In many ways, the Biden administrations views on Russia are the easiest to overview. They are a threat and U.S. nuclear forces must be strengthened to meet that threat. While arsenals are much smaller than during their Cold War highs, much of the thinking echoes back. Russia is not the Soviet Union however, it's not nearly as expansive or strong.

To examine the four deterrence factors; 1) while the Biden administration choses some different means than the Trump administration, both broad and narrow deterrence against Russia are to be expanded as a strategic necessity, 2) the same can be said for central and extended deterrence – nuclear modernization, and new delivery systems, are needed to keep the U.S. homeland and its allies safe, 3) again, general and immediate deterrence are being enhanced, immediate deterrence mostly through NATO nuclear sharing, general deterrence later through wider modernizations, 4) the U.S. government wants to complicate nuclear employment and planning for Russia, increasing risk through enhancing and adapting U.S. nuclear posture.

From our ontological factors the Biden administration is generally like the Trump administration; 1) looking at the government's modernizations and nuclear posture there seems to be a turn to reflexive and material capabilities. Russia's actions against Ukraine are seen as threatening to the European security order, and Russia's nuclear modernization is seen as an existential threat to the U.S. itself, so it reacts in kind, 2) crisis assessment is seen through and through the U.S. governments views on Russia. They physically threaten the U.S., its allies, and its interests and it also challenges U.S. international values. Russia is made to be a strategic threat and challenge to overcome, 3) the biographical narrative is not so much a shift here, that happened with Trump, but rather a radical increase of pace of the shift the Trump administration started. The U.S. will act to face and overcome its international challengers, Russia will be deterred, and its aggression contained. The U.S. superpower displays itself as a guardian, shield and sword in hand against revisionist expansion, 4) the Biden administration internationally frames the U.S. as a responsible nuclear power, trying to engage constructively with a

[128] U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, p 8.

belligerent Russia. The U.S. signals to competitors and allies alike that it will act decisively and responsibly, hoping to be threatening to one audience while being reassuring to another.

Starting with Trump, and expanded by Biden, is the return of existential thinking and physical security. From Clinton to Obama Russia was mostly perceived as potentially threatening abstract values such as democracy and free markets. Now under Biden, Russia is again an existential threat to the U.S. and its allies. The Biden administration does as expected from deterrence theory and ontological security helps explain why this is. As Russian aggression in Europe escalates the U.S. government breaks with post-Cold War narratives and re-claims the role of guardian of the west.

3. Conclusion

This thesis has examined roughly three decades of U.S. government perceptions of Russia in the nuclear field. From the optimism of Clinton, Bush, and Obama, to the resurgence of tensions under Trump and Biden.

The title of this thesis poses a question – are nuclear weapons a go-to for great powers facing existential issues? Are nuclear weapons clothes for winter? This question cannot be adequately answered with a yes or a no. This thesis examines only a limited part of what informs U.S. government thinking on Russia and Russian nuclear forces, postures, and intentions. But from this set of sources the answer is a tentative yes. The U.S. government does not appear especially keen on nuclear weapons in general, as tensions decrease, they gladly reduce their quantity and role. But as temperatures chill and Cold War style tensions in Europe rise, nuclear weapons seem to provide sought comfort.

The overarching research question has been: *How has the U.S. government's public stance on Russia as a nuclear peer evolved since the end of the Cold War?*

The Cold War ended with much optimism and cooperative engagement between the U.S. and Russia. When relations are less hostile and intents are more cooperative minded, prior to the Trump administration, deterrence theory provides little insight. Just from deterrence theory Obama is irrational with his wish to push ahead with unilateral nuclear arms reductions even as Russia is acknowledged to modernize its forces.

When examining the U.S. governments evolving view of Russia, ontological security helps explain *why* deterrence factors are as they are. After Crimea in 2014 and as Russia modernizes, the only rational thing for the Obama administration to do is surely to re-arm in kind. From an

ontological security perspective however, inaction from the U.S. government is quite understandable as it fits in well within a larger biographical narrative of the U.S. taking the lead on matters of global nuclear disarmament and terror rather than framing Russia as a crisis. Ontological security therefore seems an appropriate way to address the problem of assumed rationality both Payne and Ludvik raised. There are abstract factors at work which weighed heavier than fears of a re-arming Russia. The Obama administration expanded upon the Clinton and Bush administrations pivot towards disarmament cooperation and international terrorism and non-proliferation. So even as Russia strengthened its nuclear capabilities and posture, deterrence factors all pointed downwards for the U.S. government. Through ontological security this counter-intuitive state can be explained.

The Trump and Biden administrations actions are easier to parse through deterrence theory, in that the government does what you would expect it to do. Russian modernizations are matched, and nuclear weapons are given a larger role in response to perceived views on Russian views on nuclear employment. This blunt and straight forward view can be nuanced, however. Ontological security complements the analysis by highlighting that the U.S. government shows a preponderance for reflexive and material capabilities. Rather than this nuclear focus being seen as just a return to form, ontological security reveals that it's a larger break with prior post-Cold War narratives of cooperation. The U.S. government's views of Russian nuclear capabilities are found to be less reliant on Russian nuclear capabilities than might be assumed – crisis assessment is determinant in deciding how these capabilities are seen.

