

# Strategic Stability and the Proliferation of Conventional Precision Strike: A (Bounded) Case for Optimism?

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**This is an open-access draft of an article accepted for publication in**

***[The Nonproliferation Review](#)***:

It represents the version that the journal accepted for publication, but has not undergone copyediting, production, or post-acceptance updates

**Accepted:** 12 June 2020

## **Abstract**

What are the potential deterrent advantages of long-range conventional precision strike (LRCPS) acquisition by new possessor states? Using the case of Poland, this article argues that such LRCPS proliferation offers two possible deterrent benefits. First, it strengthens its possessors' ability to threaten aggressors with costs in the form of both counterforce denial and countervalue punishment, thereby reducing dependence on great-power allies' extended-deterrent commitments. Second, it provides a new threat-proximate center of retaliatory decision, thereby strengthening the credibility of great-power allies' extended-deterrent commitments. However, while LRCPS capabilities may indeed bring certain advantages, they may also exacerbate political hostilities, incentivize intra-crisis escalation, and fail to provide adequate survivability or penetrability to actually deliver their purported deterrent effects in practice. As such, the overall consequences of such proliferation for strategic stability and associated international security are ambiguous, thereby meriting case-by-case analysis. If they are pursued nonetheless, moreover, then a countervailing combination of operational and strategic measures may be employed to reduce both first-strike temptations and adversaries' broader fears.

Will the proliferation of advanced conventional strike capabilities – that is, the acquisition by new operator states of long-range, high-precision, standoff land-attack missiles tipped with penetrative high-yield (but non-nuclear) warheads, along with the associated delivery and targeting infrastructures – bolster deterrence, as its proponents hope, or exacerbate crisis instability, as its skeptics fear? A Simulation Exercise (SimEx) conducted within the parameters of an Expert Judgement Workshop in London during January 2019 provided grounds for concern.<sup>1</sup> In a hypothetical scenario involving a militarized interstate dispute between Poland and a major non-NATO European power, the hypothesized existence of such conventional standoff strike capabilities under Polish ownership and control resulted in a greater likelihood of escalation at each simulated decision point than in such capabilities' absence.<sup>2</sup>

Yet such a finding – while valuable – also risks stacking the deck. For while a crisis may indeed be more prone to escalation in the presence of such capabilities than their absence once it is underway, what if the existence of such capabilities prevents such a confrontation from ever unfolding in the first place? Put differently, while the presence of such weapons might make deterrence failure more dangerous once it is already presumed to have occurred, what if their presence is the very thing that prevents deterrence from even failing and thereby the escalatory situation from even arising? The SimEx scenario selected on the dependent variable, in short, and while it subsequently shed important light on *intra*-crisis escalatory dynamics, it also left a crucial half of the question over the merits of such capability proliferation – whether their presence in new possessors' hands might strengthen *inter*-crisis deterrence – unanswered.

The purpose of this article is therefore to investigate ways in which the proliferation of such capabilities could actually strengthen conventional deterrence and thereby buttress strategic stability, even conceding that – should deterrence fail – the presence of such capabilities could exacerbate escalation within a crisis. To be clear, this is not some full-throated endorsement of such proliferation; it would bring numerous downsides, as will be discussed subsequently.

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<sup>1</sup> This event was hosted at the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), as part of a collaborative research program between RUSI and the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, with financial support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Participants included a mix of government policymakers, think-tank analysts, and academic experts from a range of NATO states. For details, see: <https://rusi.org/event/expert-judgement-workshop-long-range-precision-strike-and-strategic-stability-europe> (accessed 24/07/2019).

<sup>2</sup> Such an outcome was arguably unsurprising: if one party lacks the ways/means of escalation, then their options for escalation are (obviously) zero; if that party does *not* lack the ways/means of escalation, by contrast, then their options for escalation are (obviously) *not* zero.

Nonetheless, if we are to pass comment on the positive or negative consequences of new powers' potential acquisition of such weaponry, we must examine both sides of the coin.

The analysis offered here is circumscribed in pursuit of clarity and parsimony. Like January 2019's SimEx, it restricts itself to the specific consequences of postulated Polish long-range conventional precision strike (LRCPS) capabilities. It may offer applicable insights for other regional contexts, such as the effects of ongoing South Korean LRCPS advancement on the East Asian strategic balance,<sup>3</sup> but such non-European regions are not its focus.<sup>4</sup> Poland is the largest and most strategically consequential of NATO's "new" powers, complete with the pressing deterrence concerns that such frontier proximity to a once-again-assertive Russia brings (concerns exacerbated by a twentieth-century experience of being repeatedly invaded by its great-power neighbors across offense-permissive terrain). Today, Warsaw once again finds itself with a paucity of capabilities compared to certain great(er) powers nearby, but also has the wealth to increase its own capabilities as and where it chooses to – hence positing the acquisition of one particularly significant group of such capabilities to explore their implications for strategic stability.

As it happens, moreover, Poland *is* currently engaged in the acquisition of LRCPS capabilities; the SimEx scenario was thus far from coincidental.<sup>5</sup> However, the article does not attempt to analyze the specific idiosyncrasies of Polish defense politics/spending, or of Warsaw's

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<sup>3</sup> Seoul is indigenously developing a series of increasingly long-ranged ground-/naval-/air-launched conventional strike missiles that will enable it to hold strategic targets throughout its region at risk: Richard Sisk, "New South Korean missile would target North's bunkers, long-range artillery," *Military.com*, 25 October 2017, <https://www.military.com/defensetech/2017/10/25/new-south-korean-missile-target-norths-bunkers-long-range-artillery> (accessed 24/07/2019); John Pike, "GLCM - Hyunmoo III / ALCM - Boramae / SLCM - Chonryong / Cheon Ryong / Ch'onnyong (Sky Dragon)," *GlobalSecurity.org*, 9 September 2017, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/rok/chonryong.htm> (accessed 24/07/2019). As such, South Korea is certainly one of the important regional powers currently engaged in LRCPS proliferation in the belief that such capabilities will enhance national security – but while it is an apposite case, and while the article's findings may therefore transfer to the East Asian regional context, the analysis is specifically bounded to the Polish lens for clarity.

<sup>4</sup> Since the focus is on the effects of *horizontal* proliferation by *new* operators, the analysis therefore also does not cover established LRCPS operators, i.e. longstanding major powers that have always been at/near the frontier of standoff munitions technology – although it is important to note that such powers are continuously involved in the *vertical* proliferation of such capabilities (i.e. ongoing weapon modernization/improvement).

