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David J. Trachtenberg

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David J. Trachtenberg

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Preface

This *Occasional Paper* is a compilation of selected *Information Series* articles I have written that were published by the National Institute for Public Policy on the topics of deterrence, missile defense, and arms control. The articles address longstanding misperceptions on these topics and offer policy prescriptions for U.S. decision makers to consider.

On deterrence, I challenge the conventional wisdom that U.S. nuclear targeting policy emphasizes "countervalue" strikes against "soft" targets like unprotected cities and urban-industrial areas, pointing out that, since at least the 1970s, U.S. decision makers have rejected the deliberate targeting of civilian populations and have sought flexible targeting options to avoid massive societal destruction. I also argue that deterrence cannot be assured simply by exposing an adversary's actions or preparations to conduct aggression. And I contend that the U.S. abandonment of a "two-war" force planning construct not only encourages adversary aggression but undermines the credibility of U.S. extended security guarantees and assurances to allies.

With respect to missile defense, I address the evolution of U.S. missile defense policy and the failure of multiple bipartisan administrations to develop and deploy capabilities that can strengthen deterrence by defending the American people against actual nuclear weapons use or coercive nuclear threats from major nuclear-armed opponents such as Russia and China. I make the case for moving beyond dated Cold War notions that characterize missile defenses as "destabilizing," and argue for revising U.S. missile defense policy to defend Americans against the growing threats posed by peer and near-peer nuclear adversaries. I support President Trump's "Golden Dome"

initiative and outline why such an approach is needed and how best to implement this policy decision.

Regarding arms control, I examine and refute arguments that the United States is engaging in an arms race with Russia and China, noting that U.S. strategic nuclear forces have not been modernized for decades while both Russia and China have proceeded with extensive and expansive nuclear building programs. Subsequently, I critically examine the history of U.S. arms control approaches, concluding that the results of arms control negotiations and treaties have fallen short of official U.S. expectations. Moreover, I argue that arms control in the current international environment—which is characterized by major nuclear powers with diametrically opposed strategic goals and objectives than the United States—is unlikely to result in any agreement that works to the benefit of U.S. national security. For example, both Russia and China, working independently and in concert, seek to undermine the U.S. concept of stability by overturning the existing U.S.-led world order. Given this reality, the notion of arms control as a means to ensure stability, transparency, and predictability in nuclear force postures is a chimera.

I hope you find this short compilation of *Information Series* articles useful in facilitating a greater understanding of these critical issues, countering misinformation and misperceptions regarding these topics, and informing policy makers and decision leaders with responsibility for ensuring the safety and security of the American people.

David J. Trachtenberg
National Institute for Public Policy

ON DETERRENCE

Mischaracterizing U.S. Nuclear Deterrence Policy: The Myth of Deliberate Civilian Targeting*

Introduction

As the debate over the proper role for nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy heats up, commentators and analysts continue to mischaracterize U.S. nuclear deterrence policy as one based on the deliberate targeting of cities and urban areas—consistent with the policy of "Mutual Assured Destruction" (MAD) espoused by former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in the 1960s. For example, one analyst recently wrote, "Today, MAD remains at the core of strategic deterrence," noting that both the United States and Russia can "destroy at least 150 urban centers in each country."[1]

In an attempt to determine the appropriate size and configuration of the U.S. nuclear arsenal vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, Secretary McNamara developed a series of quantitative metrics that were thought to be sufficient to ensure the effective and credible functioning of deterrence. Though the actual numbers varied over time in subsequent statements made by McNamara, the basic belief was that as long as the United States possessed the nuclear capacity to destroy 25-30 percent of Soviet population and 50-75 percent of the Soviet Union's industrial capacity, deterrence would be assured, as no Soviet leadership would risk that level of destruction. To accomplish this goal, McNamara

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*Original publication: David J. Trachtenberg, "Mischaracterizing U.S. Nuclear Deterrence Policy: The Myth of Deliberate Civilian Targeting," *Information Series*, No. 542, December 14, 2022.

[1] Tom Nichols "We Have No Nuclear Strategy," *The Atlantic*, July/August 2022, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/07/us-nuclear-strategy-cold-war-russia/638441/.

postulated that the United States required the equivalent of 400 megatons of nuclear destructive power. This would result in the "assured destruction" of the Soviet Union as a functioning, viable society. Anything beyond this would simply be "overkill" and was unnecessary for effective deterrence.[2]

McNamara's Assured Destruction criteria became the basis for U.S. nuclear planning throughout the 1960s and formed the foundation of a theory of deterrence that came to be known as "Mutual Assured Destruction." The principle of Mutual Assured Destruction (or "MAD" as it was called) assumed that because both the United States and Soviet Union could cause such massive devastation to each other's society, neither side would ever contemplate striking the other first with nuclear weapons. The resulting "balance of terror" was therefore deemed sufficient to ensure the successful functioning of deterrence in perpetuity and became the definition of deterrence "stability."

Lingering Misperceptions

Over the subsequent decades, despite significant changes to U.S. nuclear strategy and targeting doctrine, analysts who have an insufficient understanding of the evolution of U.S. nuclear policy have continued to suggest that U.S. nuclear weapons strategy is still based on the principle of Mutual Assured Destruction—namely, that the essence of deterrence is the ability (and presumably willingness) of the United States to engage in "countervalue" strikes that target Russian "soft targets" such as urban areas and industrial

[2] As McNamara argued, "Such a level of destruction would certainly represent intolerable punishment to any industrialized nation and thus should serve as an effective deterrent." *Draft Memorandum for the President*, December 3, 1964, cited in Keith B. Payne, *The Great American Gamble: Deterrence Theory and Practice From the Cold War to the Twenty-First Century* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2008), pp. 96-108.

capacity with its nuclear arsenal (as opposed to "counterforce" strikes that target military assets).

For example, a recent BBC commentary declared that mutual assured destruction is "[a] Cold War creation that still applies today: the assumption that if one side launches nuclear weapons, the other side will respond in kind and everyone dies."[3] A retired Marine Corps officer and former Department of Defense employee recently wrote, "The US retains faith in the doctrine of mutual assured destruction (MAD). MAD contributed to its Cold War victory, and it is assumed to still be effective today."[4] Another commentary explained, "It is this fear that our destruction would be mutually assured (MAD—mutual assured destruction—military doctrine), that has kept militaries in check throughout the Cold War up until today."[5] Yet another analyst declared, "The U.S. has a huge nuclear stockpile…which is designed to deter nuclear attacks on America via the doctrine of mutually assured destruction, or MAD. Any country that launches a nuclear weapon at the U.S. can expect a swift and overwhelming response in kind, that it would find impossible to block."[6] And, as yet another commentator suggested, "Deterrence stability… rests on the prospect of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), as explained by cold war nuclear strategist Schelling, '[If] two powers show themselves equally capable of inflicting damage upon each other by some particular process of war

[3] Steve Rosenberg, "Putin pins Ukraine hopes on winter and divisive US politics, *BBC News*, October 29, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63414324.

[4] Franz Gayl, "Note to the US—a nuclear war can be won by rivals," *Global Times*, October 7, 2022, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202210/1276613.shtml.

[5] Alex Gatopoulos, "High stakes gamble: Putin's tactical nuclear options," *Aljazeera*, October 15, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/15/ukraine-war-russia-putin-turn-to-nuclear-weapons.

[6] James Bickerton, "Is the U.S. Safe From Nuclear Attack?," *Newsweek*, October 19, 2022, https://www.newsweek.com/us-safe-nuclear-attack-1753288.

so that neither gains an advantage from its adoption and both suffer the most hideous reciprocal injuries, it is not only possible but it seems probable that neither will employ that Means.'"[7]

The notion of Mutual Assured Destruction assumes that the United States *deliberately* plans to target cities in order to *maximize* the number of casualties in a nuclear exchange, thereby making such an exchange too horrendous to contemplate. Ironically, this notion—that the best way to prevent nuclear war is to make it as destructive as possible—was seen during the Cold War as the morally superior position. Any movement to reduce the level of potential destructiveness of a nuclear conflict or to develop effective defenses that could protect at least a portion of the American population in the event of a nuclear conflict, was considered to be "destabilizing" and morally repugnant, as it suggested to some that the United States could, and should, seek to fight and survive a nuclear war—a prospect too unthinkable for some.

Some believe that MAD is a fact of life, similar to an immutable law of physics—a reality that cannot be escaped. For example, Graham Allison, a political scientist and Harvard professor, stated, "We still live in what strategists called a MAD world, a world of mutual assured destruction. So if we ended up in a full-scale nuclear war between Russia and the U.S. both nations could be destroyed. That reality is constant across the spectrum."[8]

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[7] Arooj Fatima, "Analyzing the US-Russia Deterrence Stability," *Global Village Space*, November 4, 2022, https://www.globalvillagespace.com/us-russia-deterrence-stability/.

[8] Interview conducted with Fyodor Lukyanov, "Graham Allison: 'Time to Search for an Off-Ramp' in Ukraine," *Russia Matters*, October 21, 2022, https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/graham-allison-time-search-ramp-ukraine.

The Evolution of U.S. Nuclear Targeting Strategy

The reality, however, is that U.S. nuclear strategy since the mid-1970s has sought to deliberately *avoid* targeting cities—consistent with the Law of Armed Conflict and "Just War" principles that date back centuries and preclude the intentional targeting of civilian populations.[9] This has been evident in official bipartisan policy pronouncements from the Nixon to the Biden Administrations. It is also a key principle behind the development of conventional precision munitions intended to minimize inadvertent civilian casualties.

