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A Perspective on the Future of Nuclear Deterrence

Remarks delivered at the Nuclear Deterrence Summit, Washington, DC, February 17, 2016.

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Twelve days ago, National Security Advisor Susan Rice released a statement on the fifth anniversary of the entry into force of the New START Treaty. In it, she states: “We...continue to call on Russia to answer the President’s invitation five years ago to begin talks on further reductions to our nuclear arsenals...The United States remains committed to reducing the numbers of nuclear weapons in the world and the role they play in our security.”

I ask that you contrast this statement with my thoughts on the future of nuclear deterrence. Ambassador Rice has captured the essence of the administration’s views on nuclear weapons – and therein lies not just a problem masquerading as a solution, but a real danger.

At last year’s summit, I argued that we need to re-think the assumptions underlying three contemporary but substantially different deterrence challenges: Russia as the most urgent case; China as a longer term and more strategically complex potential adversary; and rogue states, like North Korea, that acquire nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles for purposes of blackmail and coercion.

My focus this morning is again on Russia. So I think it is appropriate to begin by updating the conclusions I drew last year. First, while there may be a number of things reminiscent of the days of U.S.-Soviet rivalry, today’s security environment is much different. There is no ideological competition between communism and capitalism. There is no massive Red Army dividing Europe. And perhaps

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most important for deterrence, are the different approaches toward nuclear weapons taken by Russia and the United States.

According to the National Intelligence Council: “Nuclear ambitions in the US and Russia over the last twenty years have evolved in opposite directions. Reducing the role of nuclear weapons in US security strategy is a US objective, while Russia is pursuing new concepts and capabilities for expanding the role of nuclear weapons in its security strategy.”

In the Cold War there was a determination by both sides to maintain parity – at a minimum. In the words of John Kennedy, the U.S. would ensure it possessed an offensive nuclear deterrent “second to none.” Today, one side is rapidly building up its arsenal of modern missiles. The other side is reducing its forces while haltingly addressing its decaying infrastructure and debating and delaying the needed modernization of its delivery platforms. One side is issuing explicit first-use nuclear threats with the goal of coercion, while the other side preaches nuclear disarmament in a manner that is increasingly and dangerously detached from the world we live in.

Second, Russia’s defense establishment has thought a lot about nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War setting. We may not like what they are thinking, but they are thinking – and have been doing so in earnest since NATO’s intervention in Kosovo. They have considered the relationship between conventional and nuclear forces. They have thought about what deters the threats they believe they face. While U.S. officials continue to claim reduced roles for nuclear weapons, Moscow has concluded that the role of nuclear weapons is greater than in the past, in part because of an assumed asymmetry of interests and capabilities – and a lack of willingness on the part of the enemy to risk nuclear war.

In Russian military doctrine and in its procurement, nuclear weapons are the first priority of the state. This has been reaffirmed in recent military publications, in a robust program to field a host of new, specialized nuclear weapons, and in military exercises reportedly featuring the first use of nuclear weapons. Russian planners appear to have developed a strategy in which space and cyber operations are combined with unconventional military operations and integrated with plans for actual nuclear use.

Strategic nuclear weapons provide for deterrence of attack on the Russian homeland. Theater nuclear weapons, and limited nuclear use against military targets, are seen as compensating for conventional shortfalls and are described as useable tools that can de-escalate a conflict on favorable terms. According to Lt. General Ben Hodges, commander of U.S. Army Europe, “They do talk a lot about using tactical nuclear weapons. For them, it’s a viable option.”

Russia also seeks to control the upper end of the escalatory ladder. In November, the Kremlin staged the release of a briefing slide of a nuclear-tipped torpedo with a purported range of over 6,000 miles and a staggering yield of 100 million tons of TNT. Its stated purpose is to destroy “key economic assets in coastal areas and to cause devastating damage by creating wide areas of radioactive contamination.”

Whatever the status of the nuclear torpedo, Russian deterrence thinking is backed by an expansion of nuclear capabilities across the spectrum – heavy and mobile ICBMs, new SSBNs and SLBMs, upgrading



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of Bear Hs and Backfire bombers, and the maintenance of vastly superior theater nuclear forces. According to the chief of Russia's armed forces, "a strong nuclear arsenal will ensure military superiority over the West."

The latter apparently includes INF-range missiles in violation of the INF Treaty. Their purpose may be same as in the Cold War – when the Soviet Union deployed hundreds of SS-20 missiles in an attempt to sever the deterrence of Western Europe from that of the United States.

But today who could believe that NATO will respond with the same determination it demonstrated in 1983? Unlike the Kremlin, many NATO governments – particularly those located further from Russia's borders, consider nuclear use to be unthinkable. They rule out any nuclear response to Russia's Treaty violation. I suspect that the Obama administration falls squarely in this category.

My first job in government was to serve as the nuclear policy officer at NATO Headquarters from 1982 to 1985 when the alliance stood up to the threat and deployed Ground-Launched Cruise Missiles and Pershing II missiles in five basing countries. It was this demonstration of resolve that convinced Soviet leaders that they could not break the alliance and ultimately led to the INF Treaty that eliminated this entire class of weapons.

