



DISCUSSING THE UNTHINKABLE

BY ANDREW ERTL

Andrew Ertl is a Program Analyst working at the Pentagon to effectuate more optimal Marine Corps force posture in the Indo-Pacific. Previously, he was himself an active-duty U.S. Marine for six years, during which time he deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan and then served three years at U.S. embassies abroad. Andrew then earned a BA in History from Columbia University before embarking on his first graduate program at Tsinghua University in China through the Schwarzman Scholars Program, earning a Master's of Management Science in Global Affairs. Andrew earned a second graduate degree from the University of Oxford, a Master's of Public Policy in 2019. He then worked on Capitol Hill as a defense and foreign policy staffer before serving as a John S. McCain Strategic Defense Fellow for Headquarters, United States Space Force, the Office of Industrial Base Policy, and most recently within the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations working to facilitate AUKUS program agreements. Andrew's military awards include the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal, and he was a member of a team that was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation. Andrew looks forward to continuing a life of service.



Test-firing of Atomic Annie, the M65 atomic cannon, on May 25, 1953. Source: U.S. Army

I was fortunate to attend the “[Escalation, De-escalation, and Intra-War Deterrence](#)” workshop, hosted by the [Center for Global Security Research](#) (CGSR) on the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory campus, as a Pacific Forum Young Leader in early April. At the time, I worked within the Navy’s Strategic Deterrence shop, located in the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations (OPNAV N5) at the Pentagon. Having focused on the AUKUS partnership there, which intentionally has next to nothing to do with strategic (at least, nuclear) deterrence, I viewed this workshop as a great opportunity to learn more about subjects I had only peripherally been exposed to – and from bona fide experts in the field! My experience was that, and more.

Owing to the workshop’s title, much of the first session revolved around the idea of an “intrawar” and how the period in which we currently reside may be seen as residing in one. Quoting the person who led that session, “An intrawar begins with the first failure of deterrence, and ends with the last failure of deterrence, which is a nuclear exchange.” This set the tone for the remaining sessions well, and it brought up a kaleidoscope of topics: is it necessary to escalate and, if so, how far do we go towards punishing our opponent(s); when to de-escalate to preserve national advantage while not conceding too much to your opponent(s) or, indeed, provoking a deleterious response; and much more.

If we are unsuccessful at inhibiting escalation, then we should seek to motivate de-escalation. Ultimately, we want to “persuade” our opponent(s) into options that are more favorable to us, rather than escalate. From there, the continuum leads to setting conditions for peace and the culmination of (open/active) hostilities. And, of course, we must be cognizant that our opponent(s) may (probably do) have different perceptions of “sunk cost” and associated pain tolerance, and certainly different valuations over different prospective conflicts (for example, one fought over Taiwan). The paradox is that to “reset” deterrence – in the hopes of restoring the power balance in our favor – we will probably have to respond massively, and overwhelmingly, should the moment come but this may bring about a conflict that is catastrophic to ourselves as well; even if we prevail,

however such an end state is defined (indeed, a participant opined that true victory in nuclear war is near impossible). The heaviness of the subjects discussed led to Chatham House rules being of course applied.

Needless to say, a range of unique ideas were discussed that I was unfamiliar with. Examples included the notion of a nuclear “warning shot,” which comes with its own attendant consequences such as masquerading as an independent nuclear power but potentially revealing your dependence on the United States’ much larger strategic deterrent; operational decision-making spread amongst American Allies with whom the United States has substantial, and longstanding, partnerships; and so much more.

Ultimately, though, I was re-impressed by how sobering a nuclear conflict likely would be. Residing in Springfield, VA – a Northern Virginia suburb only 12 miles from the Pentagon – I’ve sometimes joked with my wife that if she ever receives a National Emergency Message text indicating nuclear missiles are inbound, she should drive southwest as fast as possible, avoiding anything she perceives as potential targets worthy of a nuclear weapon. Even if that is the best advice that can be offered, and she takes it, and hopefully, I’m not at work (because the Pentagon is surely a nuclear target), our lives and those of hundreds of millions of Americans would forever be altered. Workshops like that hosted at CGSR in April are critically important at bringing together thought leaders; in this case, nuclear deterrence experts to discuss and work out ways to avoid – and, if necessary, to fight on – the worst of days.

I am grateful to the Pacific Forum Young Leaders’ Program for sponsoring my attendance and participation and look forward to future opportunities to interact with Pacific Forum, fellow Young Leaders, and other affiliates.

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