For example, in 1974, *National Security Decision Memorandum (NSDM) 242*—dubbed the "Schlesinger Doctrine"—stated that "options should be developed in which the level, scope, and duration of violence is limited in a manner which can be clearly and credibly communicated to the enemy."[10] NSDM-242 also called for "a wide range of limited nuclear employment options which could be used in conjunction with supporting political and military measures (including conventional forces) to control escalation."[11] This policy guidance led to the development of limited nuclear options (LNOs) intended to provide the United States with credible response options short of all-out strategic nuclear war in order to limit the scope and extent of any potential nuclear conflict. The desire to control

[9] As the *Department of Defense Law of War Manual* notes, "The law of war has recognized that the population of an enemy State is generally divided into two classes: the armed forces and the civilian population, also sometimes called, respectively, 'combatants' and 'civilians.'…. However, because the ordinary members of the civilian population make no resistance, it has long been recognized that there is no right to make them the object of attack." See *Department of Defense Law of War Manual* (Volume 1: Chapters 1-9, December 2016), Section 4.2, "The Armed Forces and the Civilian Population," pp. 112-113.

[10] National Security Council, *National Security Decision Memorandum 242*, January 17, 1974, https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/nsdm-nixon/nsdm_242.pdf.

[11] Ibid.

escalation and limit the damage caused by nuclear use was the antithesis of the mutual assured destruction policy that was predicated on maximizing potential casualties and the level of destruction.

Presidential Directive (PD) 59, signed by President Jimmy Carter in 1980, outlined U.S. nuclear weapons employment policy. This "countervailing strategy" called for flexible capabilities that could hold at risk "a full range of [Soviet] military targets,"[12] to include both nuclear and conventional military forces, with "the major weight of the initial response on military and control targets."[13] The guidance explicitly stated that "Methods of attack on particular targets should be chosen to limit collateral damage to urban areas, general industry and population targets…."[14] This clearly represented a further repudiation of the notion that U.S. retaliatory forces should initially and deliberately target civilian population centers as part of a policy of Mutual Assured Destruction.

More recently, the notion of flexible response options that seek to avoid targeting civilian population centers and other "soft" targets has been embedded in various subsequent U.S. strategy documents approved by multiple U.S. administrations on a bipartisan basis. For example, the Obama Administration's 2013 *Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States* explicitly notes:

> The new guidance requires the United States to maintain significant counterforce capabilities against potential adversaries. The new guidance does not rely on a "counter-value" or "minimum deterrence" strategy.

[12] The White House, *Presidential Decision Memorandum/NSC-59*, July 25, 1980, p. 2, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb390/docs/7-25-80%20PD%2059.pdf.

[13] Ibid., p. 3.

[14] Ibid., pp. 3-4.

> The new guidance makes clear that all plans must also be consistent with the fundamental principles of the Law of Armed Conflict. Accordingly, plans will, for example, apply the principles of distinction and proportionality and seek to minimize collateral damage to civilian populations and civilian objects. The United States will not intentionally target civilian populations or civilian objects.[15]

Subsequently, the Trump Administration's *Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States—2020* acknowledged, "The United States has for decades rejected a deterrence strategy based on purposely threatening civilian populations, and the United States will not intentionally target civilian populations…. U.S. nuclear weapons employment guidance directs minimizing civilian damage to the extent possible consistent with achieving U.S. objectives and restoring deterrence."[16] And the Biden Administration's recently released *Nuclear Posture Review* notes that "longstanding U.S. policy is to not purposely threaten civilian populations or objects, and the United States will not intentionally target civilian populations or objects in violation of LOAC [the Law of Armed Conflict]."[17]

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[15] Department of Defense, *Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States Specified in Section 491 of 10 U.S.C.*, June 2, 2013, https://uploads.fas.org/2013/06/NukeEmploymentGuidance_DODbrief061213.pdf.

[16] Department of Defense, *Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States – 2020 Specified in Section 491(a) of Title 10 U.S.C.*, November 30, 2020, pp. 6-7, https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/NCB/21-F-0591_2020_Report_of_the_Nuclear_Employement_Strategy_of_the_United_States.pdf.

[17] Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, October 2022, p. 8, https://s3.amazonaws.com/uploads.fas.org/2022/10/27113658/2022-Nuclear-Posture-Review.pdf.

Nevertheless, the myth that U.S. nuclear strategy—unlike conventional war plans—sanctions the deliberate targeting of vulnerable civilian populations endures.

A Double Standard

For years, a double standard has existed regarding the desirability of minimizing civilian casualties in combat. When to comes to the employment of conventional forces in U.S. military operations, there is little debate or argument over the importance and necessity of reducing inadvertent civilian casualties and damage to property (often referred to as "collateral damage") to the maximum extent possible. In wartime, innocent civilians often suffer as a result of military operations, but the United States has consistently sought to adhere to the law of armed conflict and avoid the deliberate targeting of civilians. Moreover, the United States has often refrained from taking military actions against an enemy if doing so would risk creating inadvertent civilian casualties.

During two decades of counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Middle East, there are numerous instances where U.S. military forces withheld firing on enemy targets because of the risk of injuring or killing civilian noncombatants. Recognizing this, U.S. adversaries frequently sought to attack U.S. forces from locations that deliberately exposed innocent civilians to risk, expecting this would place U.S. forces at a disadvantage. Enemy combatants hiding behind "human shields" or operating from religious or cultural sites whose deliberate destruction could be considered a war crime under international law often placed U.S. forces in a situation where they could not engage militarily in accordance with the law of armed conflict. The damage to American credibility by inadvertently killing innocents was acknowledged by General David Petraeus, the commander of the

International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, who issued a directive stating:

> We must continue - indeed, redouble - our efforts to reduce the loss of innocent civilian life to an absolute minimum. Every Afghan civilian death diminishes our cause. If we use excessive force or operate contrary to our counterinsurgency principles, tactical victories may prove to be strategic setbacks.[18]

In addition to doctrinal guidance, the United States has also sought to develop technological solutions that would mitigate the risk of inadvertent civilian casualties. These include significant investments in more accurate precision munitions and conventional precision strike capabilities that are more discriminate, and which lessen the risk of collateral damage. They also include investments in non-lethal technologies that can be employed in a targeted manner to disrupt adversary operations without causing unwanted fatalities. Directed energy non-kinetic systems that use high-powered microwave and radio frequency technology to disrupt engine electronics, dazzling lasers, and acoustic hailing devices are some of the non-lethal capabilities have proven useful in military operations.[19] In addition, the millimeter wave Active Denial System (ADS) is one such technology that—if size, weight, transportability and power concerns can be successfully addressed—"could prove useful in a counterinsurgency operation where

[18] Press Release, International Security Assistance Force—Afghanistan, "Afghanistan: GENERAL PETRAEUS ISSUES UPDATED TACTICAL DIRECTIVE: Emphasizes Disciplined Use of Force," August 4, 2010, https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-general-petraeus-issues-updated-tactical-directive-emphasizes.

[19] A description of these technologies developed by the Department of Defense Joint Intermediate Force Capabilities Office as part of the DoD Non-Lethal Weapons Program can be found here: https://jnlwp.defense.gov/Press-Room/Fact-Sheets/.

avoidance of civilian casualties is essential to mission success."[20]

The development of these kinds of advanced conventional capabilities has enjoyed strong bipartisan support and is generally seen as consistent with the desire to limit unnecessary noncombatant casualties in U.S. military operations. When it comes to nuclear weapons, however, the approach taken by some, particularly those who still appear to endorse MAD, stands this paradigm on its head.

Nuclear weapons are clearly the most destructive weapons ever invented by man, and it is that destructiveness that has fostered a belief in their disutility for military purposes; however, the magnitude of the consequences depends on a range of variables, including numbers, types, yields, targets, environmental conditions, and a host of other known and unknown factors.

While deterrence is the primary mission of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, recent events suggest the prospect of adversary use of nuclear weapons is not unthinkable. Indeed, both Russia and China have engaged in brazen nuclear threats against the United States and its allies, including the threat of nuclear first use, and have conducted military exercises simulating nuclear strikes against the West. Such events have exceeded in scope, magnitude, and frequency similar actions that occurred during the Cold War.

Russia poses a particularly worrisome challenge as it has sought to employ nuclear threats as a coercive tool to prevent stronger Western actions in support of Ukraine—a democratic, independent country whose sovereignty and territorial integrity was flagrantly violated by Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014 and its subsequent brutal

[20] David J. Trachtenberg, "An Opportunity Missed," AEI Center for Defense Studies, August 30, 2010. Also cited in Rick Smith, *The End of Killing* (Vancouver, Canada, Page Two Books, 2019), p. 125.

aggression and invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Consequently, in the face of Russian military setbacks in Ukraine, there is growing concern that Moscow may see the limited use of "tactical" nuclear weapons as a viable option to restore its military advantage on the ground and to further message the United States and NATO to stay out of more direct involvement in the conflict or, as Vladimir Putin himself warned, "the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history."[21] Indeed, President Biden has ominously warned that "We have not faced the prospect of Armageddon since Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis."[22]

Therefore, the question that needs to be asked is: If nuclear weapons are used by Russia and the United States must respond, shouldn't that response be designed to minimize societal damage as much as possible rather than to execute a massive strategic-level strike that ensures cataclysmic results? This was the rationale behind the Trump Administration's support for the low-yield ballistic missile warhead and the sea-launched nuclear cruise missile (SLCM-N). As then-U.S. Strategic Command head Adm. Charles Richard stated, "the current situation in Ukraine and China's nuclear trajectory convinces me a deterrence and assurance gap exists."[23] Yet, opponents of these programs argue that anything that seeks to close that gap or that reduces the level of destruction caused by nuclear weapons makes nuclear use more "thinkable" and

[21] Max Fisher, "Putin's Case for War, Annotated," *The New York Times*, February 24, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/world/europe/putin-ukraine-speech.html.

[22] Justin Gomez and Elizabeth Schulze, "Biden warns Putin is 'not joking' about nuclear weapons," ABC News, October 7, 2022, https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/biden-warns-putin-joking-nuclear-weapons/story?id=91157281.

