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CONVERSATIONS ON NATIONAL SECURITY

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**AN INTERVIEW WITH GENERAL KEVIN CHILTON (USAF, RET.),
FORMER COMMANDER OF U.S. STRATEGIC COMMAND**

Gen. Chilton addresses the Biden Administration's nuclear policies, the threats posed by China and Russia, and the importance of having a credible nuclear deterrent in a dynamic international strategic environment. This interview was conducted by David J. Trachtenberg, Vice President of the National Institute for Public Policy.

Q. The Biden Administration's Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) did not adopt many of the policies advocated by supporters of nuclear disarmament, including eliminating the land-based ICBM leg of the U.S. strategic Triad and adopting a "No First Use" policy. How do you assess the NPR?

The strengths of this NPR lie mostly in what it was silent on, to include declarations of "no first use" and "sole purpose" policies (which would have been detrimental if not destructive to U.S. non-proliferation efforts), and any backing away from the recapitalization of all three legs of the nuclear triad (which would have weakened strategic stability). On the proactive side, the NPR supports continued investments in the National Nuclear Security Administration's (NNSA's) efforts to reconstitute the ability of the United States to produce nuclear weapons as opposed to merely sustaining the current stockpile, which will of course eventually age out and become useless. On the other hand its shortcomings include: 1) the failure to commit to a



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plutonium pit production rate and weapons production infrastructure writ large that will hedge against what has now become a certain, as opposed to an “uncertain” future, given the rapid buildup of China’s arsenal, and one that will do more than just sustain the current U.S. deployed stockpile; 2) the failure to support a new nuclear armed Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (again critical to non-proliferation as well as to deterring Chinese aggression in the Western Pacific); and 3) the failure to articulate a strategy that counters the imbalance in theater weapons vis-à-vis the Russian stockpile. All are critical shortcomings in the document.

Q. On balance, does it properly reflect the current international strategic environment and are its recommendations for U.S. policy appropriate to the threats we face?

In short, no to both.

Q. The NPR acknowledges that Russia and China have both increased their reliance on nuclear weapons but proposes that the United States seek ways to reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy. Specifically, it calls for terminating the nuclear sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) program and eliminating the B83-1 gravity bomb. In your view, is this a proper approach?

With regard to reducing U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons, absolutely not. Power, particularly the power wielded by dictatorial and imperialistic regimes such as Russia and China, only respects power. These regimes thrive on the weakness of their adversaries. This NPR continues to reflect the folly of both the “mirror imaging” of our adversaries (i.e., the notion that China and Russia must surely hold the same values and risk tolerances that we do), as well as the notion that they will follow our lead in any matter that is not aligned with their own national interests. Because of these differences, uncertainties exist and as a result it is prudent to address them with a more robust vice less robust inventory of deterrent options. Weapon systems like the SLCM-N not only support our non-proliferation policies (particularly in the Western Pacific), they provide future presidents with credible options that are well short of a homeland-vs-homeland exchange, which would appear to be China’s intent to threaten should the United States intervene to defend Taiwan from a Chinese military incursion. With regard to the elimination of the B-83 gravity bomb, this may make sense if the NPR articulated how we intend to replace the capability it provides to hold the hard and deeply buried targets of our adversaries (such as Russian and Chinese nuclear command and control facilities and Iranian and North Korean nuclear weapon



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production facilities) at risk. Again, we send a signal of weakness if we eliminate this capability without committing to develop adequate alternatives.

Q. Consistent with all previous NPRs, the 2022 NPR supports maintaining the strategic Triad and reiterates the need to modernize all three “legs.” Yet, some critics believe the NPR did not go far enough in making changes to the longstanding bipartisan support for the Triad by recommending significant reductions in, or elimination of, land-based ICBMs. What do you believe is the value of the ICBM leg of the Triad in today’s strategic environment?

The ICBM leg of the Triad provides the most “strategic stability” of any leg for two reasons. One, without this leg, an adversary could be tempted to conduct a first strike that with less than 10 weapons could eliminate the bomber leg of our deterrent, over 50 percent of the submarine leg, our entire stockpile of weapons, our nuclear weapon labs and the entire infrastructure that supports the development and production of our stockpile. Because of their numbers, dispersion, and hardness, an adversary would be required to use a significant number of weapons to mitigate the retaliatory threat the ICBM forces pose. And, because of our ability to launch them on warning, any first strike attempt by an adversary might very well fall on empty silos. Removing this leg or changing its alert posture would be very destabilizing as it would lower the threshold for an adversary’s consideration of a first strike.

Q. Russia’s ongoing military invasion of Ukraine has led to growing concerns that Moscow may use so-called tactical nuclear weapons to avoid defeat in the conflict. Do you believe this is a likely possibility?

Anything is possible. The question for the United States and indeed the civilized world is, how best do we make this decision by Moscow an unthinkable option?

Q. How should the United States and the West respond in such an event?

The United States should use every element of national power across the DIME (Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic) to isolate Russia from the rest of the world and insure that crossing this threshold does not result in a Russian victory in Ukraine. Failing to do the latter would embolden Russia and other nuclear armed adversaries to use (or threaten the use of) nuclear weapons as tools to support their imperialistic goals.