<sup>5</sup> Poland acquired the US-made Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM) – a reportedly ~370km-range weapon used by several other US allies – in 2014, achieving initial operational capability in 2017. But more significantly, in 2016, Warsaw gained US Government approval to purchase 70 units of JASSM's Extended-Range variant (JASSM-ER) – an air-launched deep-strike missile with a reported range of >925km – making Poland JASSM-ER's first non-US operator: *Combat Aircraft*, "Polish F-16s set for extended-range JASSM," 30 November 2016, <https://combataircraft.keypublishing.com/2016/11/30/polish-f-16s-set-for-extended-range-jassm/> (accessed 09/09/2019). And Warsaw is *also* seeking a modest submarine-launched LRCPS capability, as discussed subsequently.

diplomatic relations with the potentially hostile great power in its region (i.e. Russia), or even of the Polish JASSM-ER acquisition program. Remaining confined to the current empirical situation would unnecessarily curtail the analysis – for example, while Warsaw is indeed procuring standoff *missiles*, it still lacks the long-range ISTAR<sup>6</sup> systems that would be necessary to claim a sovereign LRCPS capability that is truly *independent* of larger NATO powers’ support<sup>7</sup> – whereas contemplating the strategic consequences of proliferation on a hypothetical basis allows us to assess the desirability of a country in Poland’s situation ever acquiring a fully independent LRCPS capability. As such, Poland’s geopolitical context effectively represents an empirically-located testbed for a broader set of generalizable concerns.<sup>8</sup>

Note too that nothing presented here suggests that either side – Poland/NATO *or* Russia – has necessarily malign or “greedy” motives (although neither are they precluded). On the contrary, both sides have sound reasons to fear the capabilities of the other, given the possibility of hostile revisionist intent, and to therefore seek to enhance their own capabilities (supporting and exacerbating the other’s fears, i.e. fueling a security dilemma).<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, from the general NATO and specific Polish perspectives, the salient question is whether the expected benefits of a strengthened deterrent threat – and thus greater capability to safeguard vulnerable interests – that LRCPS proliferation would provide are outweighed by the possible costs of crisis instability and unwanted escalation. Advancing the process of weighing this high-stakes trade-off is the contribution of this essay.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it considers two logics by which the acquisition of robust Polish LRCPS capabilities could bolster deterrence; one pertains specifically to the increased deterrent power of Poland itself, via both denial and punishment mechanisms, while the other relates to the general credibility of NATO’s extended-deterrent commitments, focusing

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<sup>6</sup> Intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance.

<sup>7</sup> Poland is reportedly seeking to modernize its Air Force via the acquisition of a 32 F-35As, which – while still not a bespoke long-range ISTAR platform – would nonetheless bring an upward step-change in ISTAR capability (as well as enhanced penetrability and survivability) compared to the current F-16 fleet: Jarosław Adamowski, “Poland wants to buy fifth-gen fighters under \$49B modernization program,” *DefenseNews*, 28 February 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2019/02/28/poland-wants-to-buy-fifth-gen-fighters-under-49b-modernization-program/> (accessed 24/07/2019). Nonetheless, overall Polish ISTAR capability remains rudimentary by the standards of states seeking to conduct >1,000km standoff strike missions.

<sup>8</sup> The article therefore combines inductive and deductive inference; it starts from a real (and important) empirical puzzle, before tracing forward the logical possibilities: David Blagden, “Induction and Deduction in International Relations: Squaring the Circle between Theory and Evidence,” *International Studies Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2016), 195-213.

<sup>9</sup> For seminal discussion of such dynamics, see: Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (1978), 167-214.

on diversification of the Alliance's centers of decision. Second, it considers an array of conceptual and practical obstacles to such LRCPS proliferation actually generating a net positive contribution to Polish/NATO security, including – but not limited to – the crisis stability concerns highlighted by the January 2019 SimEx. It concludes that such capabilities do indeed offer meaningful deterrent advantages, hence the interest of states like Poland in acquiring them. Given other associated risks, however, the overall desirability of such proliferation is ambiguous and its net contribution to both state-specific and Alliance-wide security therefore merits further case-by-case consideration.

### **The Twin Pillars of the Deterrence Case: Local Effects, General Credibility?**

The potential deterrent benefits of LRCPS proliferation – that is, the case to suggest that the acquisition of such capabilities by new operators may bolster strategic stability by reducing the likelihood of escalatory crises of the kind hypothesized by the 2019 SimEx from ever unfolding in the first place – can be demarcated into two distinct but related logics. One rests on the *independent* deterrent power that such weaponry would bring to their possessor – in this scenario, Poland – thereby *reducing* such states' reliance on the extended-deterrent commitment of great-power allies. The other rests on the contribution that such weaponry in Polish hands would make to the overall credibility of NATO's Alliance-wide deterrent posture, thereby *bolstering* the extended-deterrent commitment of great-power allies. This section discusses each in turn.

#### *Deny, Punish, Prevail? A Proliferator's Calculus*

The first half of the case that LRCPS proliferation could enhance Polish deterrence and thereby strategic stability hinges on the strengthening of Poland's national military position that such capabilities would provide. Such a case contains both denial and punishment elements, which – when taken together – may produce a plausible rationale by which LRCPS proliferation better enables Warsaw to safeguard its interests independently.

How might LRCPS enhance Polish deterrence by denial? While Poland clearly suffers conventional inferiority compared to Russia, its military forces – and economic base with which to procure more – are not so feeble that attempting conventional defense is necessarily futile. On the contrary, if any Russian assault on Poland can be made slow and attritional, then it will be

much more costly – and therefore much less strategically appealing – to Moscow. To conduct swift, decisive blitzkrieg – and thereby achieve large strategic gains via offensive action at modest relative cost, making such aggression relatively appealing – an attacker must be capable of achieving (1) concentration of its forces, (2) the overwhelming of defenses at localized points, and then (3) subsequent exploitation of those breakthroughs before they can be stemmed and countered.<sup>10</sup> If such force concentration, localized overwhelming, and subsequent exploitation can be denied by the defender, therefore, then attacking them will be a much less appealing prospect and conventional deterrence is more likely to hold.