[23] Joe Gould, "US Strategic Command chief: Sea missile cancellation opens 'deterrence and assurance gap'," *DefenseNews*, April 5, 2022, https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2022/04/05/us-strategic-command-chief-sea-missile-cancellation-opens-deterrence-and-assurance-gap/.

nuclear war more likely. Such reasoning stands logic, and any commitment to limit damage in war, on its head.

Why Mischaracterize U.S. Deterrence Policy?

Many who mischaracterize U.S. nuclear targeting policy as relying on massive countervalue strikes appear to do so in order to generate opposition to the U.S. nuclear modernization program. By focusing on the immense horror that the deliberate destruction of cities and urban populations would bring, the intent is to foster a belief in the minds of the public that the size and capability of the U.S. nuclear arsenal is excessive and that because the level of destruction that would result from any nuclear exchange is "overkill," arms control is necessary to reduce the size of (and eventually eliminate) nuclear arsenals. Indeed, those who promulgate such misinformation appear to have a broader political agenda in mind; namely, to rally public opinion against continued reliance on nuclear weapons for deterrence and to undermine support for modernizing the ageing U.S. nuclear arsenal.[24]

For example, former Secretary of Defense William Perry and Tom Collina argue that "The US nuclear-armed submarine force alone is sufficient for assured deterrence and will be so for the foreseeable future…. just one boat can carry enough nuclear weapons to place two thermonuclear warheads on each of Russia's fifty largest cities." Therefore, they conclude, "The United States should build only the weapons it needs for second-strike deterrence and should not go beyond that for obvious reasons: the weapons are

[24] As one nuclear disarmament activist put it, "…a safe and secure world must rest on nuclear disarmament and not on deterrence through the possibility of mutually assured destruction." See Jody Williams, "Essay: Will Russia use tactical nukes? It's time to abolish nuclear weapons," *Houston Chronicle*, November 6, 2022, https://www.houstonchronicle.com/opinion/outlook/article/Russia-tactical-nuclear-weapons-nobel-peace-prize-17558465.php.

expensive and dangerous."[25] In their view, this means that the U.S. ICBM force should be eliminated, as "ICBMs are simply not needed for an effective response, which would be carried out by submarine-based weapons."[26] And it means that the low-yield ballistic missile warheads deployed on strategic submarines—an initiative undertaken by the Trump Administration and supported by the Biden Administration[27]—are unnecessary and "dangerous," even though they would lessen collateral damage in the event of a nuclear exchange. As Perry and Collina state with unwarranted certainty, "The United States can deter the unlikely Russian use of its low-yield bombs with its current arsenal. There are no "gaps" in the US deterrent force, and there can be no doubt in Russia's mind that the United States is serious about maintaining an unambiguously strong nuclear deterrent."[28]

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) has also argued that a 100-kiloton airburst nuclear weapon, detonated over 10 international capitals—including Washington, DC, Beijing, Moscow, London, and Paris—would kill or injure more than 9 billion people.[29] As the study notes, "While modern nuclear weapon targets are not public information, de-classified targets from the Cold War indicate that major cities have been the target of

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[25] William J. Perry and Tom Z. Collina, "The Atomic Titanic: an excerpt from 'The Button'," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, June 19, 2020, https://thebulletin.org/2020/06/the-atomic-titanic-an-excerpt-from-the-button/.

[26] Ibid.

[27] As the Biden Administration's *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* concluded, the low-yield submarine-launched ballistic missile warhead provides "flexibility" and is "an important means to deter limited nuclear use." See Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, October 2022, op. cit., pp. 11, 20.

[28] Ibid.

[29] International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, *No Place to Hide: Nuclear Weapons and the Collapse of Health Care Systems*, February 2022, https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/ican/pages/2544/attachments/original/1644334250/NoPlacetoHide-ICAN-Report-Feb2022-web.pdf?1644334250.

nuclear weapons and so it is not unreasonable to conjecture that they may still be targets."[30] Apparently, the authors of the study are either unaware or deliberately dismissive of the fact that U.S. nuclear targeting policy has since the middle years of the Cold War evolved away from intentional countervalue attacks against soft targets. However, the shock value of estimating casualties from such countervalue attacks is intended to generate support for the nuclear disarmament movement. As ICAN concludes:

> It is clear that there is no mitigation strategy or response capacity that could adequately respond to a nuclear attack on a city: even a single moderately sized bomb over a single city would be a humanitarian catastrophe…. The only solution is to prevent the risk to any city by eliminating nuclear weapons.[31]

Such statements are clearly intended to increase public opposition to the nuclear modernization program of record—a program initiated by the Obama Administration and supported by both the Trump and Biden Administrations. Yet, despite clear evidence that U.S. deterrence policy is not based on intentional strikes against populated urban-industrial areas, such mischaracterizations endure—apparently for political purposes.

Conclusion

There is no question that contemporary U.S. nuclear targeting policy has transitioned significantly away from the Cold War metrics outlined by then-Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who suggested deterrence could be

[30] Ibid., p. 31.

[31] Ibid., p. 30.

assured through the capability to hold a certain percentage of the adversary's population and urban-industrial capacity at risk. This "assured destruction" criteria, based on the ability to cause unacceptable damage to an opponent's civilian population, contradicts basic principles in the Law of Armed Conflict and no longer serves as the basis for U.S. nuclear deterrence planning. Yet, it continues to be portrayed as such by those who oppose nuclear weapons in general, current plans for nuclear modernization, and theories of deterrence based on anything other than the "balance of terror" standard that was the hallmark of Cold War thinking.

Moreover, those who cite the "inhumanity" of nuclear weapons and the devastating human consequences of their use are also the most vocal opponents of any efforts to lessen their destructive potential based on a misguided belief that more accurate, more discriminate, and less destructive nuclear weapons capabilities make nuclear use more plausible and nuclear war more likely. Such views stand in stark contrast to the decades-long bipartisan support for more accurate and more discriminate precision-guided conventional munitions that are less likely to causes unintended collateral damage.

The issue of nuclear weapons and nuclear war is understandably an emotional one. However, those who seek to play on the abhorrence of nuclear war by deliberately mischaracterizing U.S. nuclear targeting policy in ways that suggest it is immoral are playing on fear to advance public support of their preferred disarmament agenda. Such mischaracterizations do a disservice to the need for informed public debate on such a critical issue.

The Fallacy of "Deterrence by Detection"*

In 2021, then-Commandant of the Marine Corps, General David Berger, outlined a new way of thinking about deterrence, which he called "deterrence by detection." Arguing that traditional forms of threatened punishment have been inadequate to deter aggression, Gen. Berger stated, "You could drive three aircraft carriers into the East China Sea, it's not going to deter [China's] coast guard or the maritime militia that is scaring away a fishing fleet…. The threat of punishment—conventional deterrence… I don't think that works, it hasn't, clearly, the last 10 years, last five years have shown that it will not work in all cases."[1]

Instead, Gen. Berger called for adopting what some have characterized as a "name and shame" deterrence policy, stating, "How do we deter by presenting an adversary with the perception—convincing them that there's nothing they can do that we're not going to see, and we're not going to shine a big light on and make a big deal."[2] In other words, he noted, "We have to have the capability to illuminate that…. Some portion of that is so that we can understand how they're setting their pieces for battle. And part of it, frankly, is to bring it to international attention and expose it for what it is…. They can't move, they can't take a step without the world knowing about it."[3]

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*Original publication: David J. Trachtenberg, "The Fallacy of 'Deterrence by Detection,'" *Information Series*, No. 562, September 11, 2023.

[1] Justin Katz, "US Should Pursue 'Deterrence By Detection,' Says Marine Corps Commandant," *Breaking Defense*, September 1, 2021, https://breakingdefense.com/2021/09/us-should-pursue-deterrence-by-detection-says-marine-corps-commandant/.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Justin Katz, "Berger calls for 'deterrence by detection' in light of Russia-Ukraine tensions," *Breaking Defense*, February 8, 2022, https://breakingdefense.com/2022/02/berger-calls-for-deterrence-by-detection-in-light-of-russia-ukraine-tensions/.

Late last year, the former commander of U.S. Central Command, Marine Corps General Frank McKenzie (Ret.), argued that a policy of deterrence by detection could be useful against Iran. In an article co-authored with a colleague at the Middle East Institute, they noted that "Iran's style of asymmetric warfare…is really hard to deter or contain because the Iranians are good at it…."[4] However, they contend that "US deterrence against Iran's gray-zone tactics is not a lost cause. In fact, the simple act of letting Iran know the US is paying attention may end up being the cheapest, most effective way of deterring their actions…."[5]

To support their hypothesis, the authors cite the U.S. use of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance drones in 2019 flying "above the heads of Iranian military personnel to let them know it [the United States] was watching their every move." They also point to the public release of intelligence information last November suggesting Iran might attack Saudi Arabia or Iraq, noting, "In the end, no attack was launched."[6] Yet they acknowledge that "Neither of these two examples guarantees that deterrence by detection will always work with Iran, or any other adversary, particularly one geared up for more classical warfare."[7]

And in recent months, the Biden Administration has sought to dissuade China from supplying Russia with lethal weapons in its war against Ukraine by publicly disclosing information about China's plans. As Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated, "We've been watching this very,

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[4] Bilal Y. Saab and Frank McKenzie, "Deterring by Detection: A cheap, successful way to deter Iran," *Breaking Defense*, December 12, 2022, https://breakingdefense.com/2022/12/deterring-by-detection-a-cheap-successful-way-to-deter-iran/?utm_campaign=dfn-ebb&utm_medium=email&utm_source=sailthru&STOverlay=2002c2d9-c344-4bbb-8610-e5794efcfa7d.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

very closely. And, for the most part, China has been engaged in providing rhetorical, political, diplomatic support to Russia, but we have information that gives us concern that they are considering providing lethal support to Russia in the war against Ukraine." He further warned that "this would be a serious problem."[8] As one analyst noted, "Well, clearly, the United States has specific intelligence indicating that China is thinking about - not that it's done it - but is thinking about directly providing lethal aid…. And the United States is also sharing this intelligence with allies. So the NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg has also warned China that he sees evidence that it is considering providing lethal aid. And so NATO and the United States are warning China against taking this step."[9]

Nevertheless, reports indicate that since June of last year, Chinese firms have shipped assault rifles, drone parts, and body armor to Russian companies, although the Department of Defense has seen no indication lethal weapons have been transferred "for use on the battlefield in Ukraine."[10] Yet published press reports highlighting the recent massive leak of classified intelligence documents state that China agreed covertly to provide lethal weapons

[8] Lynn Berry, "US warns China not to send weapons to Russia for Ukraine war," *ABC News*, February 19, 2023, https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory/us-warns-china-send-weapons-russia-ukraine-war-97323518.

