



INTERVIEWS

As part of its continuing effort to provide readers with unique perspectives on critical national security issues, National Institute has conducted a series of interviews with key subject matter experts on a variety of contemporary defense and national security topics. In this issue of National Institute's *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, we present two interviews: one with General Kevin Chilton, (USAF, Ret.), former Commander of U.S. Strategic Command; and another with Thomas Kent, former President and CEO of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. The interviews were conducted by David Trachtenberg, Vice President of the National Institute for Public Policy.

General Chilton discusses 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. He argues that in light of Russian and Chinese nuclear developments the United States should "absolutely not" reduce its own reliance on nuclear weapons for deterrence, criticizes the "minimalist approach to the recapitalization of our nuclear weapons production capability," and notes that the United States today is "ill prepared to defend [the homeland] should deterrence fail at any level." Mr. Kent looks at the impact of Russian propaganda and disinformation and offers suggestions on how the West can effectively counter it. He argues that "no one seems to be coordinating all the different agencies across the government that have a role in combating malign information operations" and calls for a "unified, government-wide strategy" to counter adversary disinformation.

These interviews provide insightful context on some of the most significant national security issues of our time. In today's increasingly uncertain and volatile global security environment, the views of these experts add important perspective to the current debate on the serious military and political challenges the United States faces from both China and Russia and how this nation can best prepare to address those challenges successfully.

An Interview with General Kevin Chilton, (USAF, Ret.), former Commander, 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.

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?



A. 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 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?

A. 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?

A. 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 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?

A. 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?

A. 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?

A. 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.

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?

A. 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?

A. 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?

A. 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. 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?

A. 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?

A. 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.

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?

A. 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?

A. 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?

A. 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?

A. Not today.

An Interview with Thomas Kent, former President and CEO of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

Mr. Kent looks at the impact of Russian propaganda and disinformation and offers suggestions on how the West can effectively counter it.

Q. Russia appears to be employing Soviet-style propaganda and disinformation tactics to justify its war against Ukraine. How effective do you think Russia’s tactics have been in influencing the general Russian population?

A. It depends on what part of the Russian population you’re talking about. Clearly there are many citizens who have a real problem with Russia killing thousands of people in Ukraine who, in Vladimir Putin’s rhetoric, are the same people as Russians. Others are alarmed over the damage the war has done to Russia’s economy and international standing. State propaganda can’t blot out these people’s concerns. But they know the dangers of protesting.

A second group of Russians either believe the official propaganda, and even derive some thrill from Russia being an international Voldemort that has transfixed the world’s attention. Foreign Minister Lavrov has said that Russia is not squeaky clean; it is what it is, and is not ashamed.¹ Comments like this, just like hate speech about Ukrainians on state television talk shows, set the tone for many people not to care at all about the destruction the Kremlin is raining down on a neighboring country.

¹ Steve Rosenberg, “Lavrov: Russia is not squeaky clean and not ashamed,” *BBC News*, June 17, 2022, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61825525>.

A third group—perhaps the majority—just try not to think about the war. If you don't personally know someone who was killed, it's still possible to live in Russia today and feel the war is quite far from you. In any country there's a natural instinct to trust your leaders, or at least to think there's not much you can do to change things. For many people, the war is just something in the background—not a daily factor in their lives. It's not something they're going to go into the streets about, for or against.

Q. What do you believe are the most effective methods the United States can use to combat the deliberate spread of misinformation about the war in Ukraine?

A. The United States and its allies have been pretty successful recently with “prebunking”—anticipating, and publicly warning about, actions that Russia may take. When the Kremlin was vociferously denying that it intended to invade Ukraine, the United States declared that they would—and predicted the timing almost to the day. This tactic often requires declassifying information obtained from sensitive sources—and though it may not force a change in an opponent's behavior if that opponent is bent on conquest, it's worth it in terms of the information effect.

I'm also a big believer in the potential of local non-government groups who actively combat disinformation and campaign for democracy in at-risk countries.² Some of these activists are out on social networks, punching it out on social networks, punching it out with trolls and bots. Others run media literacy classes, or focus on reaching elderly people who are often vulnerable to disinformation. They develop software to unmask troll and bot networks so social platforms can take them down. They campaign for advertisers to boycott disinformation sites.

They are extremely courageous. Their members often work at significant personal risk in countries where political violence is common.

These authentic local actors have more credibility than any messaging by a foreign country. But they need financial support, training and contacts with peers in other nations. This is a need Western governments, citizens' groups and foundations can fill.

