



US Nuclear Employment Strategy

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “U.S. Nuclear Employment Strategy” hosted by National Institute for Public Policy on October 20, 2021. The symposium focused on changes in U.S. nuclear weapons employment policy from the Obama Administration to the Trump Administration and prospects for further changes in the Biden Administration.

Franklin C. Miller

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Introduction

My goal is to put the 2020 U.S. *Nuclear Employment Strategy* report into a broader context.

There has been much consistency in U.S. nuclear targeting policy—and properly so. This consistency has been obscured from time to time by various nicknames Administrations have used to describe U.S. nuclear policy, e.g., “Strategic Sufficiency,” “Essential Equivalence,” “Countervailing Strategy”—but for the most part these names have only confused both our friends and our enemies.

And in fact, when the Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, Admiral Charles Richard, recently commented that our policy was largely unchanged from the Kennedy Administration, he was condemned by the “progressives” as promoting an obsolete policy—but that is because those critics do not understand the basic principles of deterrence.

Returning to the Basics

U.S. deterrence and targeting policy took mature form first during the Eisenhower Administration. This was “Massive Retaliation,” essentially a no-holds barred single option plan. The Kennedy Administration replaced that with “Flexible Response” doctrine, based on the premise that a president needed options to deter better whatever options the Soviets (or other enemies) might have.

That principle—“multiple options to deter an enemy’s potential options”—remains valid and remains our practice today. Over time, more flexibility has been introduced into the plan as the number of enemies grew and their capabilities and options grew.

Where there was a significant change was in “target selection”

During the Nixon-Ford Administrations, we took a wrong turn and began mirror imaging U.S. values on the Soviet leadership. The “Nuclear Targeting Policy Review,” conducted in the



1977-1979 timeframe at the direction of then Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, refocused U.S. target selection policy on what the Soviet leadership truly valued, since it would be that leadership, not the oppressed people they ruled over, which needed to be deterred from conducting aggression. Authoritarian rulers value:

- Themselves
- Their ability to remain in power, therefore their internal security forces
- Their armed forces, both nuclear and conventional, and
- The industrial potential to sustain war

Since 1979, U.S. policy has focused on holding these “elements of state power” at risk. Over time our options have been increasingly tailored to fit the threat situation. Regardless of what you may hear about “tailored deterrence,” that work began immediately after the USSR dissolved and not in subsequent administrations.

What changes might the Biden Administration seek to introduce in US policy?

There are three areas here:

- Modifying declaratory policy to adopt a “No First Use” or “Sole Purpose” policy. This would be a dangerous departure from long-standing U.S. policy and has no virtues and many vices.
- Reducing U.S. strategic nuclear forces below the New START Treaty limit of 1,550 deployed nuclear weapons. The 1,550 level was deemed sufficient eleven years ago when Russia was not seen as threatening and China was not even in the discussion. It is almost inconceivable that the same number is adequate today when both nations are seen as real potential enemies
- Finally, on the positive side, is the discussion of integrating our nuclear deterrence policy with the other forms of deterrence policy. The Russian Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, has essentially turned war into a horizontal affair. Beijing has followed suit.

Aggression can (and will) come at us in multiple domains simultaneously. The old-fashioned U.S. view of war as occurring in vertical stovepipes is no longer appropriate. To deter effectively, we must be able to meet our enemies simultaneously across the board.

Eric S. Edelman

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Thank you, David, for that introduction. And thank you to the National Institute for Public Policy for hosting this event on the Nuclear Weapons Employment Guidance Report to Congress. Since the Congressionally mandated 2020 report went to the Congress in December 2020 when the nation was distracted by the post-election turmoil it did not receive nearly as much public attention as it deserves and certainly not as much public discussion as the 2013 document produced by the Obama Administration. This webinar can help to begin to change that lamentable situation and the discussion is particularly timely as the Department of Defense is in the midst of considering the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review.

It is also good to have for discussion purposes the extremely useful article by Rob Soofer and Matt Costlow, that appears in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Policy and Strategy*, which serves as a guide to the continuities and differences between the 2013 and 2020 NUWEPS guidance documents.