[9] Interview with Robert Daly, director of the Wilson Center's Kissinger Institute on China and the United States, "U.S. warns China not to supply lethal aid to Russia for use in the war in Ukraine," *National Public Radio*, February 23, 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/02/23/1158935153/u-s-warns-china-not-to-supply-lethal-aid-to-russia-for-use-in-the-war-in-ukraine.

[10] Erin Banco and Sarah Anne Aarup, "'Hunting rifles'—really? China ships assault weapons and body armor to Russia," *Politico*, March 16, 2023, https://www.politico.com/news/2023/03/16/chinese-rifles-body-armor-russia-ukraine-00087398. Also see Mike Brest, "US hasn't seen China provide lethal aid to Russia, Pentagon says," *Washington Examiner*, March 16, 2023, https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/us-hasnt-seen-china-provide-lethal-aid-to-russia.

to Russia for use in its war against Ukraine.[11] In addition, Chinese companies have reportedly shipped "tens of thousands of kilograms of smokeless powder—enough propellant to collectively make at least 80 million rounds of ammunition" to Russia.[12] And other reports suggest Moscow has been importing dozens of unmanned aerial vehicles from China for use in its war against Ukraine.[13] This summer, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that "Chinese companies have supplied computer chips, jet-fighter parts and navigation and jamming technology to Russia."[14]

Traditional deterrence theorists question the notion that simply letting an adversary know that we know what they are up to is sufficient to deter them from taking an action we don't want them to take. For example, the Krasnoyarsk radar was a clear violation of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty but exposing it as such did nothing to deter the Soviet Union from cheating. Both the Obama and Trump Administrations made it clear to Russia that the United States knew Moscow's development and deployment of the SSC-8/9M729 ground-launched cruise missile was a clear violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. But Russia simply denied the

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[11] Karen DeYoung and Missy Ryan, "Russia says China agreed to secretly provide weapons, leaked documents show," *The Washington Post*, April 13, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/04/13/russia-china-weapons-leaked-documents-discord/.

[12] Ana Swanson and John Ismay, "Chinese Firm Sent Large Shipments of Gunpowder to Russian Munitions Factory," *The New York Times*, June 23, 223, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/23/business/economy/china-russia-ammunition.html#:~:text=in%2036%20Hours-,Chinese%20Firm%20Sent%20Large%20Shipments%20of%20Gunpowder%20to%20Russian%20Munitions,in%20Russia's%20war%20against%20Ukraine.

[13] Jacob Fromer, et al., "Special report: Russia buying civilian drones from China for war effort," *Nikkei Asia*, Jul 1, 2023, https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Ukraine-war/Special-report-Russia-buying-civilian-drones-from-China-for-war-effort.

[14] Austin Ramzy and Jason Douglas, "Booming Trade With China Helps Boost Russia's War Effort," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 21, 2023, https://www.wsj.com/world/china/booming-china-russia-trade-sends-trench-digging-machines-to-ukraines-front-lines-85f5b5ff.

violation, falsely accused the United States of non-compliance with the treaty, and persisted in deploying its prohibited cruise missile, leading President Trump to withdraw from the treaty in 2019.

With respect to Russia's actions in Ukraine, the failure of such a "name and shame" approach to deterrence is manifestly clear. Prior to Russia's invasion, the United States disclosed mountains of evidence about Russia's military buildup on Ukraine's borders, supported by satellite photography and an unprecedented amount of declassified information, all with the goal of exposing Russian President Vladimir Putin's objective of destroying Ukraine's independence and restoring Russia's control over the second largest country in Europe. One report, citing "current and former officials," called this "one of the most aggressive releases of intelligence by the United States since the Cuban missile crisis."[15]

Major media outlets in the United States and abroad ran daily news accounts of the buildup of Russian troops on Ukraine's border, the various invasion routes that Russian forces could take, and the estimated amount of casualties that would occur, including as many as 50,000 civilians killed or wounded, if Russia invaded.[16] Reports that Russia was deploying stocks of blood supplies lent credence to the

[15] Julian E. Barnes and Helene Cooper, "U.S. Battles Putin by Disclosing His Next Possible Moves," *The New York Times*, February 12, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/12/us/politics/russia-information-putin-biden.html.

[16] See, for example, David Brown, "Ukraine: What are Russia's possible attack routes?," *BBC News*, February 20, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60395500; Courtney Cube, " U.S. intel: Nine probable Russian routes into Ukraine in full-scale invasion," *NBC News*, February 10, 2022, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-intel-nine-probable-russian-routes-ukraine-full-scale-n1288922; and Karen DeYoung, Dan Lamothe, John Hudson and Shane Harris, "Russia could seize Kyiv in days and cause 50,000 civilian casualties in Ukraine, U.S. assessments find," *The Washington Post*, February 5, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/05/ukraine-russia-nato-putin-germany/.

belief that Russia was indeed preparing for military action.[17] Much of this information was attributed to U.S. government and intelligence sources, which raises profound issues over whether a policy of "deterrence by disclosure"—as one former U.S. government official has characterized it—can lead to "positive outcomes" or "negative consequences," including "the risk of giving away sources and methods."[18]

Despite this torrent of information disclosures, Putin was not deterred from recognizing the "independence" of two breakaway territories in Ukraine, Luhansk and Donetsk, and sent military troops into the region under the guise of "peacekeepers." Russia also illegally annexed the regions of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. "Ukraine never had a tradition of genuine statehood," Putin declared, arguing that Ukraine "will serve as a forward springboard" for an attack on Russia and that "Russia has every right to take retaliatory measures to ensure its own security. That is exactly what we will do."[19]

Biden Administration officials reportedly believed that exposing Putin's lies and actions would prevent what has occurred. As one senior administration official reportedly stated, "Our theory has been that putting true information into the public domain, which was bearing out in real time because everybody can see what they're actually doing, was the best way to prevent the Russians and what they always

[17] Phil Stewart, "EXCLUSIVE Russia moves blood supplies near Ukraine, adding to U.S. concern, officials say," Reuters, January 29, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/exclusive-russia-moves-blood-supplies-near-ukraine-adding-us-concern-officials-2022-01-28/.

[18] Eric S. Edelman, "The Pros and Cons of 'Deterrence by Disclosure'," *The Dispatch*, February 21, 2022, https://thedispatch.com/p/the-pros-and-cons-of-deterrence-by?utm_source=url.

[19] "Extracts from Putin's speech on Ukraine," *Reuters*, February 21, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/extracts-putins-speech-ukraine-2022-02-21/.

do, which is to try to control the narrative with disinformation."[20]

Instead, Russia's latest military aggression against a democratic neighbor whose sovereignty and territorial independence Moscow guaranteed as a party to the 1994 "Budapest Memorandum" exposed the fallacy of a "deterrence by detection" policy.

Of course, another rationale for exposing Russian misbehavior is to help ensure allied unity in responding to Russian aggression. This also appears to have been one of the Biden Administration's objectives.[21] However, while the sharing of information with allies and partners is useful for helping to ensure solidarity among NATO allies *ex post facto*, it is insufficient to act as a deterrent to aggression *ex ante*.

Critics of the Biden Administration argued that the imposition of harsh sanctions against Russia in advance of its military action would serve as a more effective deterrent to aggression than waiting until after Russia invaded Ukraine. Yet, the administration refused to act preemptively, arguing such a move would remove any disincentive for Putin to invade Ukraine and leave the United States with little recourse in that event. As then-Pentagon press secretary John Kirby argued prior to Russia's military assault, the threat of prospective sanctions had a "deterrent effect" on Russia, noting, "Right now we are not considering a preemptive sanction regime." As Kirby put it:

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[20] Michael D. Shear, Julian E. Barnes and Eric Schmitt, "Wooing Allies, Publicizing Putin's Plans: Inside Biden's Race to Prevent War," *The New York Times*, February 21, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/21/us/politics/biden-putin.html.

[21] As reported in the press, one of the Biden Administration's objectives was "building support [among allies] for a tougher response." See Barnes and Cooper, op. cit.

> If it's a deterrent and you use it before the aggression is made or the transgression is made, then you lose your deterrent effect. If you punish somebody for something that they haven't done yet, then they might as well just go ahead and do it. So we believe there's a deterrent effect by keeping them in reserve and we have been very clear with the international community and with Mr. Putin about the severity of the economic consequences that he could face.[22]

In response to Russia's invasion, which is a violation of international law and Russia's written commitment to uphold Ukraine's sovereignty, the Biden Administration issued an Executive Order banning U.S. investment in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions (which Russia refers to as the "Luhansk People's Republic" and the "Donetsk People's Republic"). Initially, the European Union (EU) appeared more willing to impose harsh penalties on Moscow than the Biden Administration. In a statement, the EU indicated it was taking action against Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, targeting Russian banks and "those who were involved in the illegal decision" to invade.[23]

Vice President Kamala Harris, speaking at the Munich Security Conference in February 2022 just days before Russia's invasion, stated that if Russia invaded Ukraine, U.S. sanctions on Russia would be "swift" and "severe," noting, "We will impose far-reaching financial sanctions and export controls. We will target Russia's financial institutions and key industries. And we will target those who are complicit and those who aid and abet this

[22] Ronn Blitzer, "Pentagon spox says threat of Russia sanctions has 'deterrent effect', but admits invasion may be 'days away'," *Fox News*, February 13, 2022, https://www.foxnews.com/politics/pentagon-spox-kirby-us-not-considering-sanctions-against-russia.