Part of weaker powers' effort to deny more powerful aggressors such swift, decisive conventional gains is often to impose the quagmire of insurgent resistance<sup>11</sup> – and, incidentally, Poland is currently in the process of developing a territorial defense militia suitable for just such contingencies.<sup>12</sup> Crucially, however, accurate, long-range, high-yield standoff munitions could *also* be an invaluable part of denying such blitzkrieg.<sup>13</sup> With Poland's large tract of Central Europe to defend, the ability to disrupt and weaken force concentrations as soon as they are brought together, before they can overwhelm defenders – and to destroy/disrupt the logistical tails necessary to exploit any breakthroughs – from extended standoff range brings important advantages. It increases the probability of being able to release anti-ground munitions from outside any area of air control – and associated air defense perimeter covering the hostile ground forces – that may have been secured by the attackers. It enables attacking forces in multiple dispersed locations to be held at risk simultaneously from a single weapons-release location – and even from outside the airspace of the defending country, if necessary – bringing benefits in terms of speed of counterattack while retaining concentration and/or permitting the tactical retreat of defending air forces (thereby enhancing their protection and survivability). And it enables defenders to strike deep into the attacker's rear, hampering their resupply, their ability to bring forward reinforcements, and – via strikes on their airfields, naval bases, command/control

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<sup>10</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 30.

<sup>11</sup> Ivan Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Justyna Pawlak and Kacper Pempel, "In training with Poland's volunteer militia," *Reuters*, 18 October 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-poland-nationalism-militia/in-training-with-polands-volunteer-militia-idUKKCNIMS1R8> (accessed 25/07/2019).

<sup>13</sup> On the value of air power in denying adversaries the successful implementation of their preferred military strategy – to which precise, long-range ground strike capabilities have made an increasingly significant contribution as technology has advanced – see: Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 69-79.

facilities, missile sites, and so forth – their own ability to provide standoff indirect fire, effective leadership, *and* close air defense/support to their ground forces. Certainly, given that accurate standoff munitions in an attacker’s hands can be such a potent aid to force concentration and breakthrough, comparable capabilities in defenders’ hands may be essential to countering attackers’ advantages.<sup>14</sup>

Taken together, therefore, it would be wrong to suggest that there are no plausible defensive operational uses for Polish LRCPS – and such strengthening of the ability to *conduct* defensive denial also strengthens deterrence based on the *threat* of such denial. Of course, Poland will hope that its own LRCPS arsenal is only ever a modest adjunct to the full firepower of NATO. Moreover, insofar as European conventional inadequacy is often held up as a problem for NATO’s overall conventional deterrent credibility – and intra-alliance relations more broadly, insofar as US policymakers and taxpayers resent European free-riding – Polish LRCPS acquisition would itself enhance that “full firepower” of the combined Alliance. Nonetheless, like any prudent state, Poland must also be aware that the only truly assured capability is its own capability (plus, the possession of its own capability also makes the activation of allies’ capability more likely, as discussed subsequently).

In circumstances in which denial – both its threat and its attempted practice – nonetheless fails, meanwhile, how might LRCPS give Poland options for punishing an aggressor? And with potential adversaries knowing as much, how might *ex ante* deterrence then be bolstered by the threat of *ex post* retaliation?

While the possession of LRCPS would give Warsaw the independent means and associated ways to retaliate for Russian aggression against Poland, such capabilities can obviously neither match nor remove Moscow’s own ability to impose higher levels of pain back on Poland (leaving aside the broader retaliatory capabilities of NATO at this stage). The only way for Poland to achieve such full escalation equivalence against Russia would be for Warsaw to pursue its own secure second-strike nuclear arsenal.<sup>15</sup> And such a choice would bring heavy

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<sup>14</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, “Precision-Guided Munitions and Conventional Deterrence,” *Survival*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1979), 68-76.

<sup>15</sup> On escalation *equivalence* as a refinement of the early notion of escalation *dominance*, i.e. achieving deterrence through potential aggressors’ expected benefits never exceeding their expected costs, see: Charles L. Glaser, *Analyzing Strategic Nuclear Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 50, 55-57. On the general limitations of conventional airpower in delivering sufficient punishment to cause a state to fundamentally change strategy, given the stakes typically motivating such strategies and states’ capacity to absorb and adapt to aerial bombardment, see: Pape, *Bombing to Win*, 59-66, 86.

political and economic costs – quite possibly including US/NATO abandonment, as punishment for nuclear proliferation, which would be profoundly self-defeating<sup>16</sup> – even assuming that it was achievable at all.

However, such an overarching conclusion does not mean that there are no plausible logics by which LRCPS could deliver enhanced deterrence via the threat of retaliatory punishment. The damage that LRCPS can inflict is necessarily limited – at least compared to nuclear weapons – but is crucially (a) long-ranging and (b) precise. These qualities could deliver meaningful retaliatory effects. Such a case rests on several interrelated sub-pillars.

First, while the costs that LRCPS can impose are limited, so too may be the benefits that an aggressor hopes to advance by attacking – so the threat of even modest retaliation against sites of value to Russian policymakers may be sufficient to shift their calculus of whether attacking Poland is worth it. Of course, this is unlikely to deter in a situation in which Moscow has concluded the threat from NATO is so existential that it must be attacked and destroyed in its entirety – but then, in such a contingency, far more powerful arsenals than Poland’s would already be committed to the Alliance’s defense anyway.<sup>17</sup> Rather, the scenario in which an attack on Poland could become a possibility might involve Moscow contemplating whether to expand operations from (say) a confrontation with NATO in the Baltic States to elsewhere in Eastern Europe in pursuit of strategic advantage. In such circumstances – still short of general war against the whole Alliance, but with Russia considering the expansion of operations – Poland’s independent ability to inflict pain on targets of value to Moscow within Russia itself, regardless of whether NATO’s major powers assisted Warsaw in such an endeavor, could weigh on Russian strategists’ estimation of whether such campaign expansion was worth the candle.

Second, while LRCPS is not capable of imposing costs on Russia *so* unbearable that *no* possible offensive benefits could justify their incurrence – certain other NATO powers’ estimate of the capability necessary to deter Russia<sup>18</sup> – they are nonetheless capable of holding at risk targets of first-order strategic value to Russian policymakers and citizens. Notably, Poland’s new JASSM-ER missiles have a reported range somewhere in excess of 925km – *just* sufficient to

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<sup>16</sup> Bringing about the end of the US alliance guarantee out of fear over its future reliability would be like committing suicide for fear of death.

<sup>17</sup> Even in a nightmare scenario of US abandonment, the conventional forces of Britain, France, Germany, and others would be mobilized while the UK and French nuclear arsenals would remain salient.