Pro-democracy groups can't be speaking just to educated elites. In many countries, the people most vulnerable to disinformation are less-educated people, often in the countryside. These people need to be addressed in their own way of speaking, with a focus on their own concerns. They're much more likely to respond to reporting about how government corruption affects their own region, than to general exhortations about democracy or human rights.

In fact, one can argue that the D-word—“democracy”—isn't that useful at all. It has been so dented by adversary attacks, and Western democracies have had so many difficulties of their own, that in some countries the word has lost the impact it had. Better to speak simply

² Thomas Kent, “In the global meme wars, it's time to side with the elves against the trolls,” *The Washington Post*, November 16, 2022, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/11/16/support-elves-trolls-disinformation-wars/>.

about the right to criticize your government without being arrested, or to have a genuine choice of candidates in an election. Those are concepts that people can easily understand and support.

It's also important to support investigative journalists who expose the machinations of authoritarian leaders and hold corrupt officials accountable. But the news products these journalists produce need to be attractive to, and readable by, everyone in their countries.

Q. How effective is the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) in countering Russian propaganda and disinformation? What additional steps, if any, should the United States take to counter the spread of Russian disinformation?

A. To its credit, the GEC has always recognized the importance of non-government actors. Its mother ship at State, the Bureau of Global Public Affairs, has been active in exposing Russian disinformation and even sending messages to the population of Russia itself—such as its “To the people of Russia” video in January.³ However, no one seems to be coordinating all the different agencies across the government that have a role in combating malign information operations. These include multiple offices at the State Department, public diplomacy officers at embassies, USAID, the military, and the intelligence community.

And even if someone does take on a coordinating role, there needs to be a clear goal that the United States wants to achieve. Does the United States want Putin to be forced from power, on the theory that whoever succeeds him will be an improvement? Do we want to inspire big anti-war demonstrations, recognizing the risks that protesters would face? Are we sure that messaging from the United States would have a positive effect, rather than spurring a backlash against us? It's hard to run an information campaign if you don't know what effect you're trying to produce.

People who worry about the United States getting more active in the information space often jump to the conclusion that effective information strategies mean doing disinformation of our own—sometimes described as “descending to their level” or “getting down in the mud.” In my view, we should always tell the truth—but we should do so much more assertively, through a variety of well-thought-out channels, in a coordinated fashion.

We need to think carefully about the tone of our messages. The “To the people of Russia” video was not hostile, at least toward the Russian population as a whole. It simply recapped past friendship between the United States and Moscow, and then showed the horrors of Ukraine. It ended with “We do not believe this is who you are,” followed by the sound of Russian demonstrators chanting “No to war.”

Of course, any Western messaging to Russia's population alarms the country's leadership, which fantasizes that the United States really does have a finely honed information operation aimed at its people. Reacting to the January video, Deputy Security Council chief Dmitry Medvedev said that it demonstrates “extreme cynicism in the best

³ Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ca6xYhruqR8>.

traditions of the Nazis. Yes, indeed, the sons of bitches bringing such nonsense are the real heirs of the Reich Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels.”⁴

Q. During the Cold War, the United States Information Agency (USIA) was generally seen as an effective tool to counter adversary disinformation. Do you believe there is a need to recreate an agency such as USIA for this purpose?

A. The legislative effort and bureaucratic battles involved in such an attempt would take forever, and paralyze U.S. information operations in the meantime. But the fundamental need in fighting disinformation is not a new organizational chart. It’s a unified, government-wide strategy.

What could make an enormous difference is a small office at, say, the level of the NSC to determine the U.S. government’s (USG’s) overall goals in the information war, decide which of our existing agencies will do what, and—importantly—provide high-level approval for the projects and messages involved. USG officials can be very risk-averse. There needs to be someone authoritative to tell them, “Yes, it’s OK to do that,” and who will defend them if something goes wrong.

Information operations are always an experiment, requiring constant evaluation of the messages you’re sending and frequent course corrections. Inevitably there will be missteps. As one USG official told me, “The number of successes you have is a function of the number of things you try.” Russian information operations are effective because they have learned from years of live-fire exercises against Western populations.

Q. Do you believe the United States has the necessary tools in place successfully to challenge Russian narratives? Is it a case of poor execution on the part of the U.S. government or are more fundamental structural changes needed?