The changes, it seems to me, mostly reflect the dramatic changes in the international security environment that have taken place over the nearly decade-long interval between the two documents. They also reflect, in my view, the failure of the hopes expressed in the 2010 NPR and the 2013 guidance that what might generously be called “a cycle of virtuous emulation” among other countries would follow from U.S. efforts to reduce the role and salience of nuclear weapons in its national security strategy. Alas, the reality appears to be that the reverse has taken place. Nuclear weapons have assumed more significance in Russian and Chinese strategy as demonstrated by Russia’s ongoing nuclear modernization and its introduction of novel and exotic nuclear weapons into its arsenal as well as China’s “breathtaking expansion” (to quote STRATCOM commander Admiral Charles Richard) of its nuclear and strategic capabilities notably a quantitative and qualitative build-up and diversification of his means of delivery of nuclear weapons. At the same time, as we have seen in recent days, North Korea continues to make advances in the direction of both a larger nuclear arsenal than many had anticipated but also many of the appurtenances of a full nuclear triad of delivery systems.

The result of these developments has been to on the United States (as the 2020 guidance document notes) a requirement to plan and posture U.S. nuclear forces to credibly deter a larger and more varied spectrum of possible nuclear scenarios than when it had the relative luxury of planning against only one true nuclear peer competitor.

This as the Guidance document and Rob and Matt’s article points out puts a premium on limited, graduated, flexible options for decision-makers. This requires tailored deterrence strategies supported by flexible capabilities. Too often, in our public debates on these issues these kinds of options are labeled as “war fighting” options as if the authors are advocating

nuclear weapons use rather than making the potential use of nuclear weapons credible to potential adversaries and therefore reinforcing and strengthening nuclear deterrence. As Rob and Matt usefully note these kinds of red herrings are not helpful to a measured and responsible debate on deterrence strategies.

If the call for tailored deterrence and better options for policymakers sounds familiar that is because there has been more continuity than change in nuclear strategy over the past sixty years. In some sense the entire history of the evolving U.S. nuclear posture since the days of “massive retaliation” and the subsequent development of the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) for nuclear weapons use has been an effort to provide more flexible, credible options for Presidents most of whom were appalled by the destructive power that would be unleashed by executing the SIOP. Our fellow panelist, Frank Miller, is one of the few people who was successful at actually making meaningful changes in that direction.

The current moment, and the 2020 Nuclear Weapons Employment Guidance document highlights this, coincides with intensifying great power competition between the U.S. and Russia and China but also rapid technological developments in artificial intelligence, micro-electronics, space, hypersonic and other technologies that may well put us on the cusp of “revolution in military affairs” that transforms the battlefields of the future. In that sense, this moment may bear some similarity to the late 1950s and early 1960s when the Single Integrated Operational Plan was put in place, at the instance of then President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and the advent of ground based Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) and submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) were revolutionizing thinking about nuclear weapons and deterrence.

In these periods of rapid geopolitical and technological change it is easy to lose sight of some of the fundamental verities of nuclear deterrence. To remind myself of those I recently returned Henry Kissinger’s meditations on the impact of ICBMs and SLBMs on thinking about deterrence in his 1961 book, *The Necessity of Choice*. I beg everyone’s indulgence as I read a quotation from the book because as you all know there is no such thing as a “short” quote from Dr. Kissinger who noted that in the wake of the advent of nuclear weapons and particularly ICBMs and SLBMs:

...the success of military policy depends on essentially psychological criteria. Deterrence seeks to prevent a given course by making it seem less attractive than all possible alternatives. It therefore ultimately depends on an intangible quality: the state of mind of the potential aggressor. From the point of view of deterrence a seeming weakness will have the same consequences as an actual one. A gesture intended as a bluff but taken seriously is more useful as a deterrent than a bona fide threat interpreted as a bluff. Deterrence requires a combination of power, the will to use it, and the assessment of these by the potential aggressor. Moreover, deterrence is a product of these factors and not a sum. If any one of them is zero, deterrence fails. Strength, no matter how overwhelming, is useless without the

willingness to resort to it. Power combined with willingness will be ineffective if the aggressor does not believe in it or if the risks of war do not appear sufficiently unattractive to him.... The psychological aspect of deterrence becomes especially acute when technology is volatile. For then the truths of one year become the perils of another. Policies which were adequate at the time of their conception become obstacles to clear understanding when new conditions arise.