<sup>18</sup> Kristan Stoddart, “Maintaining the ‘Moscow Criterion’: British Strategic Nuclear Targeting 1974–1979,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 6 (2008), 897–924.

reach Moscow itself without the launch aircraft leaving Polish airspace (as well as Saint Petersburg, obviously, which is significantly closer to Poland).<sup>19</sup> Being able to reach Moscow and Saint Petersburg, in turn, means that numerous Russian targets of political, military, cultural, and economic significance – the Kremlin itself, government ministries, national broadcasters, state firms, and more besides, along with the influential individuals who staff them – will be within range of highly accurate, high-yield conventional munitions under Warsaw’s independent control. Of course, as noted above, that does not mean that there are *no* circumstances whereby Russian policymakers would perceive a grievous enough threat from NATO that they would be willing to risk the destruction of such sites. But such destruction would certainly constitute very substantial harm to valued Russian interests, and the possibility thereof may thus be sufficient to deter Russian aggression towards Poland in circumstances *other* than those of a perceivedly first-order threat to Russia’s existence (e.g. in a scenario where Moscow may otherwise have been tempted to pursue advantage in a Baltic confrontation via escalation into Central Europe). The logic behind such a deterrent posture may also be strengthened further if particular regime characteristics cause Russian policymakers to attach particular value to institutions of state control, prestige, wealth, and so forth (i.e. if the destruction of such important and iconic sites produced an impression of regime weakness and associated domestic political instability).<sup>20</sup> Indeed, this is where the neat theoretical distinction between counterforce and countervalue targeting can break down in practice. Military bases, intelligence units, command/control headquarters, and so forth, may indeed be part of the forces that – if destroyed – can no longer be brought to bear against Poland (facilitating denial, as per the previous argument). But they may *also* be assets that an adversary values in their own right (making them apt targets for punishment).

Third, it is worth noting that – while Poland may indeed have few prospects of achieving escalation equivalence against Russia, in the sense that any Polish retaliatory strike using LRCPS could be countered by Russian re-retaliation of even greater magnitude – Moscow’s own

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<sup>19</sup> Based on measuring the distance to Moscow (919.7km) from the northeastern Polish border village of Holny Majera via the online *DistanceFromTo.net* tool: <https://www.distancefromto.net/> (accessed 29/07/2019).

<sup>20</sup> This article is not the place to debate the merits of such claims, but it is an argument that some advance (and that could conceivably influence the calculus of policymakers in Warsaw): Ben Judah, *Fragile Empire: How Russia Fell In and Out of Love with Vladimir Putin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

retaliatory options do not exist in a vacuum.<sup>21</sup> For if Russia was to punish a limited and precise Polish punishment strike that had been confined solely to regime and military targets with wider ranging re-retaliation against a broader spectrum of Polish targets – especially if Moscow introduced the ultimate weapons in its arsenal to such an exchange – then that could make it more likely that NATO’s larger powers would come to Poland’s assistance. As such, while it is true that Russia will retain the means to out-escalate Poland’s *independent* retaliatory capability, Moscow’s calculus of escalatory retaliation against Polish use of LRCPS would itself be colored by the increasing likelihood of provoking a full NATO defensive response as the severity of the attack on an Alliance member increases. And while Russia may indeed enjoy escalation dominance against Poland *individually*, it does not enjoy such superiority against NATO *collectively* (at least as long as the US superpower remains part of the Alliance). Furthermore, in contingencies in which Polish forces were contemplating a retaliatory strike using LRCPS because Russian ground forces had advanced into Poland itself, willingness to advance up the escalatory ladder could become even further skewed towards Warsaw. In such circumstances, Polish resolve would be especially high, since they were being threatened with conquest and the attendant horrors that can follow, while Russia’s ability to engage in counterforce re-retaliation would be complicated by the presence of its own troops – and yet, if they resorted to countervalue re-retaliation, it would again make a serious response from the rest of the Alliance more likely (since such countervalue targeting may well produce especially egregious humanitarian effects). Such considerations therefore not only bolster the credibility of Poland’s independent deterrence (since Moscow cannot be *sure* that Warsaw would never use its LRCPS capabilities against Russia out of fear of re-retaliation), but they also tie into the overall deterrent credibility of the whole Alliance, as discussed in the next sub-section.<sup>22</sup>

### *Centers of Decision and Extended Deterrent Credibility: An Alliance’s Calculus*

The previous sub-section considered the independent deterrent effect that LRCPS proliferation would bring to Poland, thereby raising Warsaw’s ability to safeguard its own interests beyond

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<sup>21</sup> On the nuclear and non-nuclear elements/interactions of Russia’s contemporary deterrent posture, see: Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, “The myth of Russia’s lowered nuclear threshold,” *WarOnTheRocks.com*, 22 September 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/09/the-myth-of-russias-lowered-nuclear-threshold/> (accessed 09/09/2019).

<sup>22</sup> The credibility of any deterrent or coercive posture is a function of (a) states’ power/capability and (b) sufficient interest (leading to sufficient resolve) to make good on their threats/promises: Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 8-9.

wholesale reliance on the extended-deterrent commitment of great-power allies. This sub-section now turns to consider the contribution that such weaponry in Polish hands would make to the *overall* credibility of NATO's Alliance-wide deterrent posture, thereby *bolstering* the extended-deterrent commitment of Poland's great-power allies.

Throughout its existence, NATO has faced a challenge in making its extended-deterrent commitments credible. In principle, such extended deterrence applies to the commitment of every Member State to treat an attack on another as an attack on itself, in the hope that such a commitment by all members to the defense of every other member produces deterrent effect. In practice, however, it applies most pressingly to the commitment of NATO's three nuclear powers – especially the United States, with its peerless conventional forces, vast nuclear arsenal, and secure geographical remove – to defend the Alliance's weaker members in Continental Europe, even at risk to themselves. When it comes to the United States – NATO's superpower underwriter and ultimate guarantor of an unbearable retaliatory response to aggression against the Alliance – this credibility challenge has been particularly acute: why would a US president, secure behind their oceanic moats, risk nuclear retaliation against Washington or Chicago in the name of defending Paris or Bonn? If adversaries and/or allies suspect that they would not, then the whole edifice of Alliance extended deterrence – the bargain that not every NATO member needs independent military capabilities (including nuclear weapons) sufficient to deter even the most powerful of potential aggressors, because allies' capabilities (including their nuclear arsenals) provide a “guarantee” to all – has a credibility problem.<sup>23</sup>

As long as there are doubts about intra-alliance cohesion – about whether a US president really would risk the annihilation of Chicago for the liberty of Paris, or indeed, whether a British prime minister really would risk the destruction of London for the freedom of Tallinn – such doubts about the credibility of NATO's extended deterrence will persist. The scale of this challenge has only grown with the expansion of NATO; American voters are no longer simply expected to risk Russian nuclear attack for the sake of Britons, Belgians, and Norwegians, but also for Latvians, Romanians, and Hungarians too. And as doubts over such credibility grow, the chances of a deterrence failure – that is, of some external power calculating that they can coerce

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<sup>23</sup> For seminal discussion of the credibility challenge in making deterrent commitments, see: Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966 [2008 ed.]), 35-91. For discussion of the contemporary NATO situation, see: David S. Yost, “Assurance and US Extended Deterrence in NATO,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 4 (2009), 755-780.