[23] "Statement by the Presidents of the European Commission and the European Council on Russian aggression against Ukraine," February 22, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_22_1281.

unprovoked invasion."[24] However, the Biden Administration's initial reaction was neither as "swift" nor as "severe" as promised, with U.S. policy remaining reactive, not proactive and the prospect of additional sanctions dependent on Russian actions. This approach allowed Moscow to set the terms of Washington's response by deciding for itself how far it was willing to go and how much risk it was willing to accept. Expressing frustration, Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, criticized the initial U.S. wait-and-see attitude asking, "What are you waiting for?" and stating, "We don't need your sanctions after the bombardment will happen, and after our country will be fired at or after we will have no borders or after we will have no economy or parts of our country will be occupied. Why would we need those sanctions then?"[25]

Members of Congress, on a bipartisan basis, criticized the initial U.S. response, and to its credit, the administration has been more forthcoming with significant military assistance to Ukraine in recent months. However, the United States has taken an incremental approach to giving the Ukrainians more sophisticated offensive and defensive weaponry for fear of escalating the crisis and out of concern that some systems would require U.S. trainers on the ground in Ukraine, may fall into the hands of the Russians, or may deplete U.S. stockpiles. These include the Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMs), F-16 fighter jets, and sophisticated Gray Eagle unmanned aerial vehicles.[26]

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[24] Kate Sullivan, Allie Malloy and Jasmine Wright, "Harris says US 'stands with Ukraine' while warning Russia of 'swift, severe and united' consequences," *CNN*, February 19, 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/19/politics/harris-munich-speech/index.html.

[25] Caroline Vakil, "Ukrainian president presses for preemptive sanctions against Russia," *The Hill*, February 19, 2022, https://thehill.com/policy/international/595073-ukrainian-president-presses-for-preemptive-sanctions-against-russia.

[26] See Tara Copp and Lolita C. Baldor, "EXPLAINER: US weapons systems Ukraine will or won't get," *Associated Press*, October 13, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-technology-lloyd-austin-

Recently, however, the United States belatedly approved the transfer of F-16s from Denmark and the Netherlands to Ukraine and will train Ukrainian pilots in the United States[27]—another example of what may be criticized as the United States "leading from behind." For nearly a year, the United States refused to supply Ukraine with Patriot air defense batteries, though only a single Patriot battery has now been provided to counter the massive swarms of Russian and Iranian-made drone attacks.[28] And although the administration early this year agreed to allow the transfer of Abrams tanks, they may only be provided to Ukraine starting in September given the production challenges endemic to a U.S. defense industrial base that is insufficiently geared to rapid response.[29]

In short, a "deterrence by detection" policy failed to prevent Russian aggression. More broadly, such a policy is unlikely to result in actually stopping an opponent from

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government-and-politics-b7d48caead3838e6621c1a4b0a0bcbb7. Also see Serge Havrylets, "US denies Ukraine's request for ATACMS missiles due to concerns over future conflict with China," *Euromaiden Press*, August 28, 2023, https://euromaidanpress.com/2023/08/28/us-denies-ukraines-request-for-atacms-missiles-due-to-concerns-over-future-conflict-with-china/.

[27] Joseph Clark, "U.S. Will Train Ukrainian F-16 Pilots, Ground Crews," *DOD News*, August 24, 2023, https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3504621/us-will-train-ukrainian-f-16-pilots-ground-crews/.

[28] See Barbara Starr and Oren Liebermann, "Exclusive: US finalizing plans to send Patriot missile defense system to Ukraine," *CNN*, December 13, 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/13/politics/us-patriot-missile-defense-system-ukraine/index.html. Also see Natasha Bertrand and Oren Liebermann," Russia tried to destroy US-made Patriot system in Ukraine, officials say," *CNN*, May 12, 2023, https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/12/politics/russia-patriot-missiles-ukraine/index.html#:~:text=Ukraine%20has%20received%20at%20least,missiles%20such%20as%20the%20Kinzhal.

[29] See Lara Seligman, Paul McLeary, and Lee Hudson, "U.S. to send Ukraine more advanced Abrams tanks—but no secret armor," *Politico*, January 26, 2023, https://www.politico.com/news/2023/01/26/us-sends-ukraine-advanced-abrams-tanks-00079648. Also see Lara Seligman, Alexander Ward, Paul McLeary, and Joe Gould, "U.S. expects to begin delivering Abrams tanks to Ukraine in September," *Politico*, July 27, 2023, https://www.politico.com/news/2023/07/27/u-s-expects-to-begin-delivering-abrams-tanks-to-ukraine-in-september-00108635.

committing aggression if the opponent's behavior is motivated by factors that suggest the benefits of aggression outweigh the costs. Nor does exposure to the light of truth guarantee that misdeeds will be prevented, especially when bad behavior is a hallmark of authoritarians and authoritarian regimes that have no compunctions against violating established norms and rules of behavior and choose to operate outside legally established boundaries.

This is not to argue that deterrence by threat of punishment will always work. Nor is it to suggest that exposing an adversary's anticipated actions in advance in order to influence an opponent's decision-making calculus will always be futile. Indeed, administration officials have spoken of using intelligence as an "instrument of [state] power," and that declassifying and publicly releasing intelligence information has helped to throw "our adversaries off their game"—including forcing Russia to change its tactics and disrupting Russian propaganda and disinformation efforts.[30] But a realistic assessment must recognize that states will act to achieve their own goals and objectives and will not be deterred from aggressive actions if they perceive the benefits outweigh the costs. Indeed, Putin expected the West to impose sanctions, saying, "We are being blackmailed, they are threatening us with sanctions. But I think they will impose those sanctions."[31]

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[30] See, for example, Ken Dilanian, Courtney Kube, Carol E. Lee, and Dan De Luce, "In a break with the past, U.S. is using intel to fight an info war with Russia, even when the intel isn't rock solid," *NBC News*, April 6, 2022, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/us-using-declassified-intel-fight-info-war-russia-even-intel-isnt-rock-rcna23014. Also see Mark Pomerleau, "Authorized strategic intelligence disclosures are likely here to stay, US officials say," DefenseScoop.com, April 28, 2023, https://defensescoop.com/2023/04/28/authorized-strategic-intelligence-disclosures-are-likely-here-to-stay-us-officials-say/.

[31] Valerie Hopkins, "Highlights from Putin's address on breakaway regions in Ukraine.," The New York Times, February 21, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/21/world/europe/putin-speech-transcript.html.

Yet Russia was not deterred from invading Ukraine by that prospect. In fact, deterrence can only be expected to work when the costs of aggression are seen by the aggressor to outweigh any conceivable benefits. In the case of Ukraine, this condition clearly was not met.

Russia's actions have been driven by a desire to reconstitute lost empire and to overturn the existing security framework in Europe. And Putin is willing to sacrifice Russian (and Ukrainian) lives in the process. Indeed, it was Putin who referred to the dissolution of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [20th] century."[32] It will take more than simply exposing Russia's nefarious activities to convince Putin, a former Soviet KGB officer, to change course.

NATO and non-NATO countries alike, especially the Baltic NATO states of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, are rightly concerned that Putin's appetite may be whetted if he is ultimately successful in conquering Ukraine. Moreover, China is watching how the West responds to Russia's actions, as it seeks to eliminate Taiwan's autonomy and incorporate it under Beijing's political control. Indeed, Russia and China have made common cause, and their Joint Statement of February 4, 2022 declares that "Russia and China stand against attempts by external forces to undermine security and stability in their common adjacent regions, [and] intend to counter interference by outside forces in the internal affairs of sovereign countries under any pretext…."[33]

History may not repeat itself in identical form, but there are significant parallels between Russia's actions today and Germany's actions in the 1930s. As one analyst noted,

[32] "Russia: Excerpts From Putin's State-Of-The-Nation Speech," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 25, 2005, https://www.rferl.org/a/1058630.html.

[33] "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development," February 4, 2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770.

"Putin may not be Hitler; Ukraine in 2022 isn't Czechoslovakia in 1938; and French president Emmanuel Macron, Olaf Scholz, the German chancellor, and their western colleagues aren't some sort of collective Chamberlain. But 1938 does carry important lessons: the most important being that deterrence may seem more expensive and risky than accommodation today, but it is essential for Europe's long-term security."[34]

Despite the expressions of unity by the Western allies, there are disquieting indications of dissonance beneath the surface. This dissonance may increase as the war drags on. To quote the aforementioned analyst:

> Deterrence will be impossible, however, if leaders keep telling Putin what they are not prepared to do, or if they turn up the pressure on him so slowly that he can always adapt. Biden has said that he won't send US forces to fight in Ukraine; the German foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, has publicly expressed doubts about cutting Russia off from the global payments system Swift; the [then-]Italian prime minister, Mario Draghi, has said that sanctions should not hit gas imports from Russia; and the EU, US and UK have already indicated that the recognition of the "people's republics" looks unlikely to trigger full-scale economic sanctions at this stage, despite Putin's deployment of troops.[35]

Without a more serious and unified response to Putin's aggression, "Europe will be destabilized for decades…. If he is to be deterred from going farther, even at this late stage,

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[34] Ian Bond, "The west knows the cost of appeasement. We can't rule out any option for stopping Putin," *The Guardian*, February 22, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/22/west-appeasement-putin-russia-ukraine.

[35] Ibid.

the west needs to make him uncertain that the gain will be worth the pain. Everything must be on the table."[36]

Indeed, "deterrence by detection" may seem like an inexpensive solution to the difficult problem of preventing adversary aggression. But it is a mirage. Deterrence can best be achieved by convincing an adversary that the costs of aggression are not worth the price to be paid. This requires a demonstrated commitment and credible resolve to counter the nefarious actions and behavior of an opponent. The failure to forcefully confront aggression generations ago led to world war. Hopefully, the lessons of a prior generation will not be lost on this one.

