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Losing Perspective: Nuclear Weapons and U.S. National Security Strategy

Dr. Michaela Dodge

Dr. Michaela Dodge is a Research Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy. She is the recipient of the 2025 U.S. Strategic Command's annual Gen. Larry Welch Writing Award, the author of numerous articles and U.S.-Czech Missile Defense Cooperation: Alliance Politics in Action.

In June 2025, the Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard posted a video inspired by her recent visit to Hiroshima, Japan, one of the two cities destroyed by U.S. nuclear weapons during World War II.¹ Gabbard's comments are an excellent example of a U.S. high-level government official lacking understanding regarding the role and purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy. It is a textbook case of how not to send deterrent messages to U.S. adversaries and simultaneously undermining U.S. allied assurance.

The problem is not unique to Gabbard. Since the end of the Cold War, under the delusion of the "end of history," the United States has gradually lost the nuclear competency thought to be obsolete and irrelevant to contemporary national security problems. The prevailing worldview assumed "that Washington could depend on international organizations to help it confront major challenges and that 'global governance' would emerge with the help of American leadership. ...That view presumed that since other countries were progressing inexorably toward liberal democracy, they would share many of Washington's goals and would play by Washington's rules."² U.S. leaders believed that if the United States unilaterally reduced its nuclear weapons, other countries would follow.³ Contemporary armament efforts and activities of revisionist powers, particular Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, show that this optimism was wholly misplaced.



Terror with a Purpose

Nuclear weapons exist to advance a state's political objectives, chiefly among them deterring an attack on its territory.⁴ Nuclear weapons are qualitatively different from conventional weapons due to the scale of destruction nuclear weapons can inflict relative to their size, and potential long-term consequences of their use. The 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* identified three additional important objectives: assuring U.S. allies, achieving U.S. objectives should deterrence fail, and hedging against an uncertain future.⁵ These objectives have been consistent throughout decades and, until very recently, endorsed by successive administrations on a bipartisan basis.⁶

The use of U.S. nuclear weapons in 1945 was an alternative to a ground invasion of Japan that would have resulted in hundreds of thousands of casualties on both sides and the physical destruction of Japan. The historical context is important and wholly missing from Gabbard's video. The United States and Japan, along with their respective allies, were waging a total war over the future of the world order. Both sides in the conflict, waged by conventional weapons prior to U.S. nuclear use, suffered large casualties; their economies were wholly consumed by the need to support the war. Thankfully for humanity, the United States and its allies emerged victorious – and nuclear weapons played an important role in that outcome.

Nuclear weapons have continued to play a critical role in preventing large great power wars since, including when the United States found itself in another type of conflict not of its choice, this time with the Soviet Union. General Larry Welch, former Commander of the U.S. Strategic Air Command and former Chief of Staff of the Air Force, stated that "The primary role of U.S. nuclear weapons for well over half a century has been to prevent their use. To that end, we have used them every second of every day since the first deterrent systems were deployed. They have worked perfectly. The nuclear deterrent is the only weapons system I know of that has worked perfectly without fail, exactly as intended, for their entire life span. And because they have been so successful, then there may be some who have forgotten why we need them."⁷ In other words, states continue to "use" nuclear weapons in ways that do not include detonating them. Based on a careful examination of Soviet Politburo records, Russian historian Victor Gobarev concludes that America's unique nuclear deterrence capabilities "counterbalanced" Soviet local conventional superiority and were "the single most important factor which restrained Stalin's possible temptation to resolve the [1948-1949] Berlin problem by military means. Evidence obtained from [Soviet] oral history clearly supports this fact."⁸

Threats Matter

The first objective of U.S. nuclear forces is to deter a large-scale attack against the U.S. homeland and its allies. In this, nuclear weapons have been remarkably successful, perhaps the most successful military system of all time. Threats are made credible by possessing military capabilities that can be executed against targets that adversaries value, but also by convincing



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an adversary of the credibility of that threat. Because deterrence has to do with influencing an adversary's decisions, it can be incredibly complex, more art than exact science.⁹