NATO's smaller and more peripheral members for the purposes of weakening and rolling back the Alliance without incurring too-large a risk of a painful military response from the larger and more central members – will grow too.

NATO has attempted to solve this credible commitment problem in a number of ways. The forward deployment of US, UK, and French troops – to locations such as West Berlin during the Cold War, and to areas such as the Baltic States today – commits those states to involvement in any fighting soon after the Alliance is attacked, thus increasing the risk that escalation will embroil their interests and ultimately involve their nuclear arsenals.<sup>24</sup> The risk of such escalation to the atomic level exerts a chilling effect over non-nuclear aggression at lower levels. The forward deployment of US tactical nuclear weapons to the territory of European allies for deployment with the armed forces of those allies was similarly intended to increase the credibility of the US promise to risk nuclear escalation in the name of defending Europe, thereby increasing the retaliatory credibility of the whole Alliance.

A third element that arose during the Cold War, however – one that followed coincidentally from the UK and French decisions to pursue independent nuclear arsenals despite Washington's preference for a continued atomic monopoly – was the existence of independent centers of decision. Once Britain and France possessed nuclear arms, the decision over whether and how to deploy the ultimate weapon in response to a Soviet assault on Western Europe no longer lay solely in American hands – and thus, escalation to nuclear retaliation could be set in motion by London or Paris, potentially regardless of the preferences of the US president in Washington.<sup>25</sup> Those new centers of decision were also located in Europe, and were thus more directly threatened by Soviet power. That being the case, the overall credibility of NATO's threat of nuclear retaliation for aggression – and thus the strength of the Alliance's overall deterrent posture – was enhanced by the introduction of new potential instigators and pathways to escalation (an enduring paradox of nuclear deterrence being that there is only deterrent effect if there is at least a non-zero possibility of nuclear use).

One consequence of NATO expansion, however, is that those “new” European centers of decision are themselves “old”. London and Paris – as well as Berlin, which is now another major

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<sup>24</sup> Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 47.

<sup>25</sup> Avery Goldstein, *Deterrence and Security in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: China, Britain, France, and the Enduring Legacy of the Nuclear Revolution* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 179-80; Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003 [3<sup>rd</sup> ed.]), 296; Jeremy Stocker, *The United Kingdom and Nuclear Weapons* [Adelphi Paper 386] (Abingdon, UK: Routledge/IISS, 2007), 21.

center of NATO strategic decision (albeit not nuclear decision) – are relatively remote from the Alliance’s contemporary frontier and thus relatively secure from its principal external threat (which is not to say that they are invulnerable, merely that their most pressing external major-power threat is not so proximate). This absence of a meaningful “center of decision” among the eastern NATO states could therefore weaken the credibility of the Alliance’s overall extended-deterrent posture in the frontier region that needs it most.

Polish LRCPS acquisition thus redresses this gap by locating a center of retaliatory decision among the eastern NATO countries most dependent on the robust deterrence born of a credible retaliatory threat. Of course, such decisions are not atomic decisions, in the sense that Warsaw still cannot itself commit the Alliance to thermonuclear war in the way that Washington, Paris, and London can. But by gaining the capability to conduct strategically significant conventional strikes against high-value targets inside Russia itself, Poland will gain the capability to set retaliatory punishment in motion. Insofar as such retaliation is escalatory, such a move would make the eventual commitment of NATO’s full arsenal – up to and including American, British, and French nuclear weapons – more likely, even though that arsenal is not itself in Polish hands. And insofar as this provides a mechanism by which the principal power of the Alliance’s “new” and relatively vulnerable frontier region can commit NATO to retaliation against aggression – albeit only of the limited and conventional variety to begin with – it also provides a logic by which Polish LRCPS proliferation could enhance the credibility of the Alliance’s overall extended-deterrent posture.

### **The Counterpoints: Crisis Instability and the Multifarious Roads to Unwanted Escalation**

The previous section presented two logics – one national, one alliance-wide – by which Polish LRCPS acquisition could bolster deterrence and associated strategic stability, thereby reducing the likelihood of a crisis like the one postulated in the January 2019 SimEx from ever unfolding in the first place. As noted at the outset, however, this article is not some full-throated endorsement of such proliferation, for substantial potential downsides weigh against such promised upsides. Indeed, the very basis of the argument that LRCPS proliferation could strengthen deterrence rests on the premise that the newly acquired capabilities make deterrent threats – be they threats of denial or threats of punishment – more credible. Yet such enhanced credibility can only exist if it is generated by a strengthened threat of capability *usage*. And the

crisis escalation that such usage would entail may be the very thing that defenders, be they Poles or other NATO members – themselves quite different constituencies with quite different incentive structures – wish to avoid, as highlighted by RUSI’s SimEx. This section therefore discusses three of the most prominent potential drawbacks of LRCPS proliferation within the parameters of the Polish scenario used throughout.

First, while LRCPS acquisition may indeed bring new capabilities to Poland, it will also – as the necessary counterpoint – bring new insecurities to Russia. Such an argument must not be overstated: military technology is a flawed tool of intention-signaling, since even purportedly “defensive” technologies can be turned to other ends,<sup>26</sup> while NATO (and most importantly the United States) already has vast capabilities that can be used to threaten high-value targets deep inside Russia – so it is not as if a modest Polish LRCPS arsenal will bring about some step-change in Russian vulnerability. Nonetheless, Polish LRCPS acquisition puts a force of powerful standoff weapons with a Moscow-threatening range in the hands of yet another Russian adversary. That adversary also (a) has a vehemently anti-Russian domestic lobby and (b) may regard itself as “covered” by the nuclear guarantees of great-power allies, thereby emboldening it to more assertive advancement of its interests than it would otherwise feel safe to pursue. The very variable that may bolster NATO’s general credibility, in short – a new center of decision with the power to strike Russia, but now in the Alliance’s newly-expanded eastern periphery – is thus also the same variable that gives Russia a new axis of potential threat. And while this piece is focused on hypotheticals rather than empirical specifics, Warsaw’s move beyond the mere shorter-ranging JASSM (which would serve many of the purported tactical denial benefits of LRCPS) in favor of the more expensive, longer-ranging JASSM-ER – which, as noted above, just happens to have the exact range needed to reach Moscow from Polish airspace – will not have gone unnoticed by Russian policymakers, given its implication that countervalue punishment is now at least part of Polish posture.

