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Nuclear Deterrence in Question: How We Got Here, and What to Do

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Every new presidential administration has sought to put its mark on U.S. nuclear deterrence policies and capabilities. New administrations like to give names to their deterrence policies to suggest that they have come up with something new and different, when, in reality, there has been little truly new for many years. Most recently, the Biden Administration introduced "integrated deterrence," which involved nothing truly new beyond the name. Continuity is the real hallmark of U.S. nuclear deterrence policy—even as the world has become much more dangerous.

In late 2024, anticipating a new administration taking office in 2025, my colleagues and I began working on a strategic deterrence review study. In 2023, the Strategic Posture Commission provided an outstanding report. With this new study, we hoped to add to the Strategic Posture Commission's report if we could, and comment on new developments since that report was written.

Our new study was published in June 2025 in a report entitled, *A New Strategic Review for a New Age: 2025*. Our goal was to produce and circulate the study's conclusions in time to help *inform the new administration and Congress* with regard to a sharply worsening nuclear threat environment, and to identify U.S. options for sustaining nuclear deterrence in this environment.

Additional contributors to this new study have unparalleled expertise and experience in the field: General Kevin P. Chilton (Ret.); Michaela Dodge; Robert Joseph; Mitch Kugler; Frank C. Miller; ADM Charles Richard (Ret.); Thomas Scheber; Mark B. Schneider; and, David J. Trachtenberg.

I will take just a few minutes to provide a brief overview of the study's main conclusions. My main focus today, however, will be on the factors that have led to the unprecedented threats we now face. Why look back? Because we need to recognize the hole we are in and stop digging.

Contemporary U.S. plans for nuclear force modernization and the New START Treaty were established in tandem approximately 15 years ago, at a time when U.S. officials generally still believed that U.S. relations with Russia and China were relatively benign and would *improve further*. Great power conflict was considered a thing of the past and the need for strategic deterrence and nuclear weapons was vanishing rapidly. The only remaining threats were from a few third-tier rogue states and terrorists. Nuclear weapons were considered irrelevant to these remaining threats. Consequently, many American officials considered the need for nuclear weapons and deterrence to be greatly diminished or non-existent. The 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review* explicitly identified non-proliferation as the priority goal, not nuclear deterrence, and reducing the role and number of U.S. nuclear weapons was considered a key to nuclear non-proliferation.

As my former Hudson Institute colleague, Professor Paul Bracken, said of the time: "All were on board to oppose nuclear arms…. Academics, think tanks and intellectuals quickly jumped on the bandwagon. For a time, it really looked like there was going to be an antinuclear turn in U.S. strategy."[1] This hubris reflected what was, and remains, a gross misreading of history.

In addition, Washington continued to enjoy the post-Cold War peace dividend and, in 2001, gave up maintaining a two-war standard for non-nuclear U.S. preparedness. Only one year prior to Russia's initial attack on Ukraine in 2014, the United States was still withdrawing tanks from Europe. American leaders at the time expressed shock at this aggressive Russian behavior; it contradicted their celebrated narrative dominating Washington that great power conflict was a thing of the past.

History was supposed to have transcended the old-school hostilities and aggression of the past. Secretary of State John Kerry said Russia's 2014 aggression against Ukraine sprang not from an expansionist, aggressive agenda, but from its feelings of "weakness." You see, Russia was more pathetic and unsophisticated than aggressive and expansionist. Kerry added that, "you just don't, in the 21st century, behave in 19th-century fashion by invading another country…."[2] That was the supposed New World Order reality. As an astute academic commentator noted recently, such expectations reflected "ideological certitude bordering on geostrategic arrogance, one that still infuses the nation's policy debates."[3]

Not everyone at the time had such naïve thoughts about the state of international affairs and the supposed New World Order. My late colleague, Colin Gray, said early in the post-Cold War period that we were then in only a short pause of great power hostilities, and that

"another bloody century" would resume. In fact, Colin dismissed then-prevalent expectations of a cooperative New World Order and pointed to "the strong possibility that world politics two to three decades hence will be increasingly organized around the rival poles of U.S. and Chinese power," and that China then "would menace Japan." He also fully expected that Russia would again confront the West militarily and "immediately would threaten independent Ukraine [and] the Baltics."[4]

Unfortunately, as Colin expected, the post-Cold War's superficial tranquility was but a brief interlude before a return to sharp hostilities and conflict. Nevertheless, Western officials on a bipartisan basis continued to welcome the largely academic trope that the bad old history was over, and that great power military conflict and nuclear weapons were things of the past. A New World Order was at hand, and we could now generally forget old fears, especially those that drove any need for nuclear weapons; instead, we could enjoy a well-deserved peace dividend.