[36] Ibid.

How the Lack of a "Two-War Strategy" Erodes Extended Deterrence and Assurance*

Introduction

For years following the Cold War, the United States was considered the sole superpower and the U.S. military was the preeminent fighting force in the world. In the wake of the demise of the Soviet Union, U.S. military strategy transitioned from a focus on deterring global conflict to one centered on regional contingencies. Accordingly, U.S. military planners designed a strategy that called on the United States to prepare to fight two major regional contingencies (MRCs) simultaneously.

This two-MRC construct was embedded in various unclassified U.S. military strategy documents and required U.S. forces to be sized and capable of successfully engaging adversaries in both Europe and Asia. It required a military that was sufficiently forward deployed and equipped with the most modern and sophisticated military technology that would ensure a U.S. advantage on the battlefield. This two-war standard became the benchmark against which the adequacy of U.S. forces was judged.[1]

Over time, the two-war standard was modified and scaled back to focus on irregular warfare and defeating one regional adversary while imposing severe costs on another. With the re-emergence of sharp great power conflicting interests as outlined in the 2017 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* and the 2018 *National Defense*

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* Original publication: David J. Trachtenberg, "How the Lack of a 'Two-War Strategy' Erodes Extended Deterrence and Assurance," *Information Series*, No. 590, June 17, 2024.

[1] Department of Defense, *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review*, May 1997, p. 12, https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/quadrennial/QDR1997.pdf?ver=qba2TZwCFGClTKIgPlPnvg%3d%3d.

Strategy, the United States shifted its conceptual focus from irregular warfare and lesser regional contingencies to threats posed by Russia and China. Subsequently, the 2021 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* noted, "Both Beijing and Moscow have invested heavily in efforts meant to check U.S. strengths and prevent us from defending our interests and allies around the world."[2] Yet U.S. military forces remained ill-prepared to prosecute a two-war scenario, especially one involving Sino-Russian collaboration.

The critical question is whether the U.S. armed forces today have adopted or are postured to adopt a revised force-planning construct that prepares for simultaneous regional conflicts against nuclear peer adversaries in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. Failing to do so carries significant implications for both U.S. adversaries and U.S. allies: It likely encourages adversaries to challenge the United States militarily while simultaneously causing allies to question the credibility of U.S. security assurances.

A Dangerous Decline?

Any potential conflict with China is likely to rely heavily on U.S. air- and sea-based assets. In the 1980s, the Reagan Administration sought a 600-ship Navy. Today, the U.S. Navy has shrunk in size to fewer than 300 ships. While individual platforms possess greater capability today, the U.S. capacity to deploy forward as part of a deterrence strategy is much less than it was four decades ago. Likewise, the Air Force is cutting platforms, raising questions regarding the U.S. ability to deter Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific. As one Air Force official reportedly stated, "By any measure, we have departed the era of conventional overmatch" with respect to China. Beijing has "advanced so

[2] The White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, March 2021, p. 8, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf.

far and so fast in its air and space power that the Air Force's ability to deter through conventional forces is at risk."[3] This decline in U.S. military capabilities has resulted in what has been described as a "brittle force."[4]

In addition to reducing U.S. conventional military power, Washington has repeatedly delayed essential nuclear modernization programs. In fact, the current U.S. nuclear modernization program is a legacy of the Obama Administration and was proposed at a time when the era of great power rivalry was considered a remnant of the past. Indeed, the 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review* declared that Russia was no longer an adversary of the United States and the risk of a direct U.S.-Russia military confrontation had diminished substantially, noting, "The threat of global nuclear war has become remote…."[5] Indeed, the 2010 NPR explicitly placed highest priority *not* on deterrence, but on nuclear non-proliferation and limitations on nuclear forces. In light of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the multitude of nuclear threats it has levied against the United States and the West in the past several years, such conclusions appear naïve at best, and the nuclear modernization program of record from the earlier optimistic era is now problematic.

A False Choice

The current conflict in Ukraine has exposed severe limitations in U.S. military readiness and capabilities, as the U.S. defense industrial base struggles with the demands of

[3] Mackenzie Eaglen, "The Bias for Capability Over Capacity Has Created a Brittle Force," *War on the Rocks*, November 17, 2022, https://warontherocks.com/2022/11/the-bias-for-capability-over-capacity-has-created-a-brittle-force/.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2020, pp. iv, 3-4, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf.

supporting Ukraine with sufficient equipment and materiel without negatively affecting U.S. warfighting readiness. Moreover, there are those who are calling for the United States to shift scarce defense resources away from supporting Ukraine's fight against Russia and toward confronting China in the Indo-Pacific.[6] Such calls reflect concern that the United States is ill-prepared to fight a two-front war with great powers. The situation is made even more precarious by the emergence of a hostile Sino-Russian entente that is threatening key U.S. allies in two different theaters. In addition, the United States now finds itself increasingly embroiled in a Middle East conflict that is likely to siphon additional military resources away from deterring great power rivals.

The current situation is a legacy of conscious decisions made by multiple U.S. administrations in the aftermath of the Cold War to reduce U.S. military capabilities in anticipation of a more benign strategic security environment. This was done without any apparent concern for the future assurance of allies in the event that the threat context dramatically worsened—which, unfortunately, has been the case. The expectation was that China would rise peacefully and that Russia would either be irrelevant to U.S. national security concerns or cooperative, i.e., a partner with the West rather than an adversary. As is now evident, those predictions did not materialize as expected. The international security environment today is arguably more dynamic, more uncertain, and more dangerous than ever before.

The view that the United States can only afford to prioritize defeating a single major adversary in one theater of operations carries significant ramifications for extended deterrence and assurance of allies. Indeed, it is increasingly

[6] See, for example, Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), pp. x, xvi.

unlikely that the United States can engage militarily in one regional contingency without eroding deterrence in another region. U.S. allies and strategic partners who rely on the United States as the ultimate guarantor of their own security surely recognize the increased risk that accompanies a U.S. military that is limited in its ability to respond to aggression in multiple theaters simultaneously.

Allied Queasiness Over U.S. Security Guarantees

In light of reduced U.S. military capabilities, concerns about an overextended U.S. presence abroad, and an apparent U.S. reluctance to commit military resources to ongoing conflicts in other theaters, even a focus on deterring China from attacking Taiwan has not been sufficient to quell Taiwanese anxiety over American willingness to come to Taiwan's defense should China seek to move militarily against the island. As one Taiwanese academic noted, "there is substantial skepticism" over the U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan in the event of overt Chinese aggression.[7] Indeed, public opinion polls have highlighted a lack of faith among allied publics in U.S. extended deterrence commitments and assurances. When it comes to U.S. security guarantees, a recent poll found that only 34 percent of Taiwanese believe the United States is a trustworthy country.[8] South Korean confidence in U.S. extended deterrence assurances is similarly low.[9]

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[7] Damien Cave and Amy Chang Chien, "Taiwan's Doubts About America Are Growing. That Could Be Dangerous.," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/20/world/asia/taiwan-united-states-views.html.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Peter K. Lee and Kang Chungku, "Comparing Allied Public Confidence in U.S. Extended Nuclear Deterrence," *Issue Brief*, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, March 27, 2024, https://www.asaninst.org/contents/comparing-allied-public-confidence-in-u-s-extended-nuclear-deterrence/#:~:text=A%20December%202023%20survey%20by,6%20percentage

Elsewhere in Asia, concerns over the credibility of U.S. security guarantees are growing, with both Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) openly questioning whether they should acquire their own nuclear deterrent. In the ROK, despite the U.S. reiteration of its "ironclad" commitment to South Korea's defense in the 2023 Washington Declaration,[10] polling data indicates that more than 70 percent of South Koreans support the deployment of nuclear weapons on their territory—ether the re-introduction of American nuclear weapons or the acquisition of their own.[11] In Japan, public debate over acquiring nuclear weapons as a deterrent has reached unprecedented levels—a remarkable development for the only country to have suffered through two atomic bombings. This is a reflection of these allies' growing threat perceptions and the simultaneous declining confidence in the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence.

In Europe as well, some of America's traditional key allies are growing more concerned about the credibility of U.S. security guarantees. One survey of more than 15,000 respondents in 11 European countries found that a majority believe China is on the ascendancy and will overtake the United States in relative power over the next ten years. It concluded that Europe cannot depend on the United States to defend European security. The survey also exposed a

%20points%20to%2039.3%25.&text=In%20short%2C%20South%20Korean%20confidence,extended%20deterrence%20commitment%20remains%20low.

[10] The White House, "Washington Declaration," April 26, 2023, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/washington-declaration-2/.

[11] Toby Dalton, Karl Friedhoff, and Lami Kim, "Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons," Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Lester Crown Center on U.S. Foreign Policy, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2022, https://globalaffairs.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Korea%20Nuclear%20Report%20PDF.pdf. See also, "South Koreans want their own nukes. That could roil one of the world's most dangerous regions," *The Associated Press*, November 30, 2023, https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15070825.

belief that Europeans should invest more heavily in their own security and adopt a position of neutrality in any conflict involving the United States, China, or Russia.[12] As an analysis of the survey concluded, "The growing mistrust about Washington's reliability and power is changing the nature of the transatlantic alliance."[13] Moreover, one study conducted by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs concluded that the lack of a U.S. two-war strategy could lead to opportunistic aggression, noting: "If two major wars occur either simultaneously or sequentially, US military capability will be put under great stress. In the event of a second war, the US may find itself in a situation of conventional military inferiority, which it might have to compensate for with greater reliance on nuclear weapons."[14]

One of the starkest expressions of concern over U.S. reliability was conveyed in a recent warning to European powers by two long-time scholars of transatlantic relations: "Recent events have shown that the United States will not vigorously and reliably defend you. The United States cannot credibly threaten escalation to defend our allies." Their bottom-line summation: "Dear Allies: Do not look to the United States for your defense."[15]

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[12] Jana Puglierin and Pawel Zerka, *Keeping America Close, Russia Down, and China Far Away: How Europeans Navigate A Competitive World*, European Council on Foreign Relations, Policy Brief, June 2023, https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Keeping-America-close-Russia-down-and-China-far-away-How-Europeans-navigate-a-competitive-world-published.pdf.