As such, while there may indeed be some positive deterrent effect from Polish LRCPS acquisition, it could also exacerbate the East-West security dilemma and render NATO’s protestations that it is not a “greedy” revisionist actor bent on ever-greater expansion and ever-

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<sup>26</sup> Keir A. Lieber, *War and the Engineers: The Primacy of Politics over Technology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 150-3; Robert Jervis, “Dilemmas About Security Dilemmas,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2011), 420.

tighter containment of Russia even less believable in Moscow.<sup>27</sup> Such a hostile state of relations makes the very crises and confrontations that NATO's capabilities are intended to deter all the more likely. That being the case, if NATO and/or Poland itself are indeed intent on Polish deployment of such capabilities, there is a case for the simultaneous deployment of countervailing reassurance measures. The withdrawal of (say) US forces from the Alliance's eastern periphery would undoubtedly be desirable to Russia, but may also carry risks that are themselves unacceptable to NATO (in terms of increased vulnerability to an Alliance-breaking Russian *fait accompli* in one or more of NATO's frontier states). Yet other reassurance measures could be pursued that would not bring a commensurate increase in vulnerability for the Alliance's existing members, such as a NATO-wide repeal – or unilateral Polish veto – of 2008's commitment to eventual Ukrainian and Georgian membership.

Second, as 2019's SimEx suggested, intra-crisis dynamics between Russia and Poland could prove more escalatory when both sides are armed with LRCPS.<sup>28</sup> Of course, the previous section outlined logics by which LRCPS-reinforced deterrence could prevent such crises from ever unfolding in the first place. But as was also touched upon, a sudden “bolt from the blue” Russian conventional assault on Poland – while it cannot be wholly ruled out – is an unlikely starting point for such a crisis, given the credibility of NATO's Article V in such clear-cut circumstances, Polish forces' own ability to inflict pain on aggressors (with or without LRCPS), and the limited Russian strategic gains to be had in doing so. More plausibly, Polish involvement in some NATO-Russia confrontation would follow from the escalation and expansion of a crisis instigated elsewhere – perhaps via a “hybrid” subversion campaign in the Baltic States that escalates to conventional exchanges, leading one or both sides to see value in a new and/or expanded front – and/or via some limited (or even accidental) Russian resolve-probing measure in or around Poland itself (possibly against the backdrop of broader East-West tensions). Under such circumstances, NATO deterrence would have *already* failed to at least some extent,

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<sup>27</sup> Russia already has good reason to believe that NATO is a “greedy” revisionist, of course, given that it expanded to encompass former Soviet allies *and* territories through the 1990s and 2000s, as well as pledging to do the same to even-more-vital states of the Russian periphery (Ukraine and Georgia): NATO, “Bucharest Summit Declaration,” 3 April 2008, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_8443.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm) (accessed 31/07/2019); Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, “Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion,” *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (2016), 7-44.

<sup>28</sup> For discussion of Russia's own proliferating LRCPS arsenal and expanding range of associated operational tasks, see: Roger N. McDermott and Tor Bukkvoll, *Russia in the Precision-Strike Regime: Military Theory, Procurement, and Operational Impact* [FFI-RAPPORT 17/00979] (Kjeller, Nor.: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 2017), <https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/17-00979.pdf> (accessed 09/09/2019).

irrespective of Polish LRCPS – so the trade-off that they may (1) deter crises from even happening but (2) become a source of escalatory instability once such a crisis is underway could be short-circuited by omitting the former positive gains and jumping straight to the latter negative costs.

Of course, positing a “hybrid” scenario from which a conventional confrontation subsequently emerges itself creates a false binary. The very “hybridity” in such scenarios *refers* to their hybridization of subversive and deniable activities with conventional and nuclear capabilities – so strengthening conventional deterrence can itself reduce the likelihood of such a “hybrid” contingency ever unfolding, by changing a potential aggressor’s calculus of how much subversion, covert action, proxy warfare, disinformation, and so forth they think they can “get away with” under the cover of their own conventional/nuclear deterrent. Nonetheless, in acquiring such benefits, there are unavoidable downsides.

The risk then is that LRCPS – unlike, say, a secure second-strike nuclear arsenal – offers enough pain to escalate but *not* enough pain to fully deter: each side may see meaningful first-strike advantages to be had from such munitions’ use, and be hurt enough to retaliate at an equal or greater level if used against, yet not *so* fearful of ascending the ladder as to be deterred from even stepping onto it.<sup>29</sup> Such a ladder would be fraught with dangers of further inadvertent, accidental, or otherwise unwanted escalation, meanwhile.<sup>30</sup> Polish strikes on Russian command/control might have only “conventional” motivations, for example – i.e. Warsaw seeking to curtail Russian forces’ ability to prosecute a conventional campaign against Poland – but could just as easily be construed by Moscow as a NATO attack on a crucial component of the Russian nuclear deterrent, with all of the associated implications. And even without such nuclear/conventional force conflation, finding the “off-ramps” amid a spiral of increasingly destructive countervalue retaliation and re-retaliation without Russian and/or NATO nuclear forces subsequently being dragged in would be perilous indeed. Such “chain-ganging” of the NATO major powers’ forces into Poland’s defense may be perfectly acceptable and desirable from a Polish perspective, of course. But whether it is desirable for other Alliance members

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<sup>29</sup> Moving from LRCPS in the abstract to Poland’s actual forthcoming capability, JASSM-ER may be an especially potent weapon if used in a first-strike capacity (e.g. against concentrations of unalerted, undispersed forces, or against command/control facilities to forestall coordinated offensive action) – so on both sides, the temptations of first use (and the fears of being struck first) will be especially acute, inflaming crisis instability.

<sup>30</sup> Barry R. Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

could be a different matter entirely.<sup>31</sup> The first-strike advantages of LRCPS could also make the strengthening of crisis stability via reciprocal arms control that much harder to achieve, furthermore, thereby compounding such challenges.