The clear lesson I took away from this experience was that determined and effective American leadership is the key to the success of deterrence and, one could argue, of arms control – not arms control for the sake of arms control but arms control that serves our strategic objectives.

This same lesson was reinforced twenty years later when I had the privilege of leading the negotiations with Libya over its nuclear weapons program. It was our demonstrated resolve and fear of our capabilities that convinced the late Col Qaddafi to abandon his WMD and longer range missile programs. The result was the complete removal of his nuclear enrichment infrastructure which now resides primarily in Oak Ridge Tennessee.

Third, official U.S. thinking about deterrence remains firmly stuck in the past. Since we declared an end to the Cold war, there has been relatively little new thought devoted to nuclear deterrence. For understandable reasons, the Pentagon has been focused primarily on counterterrorism and, more recently, on cyber and other demands – and all within the context of a declining budget.

This intellectual void has been reinforced by political guidance from every White House occupant since Bush 41. All have called for reductions in the nuclear force and a lessening reliance on nuclear weapons – in part because of a benign view of Russia, a sense that U.S. conventional superiority alone would ensure our security, and a feeling that nuclear weapons were 20th century tools that had little utility in the 21st century.

In the past seven years, an ideological opposition to nuclear weapons coming from the White House has directly impacted the thinking and actions of the Departments of Defense and Energy. This was evident in the 2010 Nuclear Posture review that explicitly placed nonproliferation – not deterrence -- as the



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highest priority goal of U.S. nuclear policy and said that reducing U.S. nuclear weapons and roles was key to that goal.

While there is a sense that we need to hedge against an existential threat of nuclear use against us, that concern has been accompanied by neglect at both the policy and operational levels – which became evident in such episodes as the ALCM shipment from Minot in August 2007 and subsequent leadership failures.

With few exceptions, U.S. think tanks and academics also have consistently discounted the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security. In the Cold War, we invested enormous intellectual capital – engaging the best and the brightest, such as Brodie, Kahn, and Schelling, to ensure that we maintained an effective nuclear deterrent. The result was a dynamic evolution of strategic thought -- from massive retaliation to flexible response to the tailored deterrent doctrines of Jim Schlesinger and Harold Brown - that guided our operational practices.

But with the demise of the Soviet Union, our thinking on nuclear strategy simply stopped. There is little wonder that we find ourselves today with both legacy thinking about deterrence and a legacy force posture.

Instead of deterrence requirements, arms control has become the dominant feature of debates over the future of our nuclear arsenal. Inflated cost projections often mask disarmament goals as arms control preferences often drive analysis – or what pretends to be analysis.

Just consider a recent report from the Center for American Progress proposing the elimination of the B-61 mod and LRSO weapons. The report states: “There is little evidence that niche capabilities such as cruise missiles and tactical gravity bombs are necessary to deter adversaries, especially in an age when Russia and China calibrate their aggressive actions to remain far below the nuclear threshold.” Its predictable conclusion is: “The benefits of retaining redundant niche systems in the force simply are not worth \$120 billion over 30 years.”

While this finding claims to be based on “evidence” – we all know better. Russia clearly does include nuclear weapons in its calibration of aggression and perceives a gap in U.S. deterrence capabilities that those so-called niche weapons may fill.

Since Russia’s intervention in Ukraine, there has been a growing recognition by U.S. leaders that Russia is an adversary. Secretary Carter has been most direct on this point – reinforced by the views of his military commanders – especially those with responsibilities for protecting U.S. allies who find themselves in the unfortunate geographic situation of being Russia’s neighbor.

The recently released EUCOM strategy document includes deterring Russia as a top priority. However, the steps that are being taken to deter Russia – while vitally important to that goal – are confined almost entirely to conventional force improvements, such as the enhanced military presence in Poland and the



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Baltic states as approved last week in Brussels. There is little apparent thought about how our nuclear weapons play in deterring Moscow – despite concerns about escalation.

The White House and State Department have taken a softer approach than Defense. At a time when Ukraine is in crisis and Russian air strikes are targeting Syrian opposition forces backed by the U.S., the President has, in fact, criticized “aggression by Russia” giving “rise to anxieties about global security” – but this was done literally in the same sentence that emphasized the challenges of climate change and infectious diseases. And White House policy on nuclear weapons remains unchanged: doubling down on “no new nuclear capabilities” and calling for more cuts in our nuclear forces.

As for Secretary Kerry, he has lectured and scolded Russia for its aggression but he continues to see Moscow as an essential partner even while Foreign Minister Lavrov picks his pocket at almost every diplomatic engagement. Today, following the Obama-Kerry red line debacle, we are witnessing the further loss of U.S. influence as Mr. Putin pursues a military victory over U.S. backed rebels while our Secretary of State is reduced to reading aloud UN Resolution 2254 – an image as searing as that of Neville Chamberlin holding up his agreement with Hitler and proclaiming peace in our time. According to the Washington Post – I just love quoting the Post – “the Obama administration has been a study in passivity and moral confusion.” Just imagine the effect of our policy failures on deterring further aggression in Syria or Europe.

