As part of its continuing effort to provide readers with unique perspectives on some of the most significant national security issues of our time, National Institute has conducted a series of interviews with key subject matter experts on a variety of contemporary defense and national security topics. These expert views add important perspectives to the current debate and how the United States can best prepare to address forthcoming challenges successfully. In this issue of National Institute's *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, we present an interview with Robert Taylor, U.S. Strategic Command/J8.

Mr. Taylor discusses China's rise and its potential implications for U.S. STRATCOM's missions, challenges related to the opacity inherent in China's strategic build up, and risks related to Russia's nuclear coercion in the escalation of its war in Ukraine. He also touches upon growing uncertainties in the strategic environment and the importance of U.S. nuclear modernization.

An Interview with
Robert Taylor
U.S. Strategic Command/J8

Q. Does the rise of China as a revisionist nuclear peer change U.S. Strategic Command's (USSTRATCOM's) future force requirements?

A. Any changes to USSTRATCOM future force requirements must be evaluated from a broader global security environment context. China is rapidly expanding the size and capabilities of both its conventional and nuclear forces. This expansion is arguably well beyond what we consider necessary for its stated minimum deterrence strategy. Doing so enables them to build toward a capability to execute any plausible nuclear employment strategy, as described in the 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR).

To address this challenge, we must continuously monitor the security environment, make force posture adjustments where necessary and pursue dialogue with China to manage misperceptions, while also ensuring our strategies and capabilities are sufficient to address global strategic deterrence requirements. To this end, we maintain a flexible deterrence strategy and force posture to clearly convey to China that the United States will not be deterred from defending its vital interests and our Allies' and partners'.

Ultimately, USSTRATCOM requirements are threat-informed through intelligence assessments based on national strategy and presidential guidance, and developed as a function of what is deemed necessary to address threats posed by all potential adversaries. To ensure our deterrence remains credible, our force requirements must continue to evolve in response to a rapidly changing and increasingly competitive geopolitical environment. In some cases, adjustments may require additional capacity and capabilities. At the same time, and consistent with the 2022 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS), we must

continue to support and leverage integrated deterrence by working seamlessly across warfighting domains, integrating conventional and nuclear operations, using all instruments of U.S. national power, and our network of Allies and partners to achieve our national security objectives.

Q. What do you see as the main challenge to adapting U.S. nuclear weapons policy in the future, as China's projected nuclear systems go online and Russia's nuclear threats?

A. Understanding of China's intent behind its nuclear expansion remains a significant challenge. Russia's suspension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) and threat of coercive nuclear use in Ukraine demonstrates its intent to continue reliance on nuclear forces to achieve military objectives. Both nations continue to demonstrate the rapidly changing competitive environment that will pose future challenges to nuclear weapon policy.

We must continue ongoing efforts to fully modernize the triad, associated nuclear command, control and communications (NC3) capabilities, and supporting infrastructure to ensure the foundation of our deterrent remains sound. We are striving to operationalize conventional-nuclear integration to provide a wide range of options to the Department of Defense (DoD). China's reluctance to participate in an arms control or nuclear risk reduction efforts, and lack of transparency limits our understanding of their goals. Therefore, we must continually evaluate whether adjustments in our policy, strategy, force posture, force size, and capacity and/or capabilities will be required to ensure the deterrent remains credible. Nuclear deterrence is the foundation of strategic and integrated deterrence. Nuclear weapons, with the right delivery systems, have no equal in destructive power and will serve as a necessary element of deterrence for the foreseeable future.

Q. The United States and its Allies are facing nuclear coercion in a regional context, epitomized by Russia's threats against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) during Russia's war in Ukraine. How does USSTRATCOM take into account the regional COCOM's perspective on a regional nuclear threat?

A. Russia represents an acute threat, and President Putin's threat of nuclear employment presents yet another deterrence challenge. Russia uses its annual strategic forces exercises to message its strategic deterrent to both regional and global audiences. The Russians have demonstrated a willingness to conduct these exercises ahead of potential crises to communicate Moscow's stake and deter third-party intervention, particularly NATO's, to achieve their objectives.