A. If you look across all the agencies dealing with this problem set, the tools are there—or can be quickly acquired. We’re talking here about systems to monitor the information environment, conduct online campaigns, measure the effect and so forth. There’s no rocket science here. What’s not really in place is a big-enough cadre of experts within the USG who devote their whole professional lives to information operations. Diplomats and military officers cycle in and out of information-related assignments, which is very disruptive for a specialty that depends greatly on accumulating experience through experimentation. USG components have been bringing in more contractors with that experience for a few months or years at a time. But U.S. agencies need more of their own career experts, especially at policy levels, to keep our efforts on the right strategic course.

⁴ Dmitry Medvedev, Telegram post, January 5, 2023, available at https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/241.

Q. As a former head of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), how do you assess the effectiveness of the types of media used to convey factual information to the Russian people? What challenges have been posed by the migration away from the use of shortwave radio broadcasts to more contemporary technologies such as satellite, digital transmissions, and the internet?

A. By law, U.S. government broadcasters like RFE/RL and the Voice of America have independent editorial operations. They are not the voice of the government. This adds to their credibility; more than 400 million people worldwide look to them for news and information.⁵

The five networks moved long ago to transfer most of their work from radio to the digital and video realm. Their videos scored nearly a half-billion views last year on the web and social networks. In addition, their 24-hour Russian-language TV news network, *Current Time*, has had major impact. (Older technologies such as shortwave still retain their value and should be used more in a situation like Ukraine.⁶)

That said, the broadcasters should not be the USG's only resource to reach foreign populations, especially at moments of crisis. Since they expressly are not government mouthpieces, U.S. officials cannot give them orders on what to put out. Some situations call for intense, non-stop messaging in a format quite different from what of an ordinary news service would provide.

In a crisis, there may be a need to flood the internet with hundreds of posts in just a few hours, using all the targeting techniques that our adversaries use. There may be a need to punch through internet blocks, broadcast jamming and other tactics our opponents may deploy. (The five broadcast networks have experience with that already.) We might even want to disrupt the sources of disinformation themselves. What capabilities currently exist in the USG to respond like that in a crisis? Which USG components have the skills, and how practiced are they in working together? How have we simulated such operations, perhaps just with innocuous posts, to make sure we know how to flood the zone? These are good questions to resolve before a crisis suddenly hits.

Q. There are reports that Russia is winning the narrative war in places like Africa and Latin America. Is this accurate? If so, why do you believe Russia is scoring propaganda successes?

A. Russia has a few advantages in its information operations in the Global South. One is that most people know fairly little about Russia, except perhaps for its hosting of the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Russian statements don't necessarily evoke suspicion. So when they say the war

⁵ U.S. Agency for Global Media, "Audience and Impact OVERVIEW FOR 2022," available at https://www.usagm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/USAGM_Audience_and_Impact_Report_2022.pdf.

⁶ Tom Kent, "Radio to Russia: Can Old Technologies Make a Dent in Putin's Information Blockade?," Information Professionals Association, June 21, 2022, available at <https://information-professionals.org/radio-to-russia-can-old-technologies-make-a-dent-in-putins-information-blockade/>.

with Ukraine is just a territorial dispute, or a reaction to genocide by Ukrainians, no automatic warning light goes off. (People know even less about Ukraine than about Russia.)

What people do care about is food shortages and inflation. Russia argues that these come not from Russia's invasion, but from Western sanctions. It is not hard to stir up suspicion of the West in Global South countries, where resentments endure from European colonialism, U.S. support of Latin American dictators, and Western policy on issues like Libya, the Palestinians and Iraq. Russia even claims it is fighting against colonialism by keeping NATO from seizing the agricultural riches of Ukraine.

Still, Russia still has a tough job cutting a heroic image in developing nations, especially when its extreme brutality in Ukraine is becoming well known worldwide. And the West still has its attraction. Whatever people think of U.S. and European foreign policy, there's no shortage of people desperate to migrate to Western countries. Anyone who travels the world finds their taxi driver inevitably has a brother in Brooklyn—who presumably tells the people back home that he intends to stay there. Almost no one dreams of settling down in a little cottage in Russia.

Russia's strategy, however, doesn't need to be about winning a public popularity contest in the Global South. It only needs to ingratiate itself with individual countries' political elites. Russia can be useful to these elites by helping to shore up shaky regimes, and by giving them a "Russia card" to play to get better trade and aid deals from Western countries. In return, Russia can win those countries' support (or at least abstentions) at the UN, have somewhere to export its goods, and avoid total international isolation.