Throughout, while deterrence theory gives a good foundation for understanding U.S. government views of Russia, its assumptions of rationality can fall apart. Ontological security has throughout helped explain why U.S. administrations have viewed Russia as they have and how its actions, or inaction, fit within larger narratives.

Three questions were posited:

1. How does the U.S. government describe Russia in terms of competition and cooperation?
2. How does the U.S. government describe Russian thinking and capabilities?
3. What values and interests does the U.S. government consider to be at risk?

These have been used throughout the empirical section, they shaped its disposition, and they were answered point by point in close relation with theory. Here some summarizing points will be made.

1) The Clinton era set the stage for cooperating with Russia, and this was embraced by the two following administrations. The U.S. government fit the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union as part of its biographical narrative of being a victor. Liberty, democracy, and free markets prevailed against totalitarian communism. The reflexive and material arms race of the Cold War ended and many thousands of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems were retired. As relations deteriorated under the latter part of the Obama administration, the U.S. government showed significant reluctance in abandoning these efforts. The Trump administration changed course. Russia threatened the sovereignty of European allies and western values in the world, they reacted reflexively to Russian nuclear modernization (something previous administrations expressly declined to do) by launching similar initiatives of their own. The Biden administration took a further step, declaring Russia an existential threat. If Clinton and Bush oversaw spring, Obama had the summer watch. Trump saw autumn, and under Biden winter returned. As relations worsen, deterrence factors become more prominent.

2) As touched on above, Russian nuclear capabilities are until the end of the Obama administration mostly seen as a non-threat. Even as Russia was noted to modernize its military and nuclear forces, there was little willingness to respond in kind. Current strategic forces were adequate to meet deterrence needs, if anything the U.S. government wanted to reduce its deterrence posture. After 2014 the Obama administration cautiously started showing signs of crisis thinking. Trump continued this and announced nuclear modernization in part as a response to Russian actions. Russia also received significantly more negative attention from this point onwards. Russia yet again became a strategic problem. Previously downplayed talk of how U.S. strategic forces must be able to 'achieve U.S. objectives' should deterrence fail came back. The Biden administration, again, continued in this direction. Eastern NATO-members have clamored for a larger U.S. presence in Europe. Potential shame of betraying allies, the perceived importance of extended deterrence, a crisis view on Russian actions, and the U.S. biographical narrative of being the lead western nation all play into this.

3) Throughout the administrations there's always *some* concern expressed over Russia. For Clinton, Bush, and Obama its relatively mild – its noted how Russia retains substantial nuclear forces and how they are modernizing these. Yet optimism far outweigh these worries. Concerns over Russia are hypothetical, they might fail on their journey towards U.S. values of democracy and free markets. The threat to American values and interests is

abstract and distant. Yet again, things change with Trump, but even more so with Biden. While the Trump administration expands the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. strategy and take actions to have a larger regional presence in Europe to assure allies, they do not declare Russia an existential threat. To some extent the threat posed by Russian nuclear forces is still more abstract than physical for the U.S. It is not New York city that's held at risk but rather western values, Europe, NATO cohesion, freedom of action. The Biden administration, as said, re-introduces Russia as threatening the U.S. existentially. This comes, of course, after Ukraine and the general re-invigoration of NATO since the full invasion. But the question remains if the Biden administration says this because it thinks its substantially more likely now than in 2018 that Russia might launch nuclear weapons against the U.S. homeland, or if this is better understood as crisis thinking enforcing the biographical narrative of the U.S. as a guardian of the west – and reflexive thinking and a rush to material solutions taking the perceived threat level up to existential.

4. Further Research

This thesis strongly suggests that nuclear weapons are more prominent now than ever in U.S. thinking since the end of the Cold War. This seems to be a well-founded conclusion. However, given the nature of the source material used it's inevitable that nuclear weapons receive center stage. A more comprehensive study of U.S. strategy and foreign policy, using a broader theoretical foundation and more diverse source material, would be needed to truly validate these claims. Similar studies to this one, but focusing on China, Iran, North Korea could also yield interesting results.

Examining nuclear dynamics in action with case studies would also be of value. Continuing in Jan Ludvik's footsteps by, for instance, examining nuclear signaling and deterrence in the Ukraine war. How has Russia's nuclear arsenal affected the U.S., and other countries, thinking and actions? They have evidently not deterred aid, but have they slowed it? Have nuclear weapons prevented a coalition against Russia like the one against Iraq in 1991?

Finally, further theory-building on deterrence is bound to be useful. This thesis affirms points made by Payne and Ludvik that traditional deterrence theory reduces highly complex and nuanced relationships to something simpler than they really are.

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