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Q. The viability of the U.S. nuclear deterrent depends on the existence of a reliable and secure command, control, and communications (NC3) network. How do you assess the robustness and resiliency of the existing NC3 network, and are there any specific changes that should be made to improve its efficacy in the face of cyber and other threats?

I do not have enough current information to assess the current robustness and resiliency of the existing NC3 network. However, what I do know is that the NC3 network is essential to the credibility of the deterrent. Indeed, if the deterrent could be envisioned as a 3-legged stool with the legs being the SLBM, bomber and ICBM forces, the seat of the stool that all three legs are attached to contains the NC3 element of the deterrent. Remove any leg and the stool ceases to function as a stool. Remove the seat, and the legs become worthless.

Q. As a former Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, do you believe that STRATCOM has sufficient resources to successfully carry out the missions it has been given?

No. I am concerned that there is insufficient hedging capability being provided or even considered for what is no longer an “uncertain future” but one that is quite predictable. Supporting a deterrent that is essential to the future existence of the United States as well as to the maintenance of the current world order is not well served by “just in time” recapitalization of the Triad nor by a minimalist approach to the recapitalization of our nuclear weapons production capability. Both should have margin built in to their construct because the day may come when we will need more, not less capability to deter multiple threats to our sovereignty.

Q. Multiple administrations have referred to defense of the U.S. homeland as DoD’s top priority. Given the increase in adversary investments and capabilities in hypersonics, cruise missiles, and other exotic technologies, can the United States adequately deter and defend against these threats?

I question what we mean by defense of the U.S. homeland. Do we mean the DoD has a responsibility beyond just deterring attack? What is DoD’s responsibility should deterrence fail? If the expectation is that, should deterrence fail, the DoD should be prepared to defend the homeland then we are poorly postured to do so. Fielding defenses that give the adversary doubt as to whether or not their offensive weapons would be effective certainly strengthens deterrence and increases strategic stability.



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The question we should be considering is how much defense should be fielded, not whether or not we should field defenses. Today, we seem to spend more time on the latter and as a result are ill prepared to defend should deterrence fail at any level. One must also consider that although we cannot defend against the hypersonic/cruise missile/FOB (Fractional Orbital Bombardment)/"super torpedo" threats we see being fielded today by our adversaries, neither can we defend against an "old fashioned" ballistic missile attack, simply because we have chosen not to do so by policy.

Q. What more, if anything, should the United States do to stay ahead of growing threats to U.S. security?

We must convince our adversaries that the use of nuclear weapons, either in a theater or strategic conflict, would not achieve the end states they desire. We can do this through investments in the fielding/posturing and production capacity of our nuclear deterrent infrastructure along with prudent consideration and fielding of defensive capabilities for fielded forces as well as the homeland. Consideration of this balance should include reflection and thoughtful debate on our tolerance for being coerced by our adversaries into failing to pursue our current and future vital national security interests.

Q. China is considered the "pacing threat" for U.S. defense investments and programs. However, there is concern that China is outpacing the United States in various elements of military power, including, for example, in hypersonics. What does the United States need to do to keep pace with China's extensive military modernization program?

Nuclear weapons delivered by hypersonic vehicles, be they boost glide or boost cruise, are no more lethal to the U.S. homeland than ballistic weapons since, by choice only, we cannot defend the homeland against the latter either. In a theater conflict this is not true, as systems like Patriot and Thaad can defend against a ballistic threat. I think it is most important to field defenses for the theater scenarios. With respect to deterring attack on the homeland, the issue at hand is: given the investments Russia (and perhaps China as well) is making in missile defense systems designed to defeat ballistic missile attacks on its homeland, will a purely ballistic-weapon-armed U.S. deterrent force be adequate to maintain strategic stability in the future? I think not, and therefore it would be prudent to field some amount of hypersonic, nuclear-armed, intercontinental systems that would counter Russian (and Chinese) defensive systems to ensure our ballistic weapons can effectively penetrate their defenses.



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Q. Former STRATCOM Commander ADM Richard has referred to China's expansive nuclear program, including the building of some 350 new ICBM silos, as "breathtaking." Why do you believe China is undertaking such a massive nuclear buildup?

I believe this is part of a coercive strategy that seeks to neutralize U.S. will to come to the defense of not just Taiwan but also of our allies in the Western Pacific.

Q. What does this say about China's previously declared "minimum deterrent" policy?

I believe they have turned away from this policy and seek to build a credible first strike capability to support a coercive strategy.

Q. Last year, Presidents Putin and Xi signed a pact pledging a friendship with "no limits." Since then, China and Russia have engaged in multiple joint military exercises and closer military coordination, and have made nuclear threats against NATO and U.S. allies in the Pacific. How likely is the possibility, in your view, that the United States may confront military challenges by two nuclear peer adversaries in two theaters simultaneously?

The likelihood is unknown. But failing to consider the possibility and building the necessary deterrence capabilities to address this possibility could be disastrous.

Q. Is the United States prepared to deal with such a contingency?

Not today.

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