USSTRATCOM works closely with U.S. European Command for intelligence analysis, operational plans integration, and requirement development to provide the President of the United States with the best military advice and conventional/nuclear options to

address this and any other future situations. USSTRATCOM integrates with regional unified combatant commands (CCMDs) across functions of our Command, but we can and must continue to improve deliberate integrated planning across National, DoD, and agencies, to be fully prepared for crisis and conflict. In capabilities development, regional CCMDs inform our analysis and align with the Joint Force requirements across the DoD.

Q. We have heard quite a bit lately about limited capacities of U.S. defense industrial base and challenges it would face it if were to supply the nation in war with a peer adversary. Are these concerns applicable to considerations of U.S. delivery system modernization? What are the most significant near-term and long-term challenges to executing this modernization in a timely manner?

A. Executing and delivering nuclear enterprise modernization programs on time remains one of the DoD's and USSTRATCOM's top priorities. Near-term and long-term challenges include secure supply chains, manufacturing, materials, skilled labor, and testing as the nation modernizes all three legs of the nuclear triad, the nuclear weapon stockpile, and NC3 enterprise. The 2022 NDS and 2022 NPR rightfully identify the need to strengthen our defense industrial base to ensure production and sustainment of the full range of capabilities.

We are focused long-term on attaining flexibility within the industrial base necessary to rapidly adapt to a changing geopolitical environment. The defense industrial base and program funding both represent near- and long-term challenges to ensuring modernization remains on schedule. A credible and effective deterrent requires full and consistent funding to sustain and modernize delivery platforms, nuclear weapons, and the industrial base.

Q. Given Russia's advantage on the tactical nuclear force levels and China's increasing nuclear weapon numbers and projections that are very unfavorable to the United States and its Allies, would the United States be able to support an increase in the number of delivery systems it procures and nuclear warheads it deploys if the political leadership deems it necessary?

A. It is important to acknowledge that USSTRATCOM assesses operational risk but does not establish policy. If directed by national leadership, we can support adjustments in the number of delivery systems procured and nuclear warheads deployed. USSTRATCOM would work with the Services to develop options to adjust force posture as well as program schedules for modernization, and at the same time, assess operational risk.

For example, we have already begun looking at capacity, should there be requests by the DoD or administration for additional analysis given the threat environment. This analysis would evaluate and propose the best options to adjust requirements and, if desired, to deliver more capacity. Ultimately, decisions regarding delivery systems, warheads or the Nation's nuclear posture will be based on national policy and objectives, but from the

operational perspective, ongoing analysis of our ability to meet objectives is part of the assessment for future forces.

Q. Speaking of U.S. nuclear weapon requirements, what do you foresee as the main difference between the nuclear force requirement in the 1990s and the 2030s?

A. The geopolitical environment, and particularly the threat, has changed dramatically since the 1990s. When coupled with a more globally integrated economy, technological advancements, and the speed of information movement, forces must be agile, flexible and postured to respond along far shorter timelines. These and other factors necessitate improved integration between the nuclear force and non-nuclear conventional kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities.

Within the nuclear enterprise, the requirement for a safe, secure, reliable, and credible nuclear triad remains. However, modern and more capable platforms underpinned by a 21st century NC3 capability, and supported by a revitalized weapons complex are required to address a growing and increasingly complex threat. Our modernization programs in development today were originally designed in response to the 2010 threat environment and may very well require future adjustment based on changes in only the last decade. Integrating conventional hypersonic weapons, non-kinetic capabilities, and collaborating with our Allies are increasingly important aspects of strategic deterrence that will likely grow in value as we enter the 2030s. Moving forward, we must continually assess our nuclear force posture, capacity, and multi-discipline strategic capabilities to ensure they are effective to deter in the 21st century.

Q. The Administration has recently declared Russia in noncompliance with New START. How does uncertainty regarding the treaty, and the fact there may not be a follow on arms control treaty, impact USSTRATCOM's nuclear weapon planning process?

A. Russia's non-compliance with and illegal suspension of New START is unfortunate and irresponsible. Without New START or similar agreement, Russia is unconstrained in the expansion of strategic nuclear forces. In the near-term, the impact to nuclear weapon planning processes is limited because it takes significant time to develop, test, and field additional delivery platforms. However, a long-term lapse in an arms control agreement may create a more challenging strategic environment and could result in greater complexity in our planning processes.