So what is the path forward? In an article co-authored with my colleagues Frank Miller and Keith Payne, we lay out four steps.

First, we must invest more in studying Russia’s nuclear developments, both its doctrine and its capabilities. Our intelligence community appears to have virtually divested itself of the capacity to understand Russian nuclear-weapons policy, programs, and war planning. Yet, deterrence depends fundamentally on understanding an adversary’s thinking and planning.

Second, we need to understand how developments in Russian doctrine and capabilities affect our own long-standing assumptions about the role of nuclear weapons and the capabilities we require to deter foes and assure threatened allies. If we are to deter effectively, it is essential that we adjust our thinking and forces to the reality of Russia’s nuclear strategy and capabilities.

Third, we need to make clear to Mr. Putin that any use of nuclear weapons will be self-destructive. We need to return, at very senior levels and in a definitive manner, to the type of declaratory policy used by Republican and Democratic presidents alike for decades. It must be made clear to President Putin that there are no winners in a nuclear war and the notion of escalate to deescalate is fraught with risks of uncontrolled escalation.

And fourth, we need to place renewed emphasis on rebuilding our own nuclear forces, which have suffered decades of neglect. The Navy is now on track with its efforts to build a new strategic submarine and to extend the life of the Trident II missile; these efforts must be fully funded in the years ahead. Some Air Force programs, however, appear to be lagging, with regular slips in the plans to replace the



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Minuteman ICBM force, to replace the air-launched cruise missile, and to equip the F-35 to carry the B61 bomb. This pattern of delay must end; it surely sends the wrong message to Moscow.

In conclusion, Russia has been shown to be right on a number of central points. Russia is right: the United States and Russia are adversaries because President Putin has made it so – through military aggression against Russia’s neighbors, through threats, including nuclear threats, against U.S. friends and allies, and through his statements designating the United States and NATO as threats to Russia. In his 2007 speech to the Munich security conference, Mr. Putin declared the U.S. to be a direct threat to Russia. This past New Year’s Eve, with the publication of the new Russian national security strategy document, this declaration became official policy.

Russia is right: nuclear weapons matter and are an important element of national strategy. We are all aware of Mr. Putin’s public welcoming of each new weapon system, participating visibly in military exercises involving the employment of nuclear weapons, and often reminding everyone that Moscow cannot be pushed around because of its nuclear weapons. But beyond the rhetoric and photo ops, Russia has done what we have failed to do: integrate its nuclear forces into a broader national strategy. In Russia’s case, the strategy seeks to reestablish a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, perhaps to include territory of former Soviet states that are now NATO members.

Russia is right: Cold War deterrence is outdated and insufficient to meet today’s challenges. My concern is that, because we aren’t thinking strategically about nuclear weapons, we raise the risk of misunderstanding and miscalculation in our relationship with Russia. As President Obama has stated, as long as nuclear weapons are needed, they need to be safe and reliable. But safety and reliability are not sufficient. They also must also provide credible deterrence based on sound doctrine that guides procurement and planning.

Russia is right: for deterrence to succeed, it is imperative to be – and be perceived as being – strong in both capabilities and resolve. In Mr. Putin’s words: “We should not tempt anyone by allowing ourselves to be weak.” Maybe it is his KGB background, perhaps it is classic Russian policy to expand outward at times of internal weakness, or perhaps it is history repeating itself as reflected in centuries-old efforts to secure the European and Asian borders. Whatever it is, it’s about power. And power abhors weakness. We need to have the resolve to stand up to aggression; the resolve to deploy the forces required for an effective deterrent, including new capabilities at the strategic and theater levels.

And Russia is right in its assessment that arms control can be an effective instrument to constrain an adversary while permitting Moscow to expand its nuclear capabilities in its quest for nuclear superiority. In practice, Russia has successfully used arms control negotiations as a means to achieve unilateral advantage – something Russian observers are pleased to point out publicly.

In contrast, the Obama administration has viewed arms control as a cooperative activity intended to create a more benign world. How else can one explain the New START Treaty that requires reductions in U.S. forces but allows Russian offensive forces to increase significantly? Or the call for further reductions in strategic warheads – at the same time that Russia is violating the INF Treaty.



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Today, nuclear issues – and nuclear modernization in particular – are often treated as impediments to the achievement of the preferred goal of nuclear disarmament and ultimately a nuclear free world. The result in my view will be the opposite – a more dangerous and more proliferated world.

We have not thought about nuclear weapons and the deterrence of Russia in any systematic way for 25 years. It's imperative that we do so now. And when we do, we must ensure that our doctrine is part of a broader national strategy that defines national level goals and outlines the means to achieve them through the integration of all instruments of statecraft – diplomatic, economic, intelligence, strategic communications and others.

In the Cold War, that policy was containment and nuclear deterrence was a key component. We understood that Russian nuclear threats must be countered, and a nuclear war must be deterred and never fought.

Let me end with a quote from Senator McCain from this past week: “The only thing that has changed about Mr. Putin’s ambitions is that his appetite is growing with the eating.” It is time we take the prudent steps necessary to dissuade and deter him from his dangerous course.