That hapless interpretation of twenty-first century international relations was the backdrop for New START and the current U.S. strategic nuclear program. That program reflects a continuation of what former Defense Secretary Robert Gates has called America's three decades-long "holiday from history." It was consciously structured to comport with a significant reduction of the U.S. nuclear force structure under the New START Treaty, and not add new capabilities. Washington continues to adhere to this framework while Russia and China have engaged in unprecedented nuclear and conventional force expansions, in parallel with their increasingly aggressive foreign policy agendas.

Indeed, Russia has so blatantly violated the New START Treaty that we are unlikely to know Russian strategic nuclear force numbers at this point.[5] Russia shut down on-site inspections years ago; at the time of the hearings on New START, these inspections were celebrated as the means of having force numbers transparency. Thanks to Moscow, that transparency has been gone for years. With breathtaking hypocrisy, after years of New START violations, likely including exceeding warhead limits, Russia now offers to extend observance another year.

Perhaps more importantly, both Russia and China see nuclear weapons not simply as the basis for defensive deterrence, as the West understands the value of nuclear weapons. They have deployed nuclear weapons not only to deter U.S. attacks—although folks who want to rationalize Russian and Chinese behavior make that claim. Moscow and Beijing also value nuclear weapons for the coercive cover they provide for their aggressive expansionism. The basic notion is not complex—if they can paralyze the West with various types of nuclear threats, they will have a relatively free hand to act aggressively at the time and place of their choosing. This is aggression backed by nuclear coercion. It is the difference between a nuclear deterrence posture that says, if you attack, I will escalate, and a nuclear coercion posture that says, if you respond to my aggression, I will escalate. The difference in words here is minimal; the difference in intention is enormous. Too many in the West still do not understand this—perhaps because it suggests that the reasons for Russian and Chinese armaments include their aggressive, expansionist foreign designs rather than U.S. belligerence.

We have seen this coercive nuclear formula in play in Europe since 2022, and we may see it play out vis-à-vis Taiwan in the near future. In fact, we may confront coordinated Russian and Chinese aggression under the cover of nuclear threats. A primary goal of U.S. nuclear deterrence has been to prevent nuclear coercion. To date, our ability to do so, and to convince threatened allies that we can do so, has been a mixed bag at best. As a consequence, increasingly fearful allies now have open discussions of independent nuclear capabilities, including South Korea, Japan, Germany, and, to some extent, even Australia. If this trend continues, nuclear proliferation will be unleashed, not because the United States has *sustained* its nuclear capabilities, as was the earlier contention, but because the United States has *not* sustained a credible extended nuclear deterrence.

Unfortunately, history has given us a nuclear threat environment that is much more dangerous than was expected in 2010. The likely inadequacies of U.S. nuclear forces in this environment are the direct result of opponents who have aggressive agendas and their military buildups, in combination with our own naïve arms control initiatives and behavior.

Washington's arms control mistakes seem to get a pass as a prime contributor to where we are now. Saying so is painful, but not saying so is a mistake because it encourages repetition.

It would be wise to recognize Washington's past arms control mistakes so that we just might not repeat them in the future. For example, the George H. W. Bush Administration's celebrated 1991 Presidential Nuclear Initiative was a reflection of naïve expectations about Russia. Its near elimination of U.S. non-strategic nuclear weapons (in combination with the earlier 1987 INF Treaty) has led to an enormous asymmetry in non-strategic nuclear capabilities in favor of Russia and China, and to the corresponding fragility of our current extended deterrence posture. To expect arms control agreements to solve our problems now would be comparably naïve.

But, regardless of how we got here, we are where we are. The immediate question before us now is whether the Trump Administration will now adjust the current nuclear modernization program to the reality of an unexpectedly dangerous threat environment.

Washington essentially now has three options:

1. It can define down what is necessary for deterrence and happily announce that the current modernization program is *adequate or much more than enough*. This is the "less is enough" approach that is now advocated by some prominent commentators (I call this the "Minimum, Easy Deterrence" school solution).