Mutual compliance with New START strengthens the security of the United States, its allies, and partners. It also strengthens Russian security. Russia is not better off in a world where the two largest nuclear powers are no longer engaging in bilateral arms control. Arms control measures foster transparency, understanding, and predictability, thereby reducing the risk of misunderstanding and miscalculation.

Q. What do you see as USSTRATCOM's least developed future concept that deserves further analytical exploration?

A. Numerous technology areas have the potential to significantly enhance strategic deterrence and deserve further exploration. Specific capabilities include trajectory shaping, weapons accuracy, non-kinetic capabilities, NC3 enhancements, meshed networks, advanced navigation concepts, and subsea and seabed warfare. In some cases, evolution of existing capabilities such as platform and re-entry vehicle advancements, integration of conventional and nuclear operations, and the ability to hold hard- and-deeply buried targets at risk warrant exploration and analysis. To mature these advanced capabilities and concepts, USSTRATCOM has developed specific science and technology focus areas to concentrate efforts in data science to emulate decision-making, enhance survivability against emerging threats, improve threat custody capabilities to improve kill chains, improve capabilities for submarines to operate at speed and depth, and incorporate non-kinetic concepts. These technologies and several others have the potential to enhance strategic deterrence and provide national leadership with options beyond today's existing forces.

Q. How can USSTRATCOM play more effectively in the DoD's budget process?

A. The 2022 NDS informs resource investment and identifies nuclear deterrence as a top priority for the nation. USSTRATCOM is deeply integrated into the budgeting process to ensure resources are aligned with DoD priorities and budgets are informed by operational risk. We do this through two primary methods; first, we engage with Services before and during their program objective memorandum (POM) development, establish strategic priorities, and we coordinate with the Office of Secretary of Defense as it finalizes DoD recommendations for the president's budget. Second, we work with congressional representatives and committees to ensure warfighter gaps are clearly articulated as Congress finalizes the federal budget annually. Our continued engagement in the early phases of budget development and throughout the adjudication process facilitate operationally informed budgets.

Q. In your opinion, what would be the best way to address the tension between providing the DoD capabilities in need for today's fight and requirements of modernization? How should one prioritize between the two when the tradeoffs become necessary?

A. The DoD has continued to prioritize the modernization of the nuclear triad and NC3. This prioritization has ensured sustained funding to service programs of record. However, the ongoing nuclear modernization effort is facing schedule, industrial base, and workforce challenges. We are out of margin on many fronts and must deliver the new capabilities on time to address today's threats and ensure we have the capacity, capability, flexibility, and

margin to remain credible against evolving adversary threats. We cannot divest any existing strategic systems early to fund a modernization program replacement. We do not have the luxury of choosing between fully funding the modernization program of record or maintaining the current systems. Both are required to maintain a credible, reliable, nuclear deterrent force as the bedrock of our strategic deterrence and national defense.

Q. How does USSTRATCOM assess the impact of adversaries' hypersonic weapons on U.S. nuclear deterrence?

A. USSTRATCOM has a requirement for resilient and robust missile warning and tracking capabilities to defend against the growing threat posed by hypersonic weapons, cruise and ballistic missiles. Emerging hypersonic threats present significant operational challenges by limiting warning time necessary to change force posture and presents risk to our strategic forces, creating vulnerability and eroding deterrence. This operational risk must be addressed through an integrated approach with USNORTHCOM and the DoD.

Q. What is the role of US allies in USSTRATCOM's integration efforts?

A. Integrated deterrence is the foundation of the 2022 NDS and our relationship with Allies. We are executing integrated deterrence today—and our Allies are critical to the effort. It entails working seamlessly across warfighting domains, theaters, the spectrum of conflict, whole of government, and our network of Allies and partners. At USSTRATCOM, we integrate plans, operations, and force modernization with our Allies. We are a key player in extended deterrence engagements. The strengthening of our international bodies—NATO, AUKUS—and the swift, coordinated response of the United States, Allies and partners to support Ukraine gives great credence to the effectiveness of our integrated deterrence strategy.