In particular, recent developments like the apparent Chinese test of a hypersonic missile and something that looks very much like the Fractional Orbital Bombardment System (FOBS) that the Soviets toyed with in the 1970s, don't threaten general or central deterrence between the U.S. and its near peer competitors as much as it does our extended deterrent guarantees to allies. Extended deterrence has always been a much harder case and it is not accident that most, if not all, of the Cold War crises where nuclear weapons use seemed a real possibility were crises over extended deterrent guarantees to allies in Europe, Asia or the Middle East.

Both the 2020 Guidance document and the Soofer-Costlow article address this point noting that calls for adopting a "no first use" policy or a declaration that the "sole purpose" of nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear weapons use (as opposed to conventional aggression or aggression using other kinds of weapons of mass destruction) are likely to do more harm than good. This, by the way, is precisely the same conclusion reached by a Congressionally-mandated study by an FFRD that was completed by the Institute for Defense Analysis earlier this year. That cautionary note is probably one that those who are working on the current 2022 Nuclear Posture Review would be wise to consider.

Matthew R. Costlow

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Introduction

The U.S. Nuclear Employment Strategy is a Congressionally-mandated Department of Defense report to Congress that details the guiding principles and any changes to U.S. nuclear employment strategy, plans, and options. The report, also known as the "491 Report" because of its place in title 10 of U.S. Code, helps keep the members of Congress informed of

U.S. nuclear strategy overall in conjunction with a number of other regular briefings and reports, such as Nuclear Posture Reviews (NPRs). The 2020 U.S. Nuclear Employment Strategy was sent to the required Congressional committees in December 2020 and was the product of many hours of writing and collaboration between OSD Policy, Joint Staff, State Department, U.S. Strategic Command, and the National Security Council. The following

discussion highlights the context and themes that I believe are the most relevant when studying the evolution of U.S. nuclear policy.

The Context and Substance of the U.S. Nuclear Employment Strategy

While there is some variation in the emphases and conclusions of the 2013 and 2020 U.S. Nuclear Employment Strategies, by law, they contain four necessary elements:

- (1) A description of the modifications to the nuclear employment strategy, plans, and options of the United States made by the strategy so issued.
- (2) An assessment of effects of such modification for the nuclear posture of the United States.
- (3) The implication of such changes on the flexibility and resilience of the strategic forces of the United States and the ability of such forces to support the goals of the United States with respect to nuclear deterrence, extended deterrence, assurance, and defense.
- (4) The extent to which such modifications include an increased reliance on conventional or non-nuclear strike capabilities or missile defenses of the United States.

It is important to remember the context internationally when the Department of Defense first responded to this Congressional mandate in 2013. The Obama administration, beginning in 2009 and into 2010, pushed for a “reset” of U.S. relations with Russia that resulted in the New START Treaty being signed in April 2010, along with the publication of the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review. The 2010 NPR was obviously influenced by the apparent improvement in relations with Russia at the time—a seemingly more moderate Russian President in Dmitry Medvedev and a China that seemed to still be “hiding its capabilities and biding its time.” Recognizing the overall improved security environment, but hedging against a downturn, the 2010 NPR and 2013 Nuclear Employment Strategy noted that although the threat of nuclear war was remote, the risk of a nuclear attack had increased.

As the 2013 Nuclear Employment Strategy states, in 2011, President Obama directed a follow-on analysis be conducted to determine how the U.S. nuclear posture (and policies) could best align with the five objectives laid out in the 2010 NPR. They were: prevent nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism; reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US strategy; maintain strategic deterrence and stability at reduced force levels; strengthen regional deterrence and reassure U.S. allies and partners; and, sustain a safe, secure, and effective nuclear arsenal. The Department of Defense added a sixth objective: “achieve U.S. and allied objectives if deterrence fails.”