Third – but relatedly – LRCPS can only deliver its purported deterrent advantages if the force is sufficiently survivable, penetrative, and sizeable. Any retaliatory system that can be reliably destroyed via a first strike is not so much a deterrent as a target, incentivizing one’s adversary to disarm the capability before it can be used against them (hence the emphasis in nuclear posture on achieving a secure second-strike arsenal capable of retaliating even if its possessor is struck first). Obviously, the security of such second-strike capabilities is a spectrum rather than a binary; *no* system is *wholly* invulnerable, while even rudimentary systems may have *some* prospect of surviving a first strike (especially if wily concealment and deception measures are employed). Nonetheless, the higher the vulnerability of the system, the greater the range of circumstances in which an adversary may consider the stakes worth the risk of an attempted disarming strike, thereby fueling crisis instability.

The implications for a Polish LRCPS arsenal are not hard to discern. Short of moving to a continuous airborne alert posture and/or the acquisition of enough submarines (with enough sea-launched land-strike missiles) to sustain continuous at-sea coverage<sup>32</sup> – both of which would require dramatic uplifts in the size and budget of the Polish armed forces – any LRCPS launch system will incur non-trivial first-strike vulnerabilities (be that grounded strike aircraft, locatable ground launchers, or in-port submarines). Such vulnerabilities can be reduced by dispersal/concealment of launchers, quick-reaction takeoff times for aircraft, and as-frequent-as-possible submarine patrols, but such fixes are not insurmountable for a determined and well-armed aggressor (and may themselves increase crisis instability further, if an aggressor knows that only a “bolt from the blue” strike in the very early stages of a crisis will be sufficient to

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<sup>31</sup> Obviously, the whole edifice of extended deterrence rests on just such a threatened “chain-gang”, and there are plenty of conceivable scenarios in which all NATO Member States could and would wish to come to the defense of another. But if Poland misconstrues and/or overreacts to a limited (or even accidental) Russian incursion – possibly emboldened by the knowledge of its security guarantee from NATO’s nuclear powers – thereby setting hard-to-control retaliatory escalation in motion, then that could be a deeply counterproductive outcome for the states extending such a guarantee in the belief that the Alliance bolsters their own security.

<sup>32</sup> Poland is indeed seeking new submarines equipped with land-strike cruise missiles to replace its aging *Kilo*-/*Kobben*-class boats (which lack LRCPS capability): Jarosław Adamowski, “3 European producers bid for Polish sub deal,” *DefenseNews*, 3 January 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2018/01/03/3-european-producers-bid-for-poland-sub-deal/> (accessed 09/09/2019). However, the three planned hulls will be insufficient to sustain continuous at-sea deterrence (especially if the boats are also expected to fulfil other tasking, and *especially* if any more than a tokenistic weight of retaliatory firepower is sought).

achieve disarmament of their adversary). One obvious way to strengthen the survivability of Polish LRCPS capabilities under the assumption that the hangars and runways necessary for their airborne deployment within Poland can be preventively neutralized by Russia is to develop quick-reaction force dispersal plans to operate Polish aircraft from NATO rear bases. But this risks further compounding the escalation problem: if the only way Moscow can prevent Polish LRCPS retaliation against high-value targets inside Russia is to target their operating bases elsewhere in NATO – in Germany or even the UK, say – then that provides yet another route by which a small confrontation could become a large conflagration. In short, if Poland is indeed intent on having such capabilities, then it should indeed take measures to bolster their survivability (since greater survivability will strengthen crisis stability) – but there must be awareness within both Warsaw and the rest of NATO that such measures (a) will never be perfect and (b) may produce their own unintended incentives/consequences.

On top of survivability, moreover, there are questions over the size and penetrability of any Polish LRCPS arsenal. A force that possesses exquisite capabilities but in insufficient numbers to deliver decisive effects – a recurring criticism of European NATO militaries<sup>33</sup> – may bring the associated downsides without the redeeming upsides. In the context of a “tokenistic” LRCPS arsenal, that could mean increased hostility from Russia and increased instability in crises, plus the financial expense (and associated opportunity-costs) of its acquisition, but without posing a sufficient threat to credibly deter. This is especially true of denial postures, when a large number of strikes may be necessary to meaningfully weaken an attacker’s offensive. There might be specific circumstances in which even a small LRCPS arsenal serves some sort of valuable “tripwire” function, certainly, but the question then is *how* small? (Conversely, of course, a large LRCPS arsenal might decisively worsen an adversary’s security fears – and relatedly increase their first-strike incentives – in a way that only a small force may not. It remains to be seen whether Poland’s initial 70-missile JASSM-ER force represents the “Goldilocks” sweet spot: large enough to threaten meaningful costs, based on some proportion of those 70 weapons finding their targets, but not so large as to significantly undermine Russia’s own core security and thereby increase Moscow’s belligerence.)

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<sup>33</sup> Magnus Nordenman, “The incredible, shrinking modern military,” *The Atlantic*, 12 November 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/11/the-incredible-shrinking-modern-military/264989/> (accessed 01/08/2019).

Likewise, if an LRCPS force lacks penetrability against the targets that it is intended to hold at risk – due to technological inadequacy and/or insufficient size – then it may again bring downsides, in terms of reciprocal hostility and associated crisis instability, without delivering meaningful deterrence. That is a particular concern if seeking to achieve deterrence by holding high-value targets in Moscow itself at risk, given the substantial air defenses protecting the Russian capital (although it may be less of a problem against counterforce denial targets, e.g. concentrations of attacking ground forces, which are less likely to have such robust air defenses). Moving from hypotheticals to the current empirical context, meanwhile, penetrability could be a greater challenge for the forthcoming Polish JASSM-ER arsenal than it otherwise would have been, given that Russian forces have reportedly had the opportunity to study JASSMs captured in Syria.<sup>34</sup>

Relatedly, a Polish LRCPS force without its own sovereign ISTAR capability lacks penetrability of a different kind. Independent ISTAR is of less relevance for a countervalue punishment posture – major government and military targets in Moscow are at fixed, known geographic locations – but would be of great relevance in attempting to prosecute a counterforce denial campaign against conventional aggression (since attacking forces are mobile and pursue deception/concealment). A future Polish F-35 purchase, and integration of JASSM-ER therewith, would provide a useful uplift in ISTAR compared to the current F-16 force – as well as bringing additional survivability and penetrability to the JASSM-ER launch platform, thereby strengthening prospects for successful LRCPS operations even within areas of contested air control (e.g. if Poland had lost full control of its airspace but still wanted to achieve a within-range countervalue strike on Moscow). Nonetheless, even notwithstanding the superior organic ISTAR of some future F-35 fleet, a Polish LRCPS force without a bespoke national ISTAR capability would suffer enduring target penetration limitations. It may force Polish reliance on major-power NATO allies' ISTAR in order to prosecute effective counterforce denial, resurrecting some of the extended-deterrent alliance dilemmas that an independent Polish capability would supposedly reduce (i.e. an unpalatable choice between conceding fait-accompli