   Or,

2. Washington can maintain its long-standing definition of adequacy, and hope against hope that deterrence simply is not tested while we await the replacement systems coming online. This is the "do-nothing new" path preferred by many in the hope that the apparent threats either are not real, or will somehow go away. (I call this the "Hope is a strategy" school solution).

   Or,

3. Washington can move forward urgently to strengthen the U.S. nuclear deterrence position. This is the "do more now" approach suggested by the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission. (I call this the "Threat-based" school solution).

Our recently released study concludes that this third option is the *most prudent* given Chinese, Russian and North Korean goals and posturing over the past decade. Neither of the first two options acknowledges that the increased nuclear threat over the past decade has affected U.S. nuclear deterrence requirements. But, as Winston Churchill said, "it is necessary sometimes to take the enemy into consideration."

Following Churchill's wise advice now suggests that, given the heightened threat context, Washington must strengthen the U.S. deterrence posture for the United States and for allies. The 2023 Strategic Posture Commission used the words "urgent" or "urgently" over 40 times in this regard. Many of our allies have slowly, grudgingly come to the same conclusion.

Unfortunately, given the past four decades of deep U.S. strategic and non-strategic force reductions, and the atrophying of the U.S. nuclear infrastructure, the United States is largely limited by the existing number of available strategic bombers, missiles and warheads in its near-term capacity to strengthen its nuclear force posture.

Today, the United States reportedly has approximately 1,660 deployed strategic nuclear weapons.[6] With this level of capability, even with the planned U.S. force replacement program, the United States likely cannot fully hold at risk Russian and Chinese targets related to deterrence, particularly given Beijing's new nuclear force expansion and its breathtaking construction of underground facilities.

Nuclear force upload, that is, adding existing weapons to existing platforms, is a timely, low-cost option for strengthening deterrence in the near term. In fact, nuclear upload is likely the only way America can adequately enhance the strategic nuclear force size and flexibility needed to tailor deterrence in the near term.

The entire U.S. strategic nuclear triad likely could be uploaded before the first element of the planned modernization program becomes operational. *Upload is not a substitute for the modernization program* because the existing Triad is aging out rapidly, but it may be critical for deterrence in the near term.

Upload, even under the limits of New START, could provide approximately 2,200 warheads. This number is possible because of New START's liberal bomber weapons counting rules. If not constrained by New START, the United States could have a deployed strategic ballistic missile force of approximately 2,626 warheads—depending upon decisions related to necessary missile range and the required number of single warhead missiles.[7] Bomber weapons could add somewhat to that number via uploading. The Trident SLBM force reportedly could be uploaded in months and the Minuteman ICBM force in about three to four years.[8] The planned follow-on systems could extend the upload of these legacy systems.

The cost of upload would likely be quite modest—largely transportation and warhead installation. An August 2020 report of the Congressional Budget Office concluded that: 1) Expanding nuclear forces to the Moscow Treaty limit (2,200) warheads "would not increase the Department of Defense's (DoD's) costs relative to its current plans…."; and 2) "Increasing

warhead loadings to reach the START II limits [3,500 warheads] would incur about $100 million in onetime costs for DoD."[9] These numbers do not account for the considerable inflation factor since 2020.

In sum, nuclear weapons upload of legacy and eventually replacement forces is a near-term and likely low-cost option. To do otherwise will be to risk that the planned nuclear modernization program will be too slow and too limited for confident deterrence in a rapidly worsening threat environment.

What about arms control in this context? Some former U.S. officials continue to claim that arms control can solve or help solve the current threat challenges, and that an agreement *against* uploading is the priority. This is no surprise; Americans typically want to solve nuclear threat problems via arms control: technical/contractual solutions to political problems are attractive because political solutions are very difficult.

Yet, as I mentioned earlier, China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran are not interested in what we call "stability." They seek a new world order at the expense of the United States and allies. As long as these authoritarian regimes continue to view the United States as the impediment to their drive to reorganize the world order, it is simply naïve to expect them to accept meaningful limitations on the military means that undergird their drive to reorder the globe. Colin Gray's study of arms control history years ago led to his famous, pithy conclusion that meaningful arms control is either "impossible or unimportant."[10] What he meant is that truly useful arms control agreements with dedicated enemies is impossible, and with dedicated friends it is unimportant. I believe that conclusion fully applies today vis-à-vis Russia, China, North Korea and Iran. Expecting otherwise will likely be the basis for another costly mistake.

What about missile defense in this context? For deterrence purposes, missile defense is no substitute for offensive capabilities that can hold at risk what opponents value. But it can complement those capabilities.