What then were the implications of these six objectives for U.S. nuclear policy and posture? In summary, the Department of Defense strove to create the conditions under which a policy of sole purpose could be adopted. How? By reducing the role of nuclear weapons in US defense strategy, increasing the capabilities of conventional strike options, and increasing

regional missile defenses. The 2013 Nuclear Employment Strategy also stated that the United States would maintain “significant counterforce capabilities” while pursuing up to a one-third reduction in nuclear weapons below the New START Treaty levels via negotiated cuts with the Russians. Finally, the report noted that the Department of Defense sought to shift to a more responsive nuclear infrastructure over time and rely less on non-deployed warheads for hedging.

This baseline of the 2013 Nuclear Employment Strategy was a significant marker for drafting the 2020 Nuclear Employment Strategy and illustrates some important themes for those writing nuclear policy. First, threat perceptions, and prospects for cooperation, can change rapidly. As the SALT II Treaty and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan illustrated, and later the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the threat environment is far from static—and events outside the realm of nuclear weapons can nevertheless have an effect on U.S. nuclear policy. A second important theme is that even though the security environment can change rapidly, there are some enduring U.S. interests and principles. Many of the similarities between the 2013 Nuclear Employment Strategy and the 2020 Nuclear Employment Strategy are the products of decades of debate and analysis. Changes in nuclear policy are usually evolutionary, not revolutionary—which seems on the whole to have been prudent. Third, where there are differences between the two official U.S. documents, the authors should “show their homework” and explain as much as they can why policy or force posture is changing. This can potentially go a long way toward deterring the inclusion of partisan-focused policy and encouraging sound analysis based on the threat environment and U.S. capabilities.

The Similarities between the 2013 and 2020 Nuclear Employment Strategies

Much like how the 2018 NPR and the 2010 NPR shared many similarities, so too do the 2013 and 2020 Nuclear Employment Strategies. Both emphasize the importance of modernizing the nuclear triad plus dual-capable aircraft—a critical similarity that analysts typically overlook: Presidents over the nuclear age have found the triad to be of value in times of crisis and in times of peace. Both reports also recognize there are a similar set of roles for nuclear weapons in U.S. defense strategy, that is: deterring adversaries, assuring allies, achieving objectives should deterrence fail, and hedging against an uncertain future. In addition, both reports note that an essential aspect of a credible deterrent is having plans for when nuclear weapons may need to be employed and to recognize there are a “range” of such scenarios—from limited use all the way up to general nuclear war. Preparing for the possibility of

nuclear employment has two general advantages: first, preparing for the possibility of nuclear employment contributes to deterrence—as Herman Kahn said, “the best way to look willing is to be willing.” Second, preparing for the possibility of nuclear employment can contribute to limiting damage should deterrence fail.

To deter such an event, both reports note the importance of adaptability in the U.S. nuclear force structure, and especially the ability of uploading additional warheads as a hedge (and eventually moving toward a responsive infrastructure). One can see the wisdom in this especially after these public revelations about China's large nuclear buildup. A partial upload of additional U.S. warheads could be a legitimate option in some cases in the future, especially before new U.S. delivery systems obtain their initial operational capability. Importantly, should a crisis develop into a conflict, neither the 2013 or 2020 reports express confidence that escalation can or will be controlled. Nevertheless, it would be imprudent not to try. Both reports reject a "minimum deterrence" approach to nuclear targeting—i.e. "city busting"—and instead state clearly that all nuclear employment plans adhere to the laws of armed conflict. Finally, both reports emphasize the importance of extended deterrence and note how critical a modernized U.S. nuclear arsenal is for this goal.

Differences between the 2013 and 2020 Nuclear Employment Strategies

Most of the differences between the 2013 and 2020 reports stem not from partisanship or ideology, but rather from fundamental changes in the security environment. To be blunt, the world in 2013 looked much different than the world in 2020, so the United States had to adapt its strategy accordingly. According to the 2010 NPR and 2013 Nuclear Employment Strategy, the top two most pressing threats were nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism. While these threats remain, the 2020 report elevated the risk of a Russian or Chinese limited nuclear employment into the top tier of threats. Crucially, the Russian and Chinese nuclear threats appear to be mid- to long-term challenges—again indicating the importance of U.S. nuclear forces' adaptability.