Countries use nuclear forces to deter opponents and assure their allies. For example, the United States recently started occasionally docking nuclear-capable submarines in South Korea.¹⁰ Russia regularly sends aircraft close to U.S. territory; China does occasionally.¹¹ In 2019, on one of these occasions, Russian state media showed a list of U.S. targets Moscow could destroy in case of conflict.¹² North Korean media sometimes show imaginary strikes on U.S. targets.¹³

Quite incomprehensibly, Gabbard's video does not discuss threats to U.S. interests at all. Gabbard mentions that "...political elites and warmongers are carelessly fomenting fear and tensions between nuclear powers." Gabbard insinuates that is because they have access to nuclear bunkers. The idea is preposterous on its face. The tensions between nuclear powers are a consequence of fundamentally divergent political goals with regard to the organization of the world order. The status quo nuclear powers (the United States, the United Kingdom, and France) use nuclear deterrence to defend the liberal world order and rule of law. Russia, China, and North Korea are seeking to advance a new world order compliant with their autocratic regimes and expansionist goals.

The revisionist powers are modernizing their nuclear forces and incorporating them into their national security strategies. According to United States Strategic Command Commander General Anthony Cotton, China "has surpassed 600 deliverable nuclear warheads and is forecasted to have over 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2035."¹⁴ Russia maintains the largest and the most diverse nuclear arsenal in the world, has a massive advantage in tactical nuclear forces and a history of ignoring arms control obligations.¹⁵ Russia's and North Korea's cooperation involves technology transfers from Russia to North Korea in return for North Korea's support of Russia's brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine.¹⁶ The cooperative relationship among these revisionist powers presents a challenge unlike no other since the dawn of the nuclear age.¹⁷ As even the Biden Administration suggested, addressing the fundamental asymmetry between their nuclear posture and U.S. nuclear posture will require more nuclear weapons and a comprehensive modernization of U.S. nuclear delivery systems and the nuclear warhead production complex.¹⁸ This is not "warmongering," but prudent adaptation of the U.S. nuclear deterrent in the face of worsening threats.

Moreover, the United States guarantees security to more than 30 allies around the world, including, notably, Japan and South Korea. Some of these allies have foregone developing nuclear weapons of their own, even when they had technologies and resources to do so; others have kept their arsenal size smaller because they can rely on U.S. security guarantees. There is currently no viable alternative to the United States fulfilling this role.¹⁹ Treating U.S. nuclear weapons as if they are the problem as opposed to a necessary capability to preserve U.S. and allied security is folly – especially when done by senior U.S. officials.



Conclusion

Nuclear war would be horrific; that is the sensible but self-evident information in Gabbard's video. There is also nothing particularly revealing about it. Unless a fundamental transformation of the world order happens, nuclear weapons are here to stay and will be utilized by countries to advance their national security interests.²⁰ Some of these interests can be fundamentally at odds with U.S. interests.

To prevent a nuclear war, the United States developed diverse nuclear weapons capabilities during the Cold War – and dismantled the vast majority of them after the Berlin Wall fell. All U.S. conventional plans hinge upon nuclear deterrence holding right, as former Strategic Command Commander Admiral Charles Richard said,²¹ and that is why it is imperative to do what it takes to ensure deterrence keeps holding right, including modernizing U.S. nuclear forces. Frustrating adversaries' designs is a quintessential component of the U.S. national security strategy, otherwise Americans and U.S. allies will end up less safe and prosperous. Videos like Gabbard's offer platitudes, but nothing by the way of constructive ideas regarding how to strengthen deterrence and continue to ensure that nuclear deterrence holds.

¹ The video was posted on Tulsi Gabbard's personal account. Tulsi Gabbard [@tulsigabbard], "I recently visited Hiroshima, and stood at the epicenter of a city scarred by the unimaginable horror caused by a single nuclear bomb dropped in 1945. What I saw, the stories I heard, and the haunting sadness that remains, will stay with me forever." X, June 10, 2025, 5:27 AM, <https://x.com/TulsiGabbard/status/1932368919039459348>.

² Nadia Schadlow, "The End of American Illusion," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 5 (September/October 2020), p. 37.

