Restoring Nuclear Deterrence in the Modern Age

Lt. Gen. (Ret) Charlie "Tuna" Moore
Distinguished Visiting Professor
Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN
Charles.moore@vanderbilt.edu

Brett Goldstein
Special Advisor to the Chancellor
Research Professor in Engineering Science & Management
Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN
Brett.goldstein@vanderbilt.edu

The threat of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) has proven sufficient to deter a catastrophic global exchange of nuclear weapons, but that stability is under threat from modern technological advancements including hypersonic and autonomous weapons, enhanced cyber capabilities, and capable missile defense systems. The United States should respond to these developments by adopting a nuclear "pentad" approach—modernizing the triad delivery capabilities, investing in air/missile defense, and ensuring nuclear command, control, and communication systems are secure, resilient and reliable.

Keywords: nuclear deterrence, cybersecurity, hypersonic weapons

INTRODUCTION

For six decades, Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) has been the bedrock of nuclear stability. The logic is stark but effective: if each side can absorb a first strike and still retaliate with devastating force, neither side benefits from acting first. That deterrent rested on the shared perception that both adversaries possessed a survivable second-strike capability. Today, that perception is beginning to erode.

Hypersonic delivery vehicles compress warning times to mere minutes (Sayler K. M., 2025); sophisticated cyber operations and artificial intelligence driven deception have the potential to cloud the reliability of our nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3) (Roth, Earnhardt, & Andrews, 2021); and the traditional nuclear triad—intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles and strategic bombers—was never designed for an era of modern air/missile defense. As a result, the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent may be perceived as slipping precisely when the speed and complexity of conflict are accelerating.

WHY MAD WORKED—AND WHY THOSE CONDITIONS ARE VANISHING

MAD emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, crystallized by strategists such as John von Neumann and codified in treaties like the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the first two

Strategic Arms Limitation Treaties (Woods, Ma, & Clancy, 2024; The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025). Its success depended on three practical tenets. First, both superpowers fielded a triad of delivery systems that offered redundancy across land, sea, and air, making it virtually impossible to destroy every retaliatory asset in a single blow. Second, the NC3 architecture, while susceptible to physical attack, operated in an analog environment that was largely insulated from sophisticated real-time intrusion. And third, that each country possessed a Presidential succession and launch authority delegation plan.

Unfortunately, the development of modern advanced capabilities has begun to erode the perceptions that a nuclear war is "unwinnable." Unlike traditional ICBMs that take approximately thirty minutes to reach their targets, hypersonic glide vehicles can arrive in under five minutes and maneuver unpredictably along low trajectories that challenge current sensors and interceptors (Defense Primer: Hypersonic Boost-Glide Weapons, 2024; White, 2025). Autonomous weapons can be used to overwhelm defensive systems or to attack inside of our traditional sensor coverage. Additionally, the potential exists for cyber actors to probe NC3 networks for opportunities to spoof, jam, or delay presidential communications. Meanwhile, generative AI could fabricate sensor data or advisory messages, making them appear authentic in the fog of crisis. And finally, modern missile defensive systems can significantly reduce the number of nuclear weapons that successfully reach their target (Korda & Kristensen, 2019).

THE DECISION-SPACE CRISIS

Imagine the following scenario: global sensors report a hypersonic launch, and trajectory analysis predicts an impact on the national capital within minutes. The President must be notified, connected to senior military leaders through secure channels, fully briefed on the situation, and asked to make the gravest decision any human has ever had to contemplate—all before the inbound weapon arrives. Swarms of autonomous systems could be launched from near on inside our borders to further decrease or even potentially eliminate the Presidents decision space. Additionally, if cyber interference delays or corrupts the communication process, or if deep-fake messages create even momentary doubt about data fidelity, our ability to decisively respond may be questioned. Although it has been publicly acknowledged that there are robust presidential succession and launch authority delegation plans in place (the details of which remain classified), adversaries equipped with hypersonic and autonomous weapons, advanced cyber capabilities, and a reasonably capable missile defense system might nevertheless believe they can successfully execute a decapitation strike and substantially mitigate a smaller scale retaliatory response.

MAD is eroded, not because our adversary's warheads are more destructive, but because we have not kept up with the technological advancements that undercut the perception that it is still the most likely outcome.

TOWARD A NUCLEAR PENTAD

To re-establish a credible deterrent, the United States must expand from our current triad to a "pentad," adding two mutually reinforcing elements to the existing land, sea, and air legs. The first new element is a layered, global, and multi-domain missile/air defense network designed not to provide an impenetrable shield but to complicate an adversary's first-strike calculations and, crucially, to buy additional time for informed decisions. The second is a cyber resilient, AI empowered NC3 architecture that can authenticate data, withstand digital attack, and guarantee that valid orders reach our delivery platforms even under the most challenging conditions (Wehsener, Reddie, Walker, & Reiner, 2023). Additionally, the U.S. must continue to add hypersonic capabilities to our traditional triad. Together, these additions form a five-part structure whose sole purpose is to preserve the United States' ability to order the delivery of a second devastating strike, thereby restoring the mutual vulnerability that deters a first strike from the start.

Strategic Stability and Perception Management

A modern pentad is defensive, not escalatory. By signaling that the United States can respond even under the most challenging of circumstances, it removes the temptation for an adversary to gamble on a knockout blow. To prevent misinterpretation, Washington should accompany the transition with transparent messaging and renewed arms-control initiatives, particularly on hypersonic and dual-use technologies. Additionally, the U.S. should not take actions that undermine an adversary's second-strike potential. The goal is to reassure rivals that U.S. improvements safeguard second-strike credibility rather than seek a first-strike advantage.

CONCLUSION

MAD remains the logical center of nuclear peace, but the technological context that once made it reliable is waning. Hypersonic speed, autonomous systems, pervasive cyber operations, and AI threaten to wrest the retaliatory option from the President before it can be exercised. Additionally, even if nuclear authorities are delegated and exercised, modern air defense systems can challenge the effectiveness of traditional missile and air defense systems. By evolving from a triad to a pentad the U.S. can reestablish an undeniable second-strike capability. Doing so neither eliminates all risk nor aspires to be a completely impenetrable shield; it simply restores the bedrock assumption that any nuclear aggression will invite the high probability of a devastating reprisal. In a world where the instruments of war grow faster, smarter, and less predictable, such assurance is the surest path to preserving deterrence.

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