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<sup>34</sup> Two JASSMs were reportedly retrieved undetonated by regime forces – and subsequently transferred to Moscow for analysis – following the US strike against Syria's Barzah chemical weapons research center in 2018: RIA Novosti, “Эксперт рассказал, как Россия использует найденные в Сирии ракеты США,” 19 April 2018, [https://web.archive.org/web/20180419104144/https://ria.ru/syria\\_chronicle/20180419/1518959404.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20180419104144/https://ria.ru/syria_chronicle/20180419/1518959404.html) (accessed 26/07/2019). If true, this may mean that – moving from hypothetical LRCPS to the particulars of Poland's forthcoming system – the full utility of JASSM-ER in such deep-strike scenarios against Russia is not as extensive as it otherwise might have been, given the tailored air defenses that Moscow may now be able to put in place.

defeat of a NATO member *or* risking escalatory entanglement on that ally's behalf). It could further strengthen Russian suspicions that the point of Polish LRCPS is not tactical denial but rather strategic punishment, worsening relations and crisis instability. And *even* in the countervalue role against known fixed targets, having adequate ISTAR on the disposition of defending forces may still be important in issuing threats of retaliatory punishment that are sufficiently credible to deter (since "blind" attackers that cannot penetrate defenses also cannot punish their targets). From a solely Polish perspective, meanwhile, reliance on NATO allies' ISTAR – or, indeed, command/control of the actual standoff weapons – may expose Warsaw to unwanted, sovereignty-limiting control/coercion by capricious patrons.

## Conclusion

If we are to adequately assess the possible consequences of LRCPS proliferation for strategic stability, we must sum both sides of the balance sheet. And for all of the possible drawbacks, there are also plausible potential benefits, hence the interest of states like Poland and South Korea in their acquisition. LRCPS may strengthen such states' deterrence through the twin threats of both denial and punishment. They may also buttress the credibility of their allies' extended-deterrent commitments by providing a new, threat-proximate center of retaliatory decision. Nonetheless, as also stressed from the outset, the overall case for such proliferation is ambiguous. For while LRCPS capabilities may indeed bring certain advantages, they may also exacerbate political hostilities, fuel intra-crisis escalation (as 2019's SimEx implied), and fail to provide adequate survivability and penetrability to actually deliver their purported deterrent effects in practice. Given Poland's involvement in other aspects of NATO posture that also increase Russia's perceived vulnerability, notably ballistic missile defense,<sup>35</sup> it is not hard to understand why the state that such capabilities are intended to deter – while hardly "innocent" of its own coercive behaviors – is likely to view such acquisition as hostile and potentially worthy of counterbalancing.<sup>36</sup>

Of course, the overall strategic significance of Polish LRCPS acquisition – particularly the initial real-world capability – should not be overstated. 70 JASSM-ERs deployed on a

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<sup>35</sup> Marcin Gocłowski and Lidia Kelly, "Poland says U.S. missile shield site delayed until 2020," *Reuters*, 22 March 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-defence-usa/poland-says-u-s-missile-shield-site-delayed-until-2020-idUSKBN1GY2RE> (accessed 09/09/2019).

<sup>36</sup> Charles L. Glaser and Steve Fetter, "National Missile Defense and the Future of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy," *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2001), 40-92.

modified aircraft (the F-16) not initially designed for standoff strike operations and lacking bespoke ISTAR support is hardly some decisive shift in the European balance. And even the modest fleet of F-35s that Warsaw is reportedly seeking – assuming JASSM-ER is eventually integrated with this aircraft – would hardly change that. Nonetheless, small exchanges involving modestly-armed middle powers have been significant in the escalation of big wars before, especially when they face powerful-yet-fearful adversaries and have their own great-power allies. As such, if Poland or other states in similar situations are indeed intent on acquiring such capabilities, they and their major allies must pay close attention to both operational force configurations and broader strategic relations. Operationally, it is important that forces are configured to reduce both sides' first-strike incentives as best they can be within the bounds of feasibility. And strategically, anything that can be done to reassure adversaries without significantly increasing one's own vulnerability – such as conceding certain interests that are vital to one side but merely peripheral to the other – must be grasped.

This article has only provided a first-cut on these questions; it does not pretend to be exhaustive, and there may well be other logics on both sides of the scorecard, i.e. further reasons to favor or oppose LRCPS proliferation. It also says nothing of the idiosyncrasies of Polish politics, defense acquisition/budgeting, or Russo-Polish diplomacy, all of which may affect the two halves of the deterrent ledger (capability and resolve). For example, Polish nationalist sentiment could produce particular anti-Russian pressure for escalation, i.e. via an early switch from counterforce to countervalue targeting during some limited initial confrontation. Conversely, of course, various Central European far-right movements have a shared affinity for Putinism – so that might create scope for some future Russo-Polish rapprochement (albeit of a problematic kind, from NATO's perspective).

One final postscript is due. While Poland's forthcoming LRCPS force is US-sourced, in the form of a US-made missile mounted aboard US-made aircraft, South Korea's indigenous LRCPS development shows that – for wealthy enough, technologically advanced enough middle powers with pressing enough perceived needs – states can find ways to acquire such capabilities outside the strictures of a single supplier (that supplier's undeniable influence notwithstanding). Americans, Brits, and others must thus be cognizant of the limitations of debating what capability their allies are “allowed” to acquire; short of threatening the “nuclear option” of alliance abandonment as punishment for proliferation – which may itself be a non-credible

threat, given the very advantages that such alliances exist to deliver – others will pursue the policies that they think they need.<sup>37</sup> In counselling Warsaw, Seoul, or others on their acquisition of such capabilities, therefore, we must be aware that they are likely to procure them anyway. As such, strategic stability must be pursued as best we can within the parameters of that basic reality.

### **Acknowledgements**

I thank Andrea Berger, Rhianna Kreger, Jamie Kwong, Tom Plant, Joshua Pollack, Patrick Porter, and the anonymous reviewers for invaluable help and feedback on this article. I also thank the Royal United Services Institute, the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York for their support of the workshop that enabled its development.

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<sup>37</sup> On the self-referential Anglo-American affinity for omitting others' own politics/preferences when offering strategic explanations/prescriptions, see: Patrick Porter, "Libya and Iraq were never the West's to lose," *The National Interest*, 2 November 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/libya-iraq-were-never-the-west-lose-18266> (accessed 01/08/2019).