While the 2013 Nuclear Employment Strategy called for reducing to 1,000 deployed strategic warheads, ideally in concert with Russia, the 2020 report omits that recommendation and instead recommends explicitly against any unilateral nuclear reductions. Such reductions would negatively affect deterrence and assurance while doing nothing to halt the Russian and Chinese nuclear advances. Also, the 2013 report seeks to create the conditions for a sole purpose policy (while at the time choosing not to adopt one at present) while the 2020 report states that such a policy—or No First Use—would be ill advised.

After Nuclear Employment

The 2020 Nuclear Employment Strategy states that the most likely scenario where a nuclear weapon will be employed is an adversary's attempted escalation out of a failed conventional conflict, but given the unpredictable nature of escalation, larger and more destructive scenarios cannot be ruled out. Thus, the report explains U.S. policy: "Should deterrence fail, the United States will strive to end any conflict at the lowest level of damage possible and on the best achievable terms for the United States, allies, and partners." This goal then leads to a focus on providing a "graduated set of response options" for the whole range of possible nuclear scenarios. In case of a limited nuclear attack, an adversary can count on a U.S.

response, but cannot be sure of the timing, intensity, or target of the response. U.S. leaders are likely to seek a response that signals both resolve and restraint. The supplemental capabilities explained in the 2018 NPR—the low yield W76-2 submarine launched ballistic missile warhead and the nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N)—are examples of how a flexible U.S. nuclear force helps close potential “gaps” between what the adversary perceives U.S. will do, and the U.S. ability to achieve its goals.

Having larger response options, beyond those that could be used in a more limited response scenario, helps reinforce the point in the mind of the adversary that should he choose escalation beyond limited employment, there will be no scenario in which he could achieve his political objectives. The 2020 Nuclear Employment Strategy states in this regard, “Should a crisis escalate into a large-scale nuclear attack on the United States or its allies or partners, the United States retains the option to pursue multiple objectives, from preventing further nuclear employment to inflicting intolerable costs on the adversary.” This is, in a sense, the final backdrop to any limited nuclear employment. The opponent must know that even if he plans a “perfect” attack and catches the United States at its worst moment, the United States will still have the ability to inflict unacceptable damage so as to make any attempt ultimately unprofitable.

Conclusion

I am encouraged that the past five Secretaries of Defense, going back to the early Obama administration, have said that nuclear deterrence and nuclear modernization are the number one missions or priorities of the Department of Defense. The 2013 and 2020 Nuclear Employment Strategies reflect this continued tradition of bipartisanship—a tradition built on decades of debate and study of issues that are, quite literally, on the highest of stakes. The security environment for the next Nuclear Employment Strategy—if the past two are any indication—will be different from the 2020 report, but the historic U.S. missions are likely to remain. The Department of Defense must do its part through reports such as these to continuously inform both Congress and the American people. They should know the considered approach, and reasons behind, how U.S. officials think about the unthinkable: nuclear employment.

Robert M. Soofer

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This unclassified report is unprecedented among nuclear powers and provides significant detail on how and under what conditions the United States would consider the use of nuclear weapons. The report was driven by the United States Congress, whose original legislation

requiring the report dates to the early days of the Obama Administration when some in the House and Senate Armed Services Committee were apprehensive about potential changes to US nuclear strategy and employment policy. There was concern that the administration might adopt a minimum deterrence posture to facilitate significant reductions in US nuclear forces consistent with President Obama's vision of an eventual world without nuclear weapons. That concern, it turns out, was misplaced. Nevertheless, Congressional attention on nuclear matters is, on balance, a good thing, as witnessed by the long-standing bipartisan consensus on nuclear modernization.

The report is helpful in important respects

NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg has said that “deterrence starts with resolve; you can't just feel it, you have to show it.” This report contributes to measures undertaken to “show” resolve, along with NATO communiqués, nuclear related exercises, nuclear burden sharing, and the modernization of US/NATO nuclear forces.

Employment guidance, like other aspects of US declaratory nuclear policy, is meant to convey to adversary and ally alike the circumstances under which the US would employ nuclear weapons, how it might employ said weapons, and to what purposes. The guidance is meant to strengthen the credibility of deterrence threats, and in so doing, reassure allies that the United States is willing and capable of using nuclear weapons on their behalf in extreme circumstances—that the United States is willing to run risks on their behalf.