[13] Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, "The crisis of American power: How Europeans see Biden's America," *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, January 19, 2021, https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-crisis-of-american-power-how-europeans-see-bidens-america/.

[14] Jyri Lavikainen, "China as the Second Nuclear Peer of the United States," *FIIA Briefing Paper No. 383*, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, February 2024, p. 2, https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/bp383_china-as-the-second-nuclear-peer-of-the-united-states.pdf.

[15] Michael Hochberg and Leonard Hochberg, "Our Restraint Destroys Your Deterrence," *RealClear Defense*, February 10, 2024,

These changes in perceptions, in part, reflect concerns over official U.S. wariness to engage directly or indirectly in actions that could lead to escalatory outcomes. That wariness corresponds to the U.S. military retrenchment that began years ago with the movement away from a two-war strategy and the necessary procurement of military capabilities that could effectively execute that strategy.[16]

As U.S. military capabilities have declined, allies and strategic partners of the United States have become increasingly skeptical of U.S. security guarantees. Consequently, the Biden Administration has sought to publicly reassure partners in Europe and Asia of the "ironclad" nature of America's commitment to their security.[17] The need for such reassurances suggests recognition of a growing uneasiness among allies over the credibility of such guarantees.

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https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2024/02/10/our_restraint_destroys_your_deterrence_1010986.html.

[16] While some attribute growing allied concerns over American security guarantees to domestic U.S. politics—in particular concerns over how U.S. policy might change in a second Trump Administration—the inability of the United States adequately to defend its global interests in an increasingly contested international security environment characterized by two peer nuclear adversaries has arguably contributed to the belief that the United States may not be a reliable security partner. It has also fueled the controversy over whether and how the United States must choose between deterring adversaries in multiple potential theaters of conflict.

[17] Over a one-day period, President Biden, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner all publicly reasserted that U.S. security guarantees to Japan, the Philippines, Israel, and South Korea were "ironclad." As a DoD press release noted, the United States "affirmed its ironclad commitment to extended deterrence…." See Aamer Madhani and Zeke Miller, "Biden says US support for Philippines, Japan defense 'ironclad' amid growing China provocations," *Associated Press*, April 11, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/japan-philippines-trilateral-kishida-marcos-biden-03e6288c5b5155af1bb693a464de875d; Tweet by Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, April 11, 2024, https://twitter.com/SecDef/status/1778570526396424598; and Department of Defense, "Joint Press Statement for the 24th Korea-U.S. Integrated Defense Dialogue," April 11, 2024, https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3739122/joint-press-statement-for-the-24th-korea-us-integrated-defense-dialogue/.

Addressing the Challenge

The force expansion necessary to implement a two-war strategy will require additional fiscal resources beyond those currently budgeted. The resources to implement such a course of action will no doubt be sizable. Some in Congress have shown a willingness to go beyond the levels of defense spending requested by the Biden Administration. For example, the Senate Armed Services Committee and the Senate Appropriations Committee have approved levels of defense funding well in excess of the administration's budget requests.[18] And the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024, signed into law by President Biden on December 22, 2023, also increased the level of defense funding to more than $883 billion, well beyond that originally requested by the administration.[19]

Despite some positive signs, the results of recent budget negotiations are likely to constrain the procurement of the additional forces needed to implement adequately a two-war strategy. For example, anticipated reductions in the number of weapons platforms across all the Services, including F-35 fighters, nuclear submarines, and other

[18] The Senate Armed Services Committee approved a level of defense funding roughly $45 billion more than what the administration requested. See Senate Armed Services Committee Press Release, "Reed and Inhofe File Fiscal Year 2023 National Defense Authorization Act," July 18, 2022, https://www.armedservices.senate.gov/press-releases/reed-and-inhofe-file-fiscal-year2023-national-defense-authorization-act. The Senate Appropriations Committee also added significantly to the administration's defense request. See "Senate appropriators seek $850 billion for defense, largest total of 4 key committees," *Breaking Defense*, July 28, 2022, https://www.google.com/amp/s/breakingdefense.com/2022/07/s enate-appropriators-seek-850-billion-for-defense-largest-total-of-4-keycommittees/amp/.

[19] Senate Armed Services Committee, "Summary of the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act," https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/fy24_ndaa_conference_executive_summary1.pdf.

military equipment as a result of defense budget caps signed into law by President Biden last year as part of the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023 will seriously impact any move toward restoring a two-war defense capability.[20] Indeed, the president's proposed defense budget for fiscal year 2025 reflects only a one percent increase over the previous year—which translates to a real *reduction* in actual defense purchasing power given the rate of inflation.[21] As Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin stated, the cuts will result in "targeted reductions to programs that will not deliver capability to the force until the 2030s…."[22] This actual reduction in U.S. defense spending purchasing power is likely to preclude implementation of the current strategy, much less a two-war strategy.[23]

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[20] Lara Seligman, Connor O'Brien, Lee Hudson, and Paul McLeary, "Pentagon slashes weapons programs to stay under debt deal," *Politico*, February 21, 2024, https://www.politico.com/news/2024/02/21/pentagon-slashes-weapons-programs-debt-deal-00142465#:~:text=The%20Biden%20administration%20struck%20a,stay%20under%20the%20spending%20caps.

[21] See Tony Capaccio, "Biden to Seek 1% Increase in 2025 Defense Budget Under Cap," *Bloomberg*, March 6, 2024, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-03-06/biden-to-request-1-increase-in-2025-defense-budget-under-cap?embedded-checkout=true. Also see Brad Dress and Ellen Mitchell, "Biden seeks modest bump for record $895B defense budget," *The Hill*, March 11, 2024, https://thehill.com/policy/defense/4524735-biden-record-895b-defense-budget/. *The Wall Street Journal*'s editorial board referred to this as "a military budget fit for 1991" and stated that "the U.S. military is in a state of managed decline." See The Editorial Board, "Biden Shrinks the U.S. Military," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 12, 2024, https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-defense-budget-pentagon-u-s-military-china-russia-israel-ukraine-ba7fd46b.

[22] Department of Defense, "Department of Defense Releases the President's Fiscal Year 2025 Defense Budget: Statement by Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III on the President's Fiscal Year 2025 Defense Budget," March 11, 2024, https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3703410/department-of-defense-releases-the-presidents-fiscal-year-2025-defense-budget/.

[23] Some in Congress have reportedly argued that the defense budget is more than $400 billion below what is required to meet current commitments. For example, Sen. Roger Wicker (R-MS) called for a defense budget of $1.3 trillion, or five percent of U.S. Gross Domestic Product. See Senator Roger Wicker, *21st Century Peace Through Strength: A Generational Investment in the U.S. Military*, May 2024, p. 7, https://www.wicker.senate.gov/services/files/BC957888-0A93-432F-A49E-

The problems created by caps on U.S. defense spending and the corresponding lack of consideration of a two-war strategy are being exacerbated by increasingly aggressive adversary threats and closer collaboration between China and Russia. Indeed, the risks of opportunistic aggression by Moscow or Beijing, acting unilaterally or in concert, will likely grow without a concerted U.S. effort to adopt a more robust deterrence posture. This will also place increasing pressures on extended deterrence and assurance.[24]

Nevertheless, there is considerable resistance in Washington to reinstating a two-war standard. Such a posture would require greater resources and investments by the Services in additional military capabilities, a prospect which some find unappealing. As one recent assessment has

6202768A9CE0. Also see Bryant Harris, "A nearly $1 trillion defense budget faces headwinds at home and abroad," *DefenseNews*, March 7, 2024, https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2024/03/07/a-nearly-1-trillion-defense-budget-faces-headwinds-at-home-and-abroad/?utm_campaign=dfn-ebb&utm_medium=email&utm_source=sailthru&STOverlay=2002c2d9-c344-4bbb-8610-e5794efcfa7d#:~:text=As%20the%20Pentagon%20seeks%20to,and%20where%20it's%20falling%20short.; Stephen Groves, "Key Republican calls for 'generational' increase in defense spending to counter US adversaries," *Associated Press*, May 29, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/us-military-spending-pentagon-china-russia-iran-1af566ecfca060ce3042b23d9feb2438; Bryant Harris and Leo Shane III, "How a Republican majority in the House will affect defense policy," *DefenseNews*, December 8, 2022, https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2022/12/05/how-a-republican-majority-in-the-house-will-affect-defense-policy/.

[24] As one analyst noted, "the premise that the United States will only need to fight one adversary in one part of the world seems like a bad bet. The United States may not yet be confronting a true 'axis of evil,' but American adversaries are becoming more tightly aligned, leaving the United States with a one-war force for an increasingly multi-war world." See Raphael S. Cohen, "Ukraine and the New Two War Construct," *War on the Rocks*, January 5, 2023, https://warontherocks.com/2023/01/ukraine-and-the-new-two-war-construct/. Also see Greg Weaver, "Part I: US Deterrence Requirements In The Coming Two-Nuclear-Peer Threat Environment," in Greg Weaver and Amy F. Woolf, *Requirements for Nuclear Deterrence and Arms Control in a Two-Nuclear-Peer Environment*, Atlantic Council and Los Alamos National Laboratory, February 2, 2024, p. 8, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Requirements-for-Nuclear-Deterrence-and-Arms-Control-in-a-Two-Nuclear-Peer-Environment-Weaver-and-Woolf.pdf.

noted, "The [Marine] Corps has consistently maintained that it is a one-war force and has no intention of growing to the size needed to fight two wars, and both its annual budget requests and its top-level planning documents reflect this position."[25]

Today, the United States remains constrained by the choices it made decades ago. U.S. military prowess remains limited by a one-war standard (which, some argue, is really a one-half-war standard). With few exceptions, allies have not stepped up to take up the slack for their own defense.