³ David J. Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge and Keith B. Payne, *The "Action-Reaction" Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 2021), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Action-Reaction-pub.pdf>.

⁴ That is not to say that countries' political objectives are the same. U.S. political objectives are fundamentally at odds with Russia's and China's.

⁵ The following objectives are taken from U.S. Department of Defense, *2018 Nuclear Posture Review*, February 2018, p. 3, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/feb/02/2001872877/-1/-1/1/executive-summary.pdf>. They have been largely consistent throughout administrations.

⁶ The Biden Administration eliminated "hedge against an uncertain future" as a formal role for U.S. nuclear weapons in the 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*. See Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review, 2022*, p. 7, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.pdf>.

⁷ Larry Welch, *transcript of remarks*, Air Force Association Huessy Congressional Breakfast Series, May 25, 2012, available at <http://secure.afa.org/HBS/transcripts/2012/5-25-2012%20Gen%20Larry%20Welch%20v2.pdf>.

⁸ Victor Gobarev, "Soviet Military Plans and Actions During the First Berlin Crisis, 1948-1949," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (September 1997), p. 5; and James Acton, *Deterrence During Disarmament* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, March 2011), p. 34.



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⁹ Keith B. Payne, “Deterrence is Not Rocket Science: It is More Difficult,” *Information Series*, No. 527, (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 6, 2022), https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-deterrence-is-not-rocket-science-it-is-more-difficult-no-527-july-6-2022/.

¹⁰ Jack Kim, “North Korea says US nuclear submarine at South Korea port posing grave threat, KCNA reports,” *Reuters*, February 10, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-says-us-nuclear-submarine-south-korea-port-posing-grave-threat-kcna-2025-02-10/>; and Matt Murphy, “First US nuclear sub docks in South Korea since 1981,” *BBC*, July 18, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-66233802>.

¹¹ Stephen Smith, “Russian warplanes flying near Alaska tracked by U.S. military, NORAD says,” *CBS News*, April 15, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russia-warplanes-alaska-tracked-us-military-norad/>.

¹² Andrew Osborn, “After Putin's warning, Russian TV lists nuclear targets in U.S.,” *Reuters*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/after-putins-warning-russian-tv-lists-nuclear-targets-in-us-idUSKCN1QE1DM/>.

¹³ Elizabeth Weise, “North Korean video shows imagined strikes on U.S.,” *USA Today*, April 14, 2013, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/04/13/north-korean-propaganda-video/2080805/>.

¹⁴ Statement of General Anthony Cotton, Commander, United States Strategic Command before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, March 26, 2025, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/testimony_of_general_anthony_jcotton1.pdf.

¹⁵ Mark Schneider, “How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Russia Have? The Size and Characteristics of the Russian Nuclear Stockpile,” *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 3, No. 8 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2023), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Vol.-3-No.-8.pdf>.

¹⁶ Edward Howell, “North Korea and Russia’s dangerous partnership,” *Chatham House*, December 4, 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/12/north-korea-and-russias-dangerous-partnership/revival-north-korea-russia-relationship>.

¹⁷ Keith B. Payne and David J. Trachtenberg, “Deterrence in the Emerging Threat Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters,” *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2022), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/OP-Vol.-2-No.-8.pdf>.

¹⁸ Keith B. Payne and Mark B. Schneider, “Tailored Deterrence and Nuclear Weapons Upload,” *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 5, No. 6 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 2025), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Vol.-5-No.-6.pdf>.

¹⁹ Michaela Dodge, “Trends in Allied Assurance: Challenges and Questions,” *Occasional Paper* Vol. 4, No. 8 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2024), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Vol.-4-No.-8.pdf>.

²⁰ For more on this point, see Keith B. Payne, *Chasing a Grand Illusion: Replacing Deterrence with Disarmament* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2023).

²¹ Amy Hudson, “Richard Says Nuclear Deterrence Connected to All Other DOD Capabilities,” *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, May 7, 2021, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/richard-says-nuclear-deterrence-connected-to-all-other-dod-capabilities/>.

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