It is also a message to potential adversaries that while deterrence is our most important objective, we have also thought through the scenarios should nuclear deterrence fail. By demonstrating that the United States is prepared to use nuclear weapons under a broad range of circumstances, the United States makes it less likely that challengers will tempt fate or run nuclear risks.

The report is meant to convey the following messages to potential adversaries, allies, and the American people by way of the United States Congress:

For potential adversaries (principally Russia and China)

Potential opponents must understand that the United States has the resolve and capabilities to counter any adversary nuclear use. There is no scenario for nuclear use to which the President cannot or would not respond. To this end, the President is provided limited, graduated response options so that the President is not left with the choice of either responding massively against adversary cities (which would be tantamount to national suicide) or doing nothing. The enemy should understand that the United States maintains a range of delivery systems with different yield warheads and that those systems are SURVIVABLE against an enemy surprise attack. This survivability avoids the need for the United States to consider nuclear preemption during a crisis, thus ensuring crisis stability.

The report makes clear that while deterrence is the first objective, the U.S. leadership thinks seriously about nuclear use should deterrence fail and that it can adaptively plan based on the circumstance.

The report also explains U.S. nuclear strategy in some detail. Contrary to notions of targeting populations based on “mutual assured destruction,” U.S. nuclear strategy is meant to limit escalation and restore deterrence at the lowest possible level. In this way, we hope to disabuse an adversary of whatever notion it was that gave them confidence in using nuclear weapons in the first place—and that pursuing further nuclear use will leave them very much worse off.

We don’t know if nuclear war can be limited—in fact, the risk of uncontrollable escalation enhances deterrence. Yet it would be imprudent not to plan for limited use because massive retaliatory attacks in response to limited adversary nuclear use lack credibility and, if executed, would lead to the worst possible outcomes. By conveying to potential opponents our intent to restore deterrence at the lowest level possible, this could enhance crisis (first strike) stability because the adversary need not fear a U.S. disarming strike. We don’t want the adversary to conclude that its only option is a full-scale attack against the United States, but that there is, perhaps, a way to limit escalation and resolve the conflict short of societal destruction.

A strategy of limited use (to restore deterrence) requires the U.S. to identify targets to strike that can demonstrate resolve while also showing restraint—and how to communicate that restraint to the adversary under stressful conditions.

For Allies

The report should reassure U.S. allies that extended deterrence is strong, despite perennial domestic debates over reducing the role of nuclear weapons and no first use declaratory policy. We want allies to know that the U.S. thinks, plans, and exercises to use nuclear weapons on behalf of its allies, and that we are willing to run risks on their behalf. U.S. nuclear use will be tailored to the circumstances of the threat faced by our allies; we have a range of capabilities that should give an adversary pause before threatening our allies with conventional attacks or risking escalation.

Take-aways for Congress

Despite a healthy interest in nuclear matters in the U.S. Congress, nuclear deterrence theory, U.S. nuclear strategy, and nuclear employment strategy are not well understood, except by a few Members of Congress who have dedicated themselves to this complicated subject. This report should serve to raise the nuclear IQ by imparting the following key points:

The US does not have a policy or strategy of nuclear primacy or superiority. The objective of our nuclear strategy is not to win a nuclear war. Likewise, US nuclear strategy is not Mutual Assured Destruction. We do not target civilians deliberately and we do not rely on massive nuclear attacks to deter adversaries, for such threats like credibility for extended deterrence.

A nuclear strategy of tailored deterrence with flexible capabilities has been a hallmark of U.S. nuclear strategy for many decades and reflects the realities of the nuclear military balance and our extended deterrence requirements.

Flexible, graduated options are not “nuclear warfighting,” but rather help to maintain the nuclear threshold as high as possible because we eliminate from the adversary the supposed benefits from limited strikes. It is a paradox of nuclear deterrence that the best way to make sure that nuclear weapons are never used is to convince the adversary that you are, in extreme circumstances, willing to use them. An incredible nuclear threat does not deter.

Finally, we hope to convey to the Congress and the American people that the U.S. has chosen an appropriate and reasonable nuclear strategy (and supporting nuclear force structure) that considers the existing and foreseeable security environment.