Progressively moving now to protect U.S. nuclear retaliatory capabilities, including nuclear command, control, and communications, is an urgent priority. The more effectively the United States provides this protection, the more able it will likely be to deter war—there are no trade-offs in this regard.

Critics of homeland missile defense now repeat the same arguments I have heard since the 1960s: 1) Homeland missile defense cannot work; 2) homeland defense will destabilize deterrence; and 3) homeland defense will lead our opponents to arms race. These three arguments have driven U.S. missile defense policy for decades.

But, for all their repetition and policy influence, these arguments are demonstrably bogus or logically incoherent in the contemporary threat context: 1) Homeland missile defense likely cannot be 100 percent effective against a large-scale nuclear attack, but that is the standard for "can it work?" put forth as a strawman by missile defense opponents. Homeland defense that is far from perfect likely *can work* in extremely helpful ways for deterrence and if deterrence fails; 2) Rather than destabilizing deterrence, U.S. homeland missile defense will more likely *strengthen* deterrence in many plausible scenarios. It is the *presence* of our nuclear retaliatory and defensive capabilities that can *create* needed deterrence effects, *not the absence* of U.S.

defensive capabilities; and 3) Our opponents *have been arms racing for more than a decade*—U.S. homeland missile defense now is hardly the cause of their racing.

I believe I have taken as much time as is permitted for my remarks, so I will conclude by simply saying that we and our allies are in an unprecedentedly precarious place. International political hostilities are now as ripe as they were prior to World War II, but the instruments of destruction—conventional, nuclear, chemical and biological—are much more lethal and in the hands of many. The great Australian scholar Hedley Bull described a leadership tendency that captures how we got here: "…history is littered with catastrophe unthinkable and unimaginable to its victims, who placed their trust in a logic of history which deserted them in their hour of need."[11] Much of Washington has misread history for three decades—to our great contemporary disadvantage.

Recognizing where we are, how we got here, and moving quickly to strengthen our position may yet help deter war. Winston Churchill warned that it is a "mistake to mix up disarmament with peace. When you have peace, you will have disarmament." The contemporary corollary of Churchill's wise warning is that we must not "mix up" deterrence with war. Deterrence prevents war and, if we had a reliable political settlement, deterrence would not be such an urgent concern. However, I do not expect Russia, China, North Korea, or Iran to soon give up their aggressive drive to overturn the world order at our expense. That would constitute a political solution to current threats. Until then, our goal must be for U.S. and allied deterrence positions to persuade opponents, on every occasion, that their aggression is not worth the risk or cost.

[1] Paul Bracken, "Whatever Happened to Nuclear Abolition?" *The Hill*, March 19, 2019, https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/434723-whatever-happened-to-nuclear-abolition.

[2] Quoted in Rebecca Kaplan, "John Kerry warns of consequences for Russia after Ukraine invasion," CBS News, Face the Nation, March 2, 2014, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/john-kerry-warns-of-consequences-for-russia-after-ukraine-invasion/.

[3] Andrew A. Michta, "The Next U.S. National Security Strategy Risks Misreading History Again, *RealClearDefense*, September 22, 2025, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2025/09/22/the_next_us_national_security_strategy_risks_misreading_history_again_1136169.html.

[4] Colin S. Gray, *The Second Nuclear Age* (London: Lynn Reiner Press, 1999), pp. 39-41.

[5] See Mark B. Schneider and Keith B. Payne, *Tailored Deterrence and Low-Cost Nuclear Weapons Upload* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 2025), pp. 3-6.

[6] Schneider and Payne, *Tailored Deterrence and Low-Cost Nuclear Weapons Upload*, op. cit., p. 14.

[7] Schneider and Payne, *Tailored Deterrence and Low-Cost Nuclear Weapons Upload*, op. cit., Tables 1 and 2.

[8] As reported in, Peter Huessy, "Arms Control Challenges: Past & Present," *Warrior Maven*, June 8, 2023, https://warriormaven.com/global-security/arms-control-nuclear-deterrence.

[9] Congressional Budget Office, "The Potential Costs of Expanding U.S. Strategic Nuclear Forces If the New START Treaty Expires," August 2020, https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2020-08/56475-START.pdf.

[10] Colin S. Gray, *House of Cards* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. X.

[11] Hedley Bull, *The Control of the Arms Race* (New York, NY: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1965), p. 48.

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