Some have suggested that it is up to America's allies to shoulder a greater burden of defense preparedness and that this should be a prerequisite for any increase in U.S. support to allies or strategic partners such as Ukraine that are engaged in their own efforts to counter military aggression.[26] While the issue of allied "burdensharing" has long been controversial, and greater allied defense investments should be encouraged, there is no substitute for American leadership. The U.S. inability to demonstrate both a willingness and capability to deter, and if necessary defeat, aggression in multiple theaters simultaneously—particularly in the face of a growing Sino-Russian entente—risks encouraging the very aggression U.S. defenses are intended to deter.

Eventually, U.S. allies will be compelled to make tough choices: either work with the United States to seriously rearm; rearm themselves independently; or conciliate to the Sino-Russian entente. Without a demonstrable American

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[25] Dakota L. Wood, ed., *2024 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, The Heritage Foundation, January 2024, p. 518, https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/2024_IndexOfUSMilitaryStrength.pdf.

[26] See, for example, Rep. Mike Waltz, "Europe must do more for Ukraine; U.S. has to protect its own border," *The Highland County Press*, September 26, 2023, https://highlandcountypress.com/europe-must-do-more-ukraine-us-has-protect-its-own-border#gsc.tab=0.

commitment to reenable a two-war strategy, the last option may be increasingly inevitable for some allies.

A policy of accommodation or appeasement is unlikely to forestall any aggressive acts by a Sino-Russian entente. Some European states have demonstrated the will to increase their own defense capabilities in the face of growing Russian assertiveness and aggression. Yet there is no substitute for U.S. leadership and power; it falls on the United States, as the leader of NATO and the ultimate guarantor of European security, to shoulder much of the burden. Doing so undoubtedly entails moving expeditiously toward re-adoption of a two-war strategy and to procure the conventional and nuclear capabilities needed to implement that strategy. Only in this way will allied confidence in the credibility of U.S. security guarantees increase and the efficacy of the U.S. extended deterrent be preserved.

The need to reconsider a more robust force sizing construct to strengthen deterrence in an era of two great power rivals has received strong bipartisan support. Recently, the congressionally mandated Strategic Posture Commission concluded that a one-war strategy is inadequate and inappropriate to the contemporary military challenges facing the United States. It declared that "U.S. and allied conventional military advantages in Asia are decreasing at the same time the potential for two simultaneous theater conflicts is increasing."[27]

This structural challenge facing extended deterrence and assurance cannot be solved with robust rhetoric from Washington and NATO. The *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) shows some recognition of the problem but

[27] Madelyn R. Creedon, Jon L. Kyl, et al., *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, October 2023, p. 90, https://ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/a/am/americas-strategic-posture/strategic-posture-commission-report.ashx.

eliminates "hedging" as a requirement despite the need for greater flexibility and adaptability in U.S. force preparedness. However, a renewed two-MRC standard would help provide a needed hedge against resurgent Russian revanchism, the rise of Chinese aggression, and a combination of both. Without such a hedging strategy, the risks of aggression, including opportunistic or coordinated aggression, will increase.[28]

Conclusion

Over the past decade, there have been several calls for a return to a two-war strategy in light of contemporary security developments. The prospect of a revanchist China and Russia working together or engaging in opportunistic aggression to challenge U.S. national security interests worldwide suggests that the time has come to restore the two-MRC force-sizing construct as a means of bolstering deterrence.

As the congressionally mandated Commission on the National Defense Strategy of the United States concluded, "The United States now faces five credible challengers, including two major-state competitors, and three distinctly different geographic and operational environments. A two-war force sizing construct makes more strategic sense today than at any previous point in the post-Cold War era."[29]

Restoring a two-MRC standard will require greater regional power projection capabilities, including an expanded U.S. force presence abroad, along with a greater

[28] Gouré, op. cit., p. 4. Also see Mark Gunzinger and Lukas Autenried, *Building A Force That Wins: Recommendations for the 2022 National Defense Strategy*, The Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, Air Force Association, June 2021, pp. 5, 22, 45, https://mitchellaerospacepower.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Building-a-Force-that-Wins-FINAL.pdf.

[29] *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission*, November 2018, pp. 35, 66, November 2018, https://www.usip.org/publications/2018/11/providing-common-defense.

number of more flexible, technologically sophisticated, and survivable offensive and defensive military assets both in theater and capable of rapid deployment to theater as needed.

The impact of a less than two-war strategy on extended deterrence and assurance is manifestly detrimental to the credibility of U.S. security guarantees to allies and their corresponding assurance. The credibility of America's security guarantees corresponds to the capability and willingness of the United States to act on its commitments, and to be seen as willing to do so. A failure of U.S. resolve in one region cannot help but raise doubts about U.S. steadfastness and resolve among allies and strategic partners elsewhere. The end result is likely to be a weakening of trust in the United States and a greater movement by friends and allies toward accommodation and appeasement of U.S. adversaries. In the emerging threat environment, where the United States faces not one but two nuclear peer adversaries, the U.S. ability to project power and make good on its extended deterrence and assurance commitments is more critical than ever.[30]

[30] As two former senior U.S. officials have commented, "Credibility among allies and potential enemies alike depends on our perceived will to maintain our longstanding commitments to support and defend like-minded democratic states." A failure to do so, such as in Ukraine, "will cause all of our other allies and friends (including Taiwan) to question whether we would at some point abandon them too." They argue, "Because American security commitments are not severable, such a loss of confidence would cause longtime allies to drift away, to be more accommodating of our potential enemies to our detriment, all leading, therefore, to a weakening of our own ability to shape world events." Indeed, they conclude that anything less than a two-theater defense planning construct "is no longer sufficient in the two nuclear peer world in which we now find ourselves," and that "Any suggestion that the U.S. military is too weak to engage in two theaters simultaneously—and therefore to deter in two theaters simultaneously—fundamentally misunderstands the nature of potential wars in NATO and in the Pacific." See Eric S. Edelman and Franklin C. Miller, "We Must Return to and Maintain the Two Theater Defense Planning Construct," *RealClear Defense*, August 1, 2023, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2023/08/17/we_must_return_to_and_maintain_the_two_theater_defense_planning_construct_973522.html.

Facilitating the Upload of Nuclear Weapons: What Congress Must Do*

Introduction

The U.S. nuclear enterprise is in desperate need of modernization and recapitalization. Despite dangerous changes in the international strategic environment over the past several decades—including massive nuclear expansion programs by China and Russia—the U.S. nuclear arsenal has simultaneously grown older and smaller, as the United States has sought to reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons while others have moved in the opposite direction.

To ensure its continued efficacy, resilience, and credibility, the U.S. nuclear deterrent must be flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances. Yet, the United States has not explosively tested a nuclear weapon since 1992. No new nuclear delivery systems have been deployed in decades. Existing legacy systems have had their operational life extended well beyond originally planned parameters. And the United States continues to rely on a rudimentary missile defense system that is focused on defending only against limited threats and is relatively unchanged since it was first deployed more than 20 years ago—despite the significant quantitative and qualitative growth in adversary missile capabilities.

Effectively responding to adversary developments will take time, resources, and substantial effort. Unfortunately, given the current state of the nuclear enterprise, there are few options for short-term fixes. As a previous *Information Series* explained,[1] the most timely and cost-effective way to

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*Original publication: David J. Trachtenberg, "Facilitating the Upload of Nuclear Weapons: What Congress Must Do," *Information Series*, No. 633, August 31, 2025.

[1] Keith B. Payne and Mark B. Schneider, "Deterrence Requirements and Low-Cost Nuclear Upload Options," *Information Series*, No. 626 (Fairfax, VA: National

bolster the U.S. nuclear deterrent is through the uploading of warheads on ICBMs and SLBMs, consistent with the recommendations of the congressionally mandated, bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission. This will require both executive branch decisions and legislative branch actions to implement fully those decisions.

The Importance of Congressional Action

Consistent with its Article I authorities under the Constitution, the Congress can exercise its power to fund (or not to fund) defense and national security programs and to establish, modify, or revoke existing policy with respect to U.S. military activities and priorities, including nuclear weapons and strategic force programs. This can be done through the use of several legislative vehicles, but the most likely and appropriate vehicles are the annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and the DoD Appropriations Act.

The NDAA contains numerous provisions relating to U.S. strategic forces. For example, Subtitle C of Title 16 in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 NDAA contains eighteen separate sections dealing with U.S. nuclear forces.[2] Along with authorizing funding for defense programs, it addresses a range of defense policy issues, some of which can be highly controversial. In addition, the House and Senate Armed Services Committees (HASC and SASC), which are responsible for the annual NDAA process, typically issue report language accompanying each year's NDAA that is often directive in nature, requiring the Secretary of Defense

Institute Press, June 5, 2025), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-and-mark-b-schneider-deterrence-requirements-and-low-cost-nuclear-upload-options-no-626-june-5-2025/.

[2] *Servicemember Quality of Life Improvement and National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025* (Public Law 118-159), December 23, 2024, available at https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/5009/text.

or the president to submit various reports or take specific actions related to the U.S. nuclear weapons establishment. Although such directive report language is not signed by the president and is not considered legally binding, failing to comply with its requirements often leads Congress to impose penalties on the executive branch that can stymie the administration's plans. Those penalties often include funding cuts or restrictions that make implementation of various administration priorities difficult if not impossible. As James Madison stated in *Federalist 58*, this so-called "power of the purse may, in fact, be regarded as the most complete and effectual weapon with which any constitution can arm the immediate representatives of the people, for obtaining a redress of every grievance, and for carrying into effect every just and salutary measure."[3]

In the past, Congress has restricted or prohibited funding for various nuclear weapons-related programs, has imposed conditions on the president's ability to negotiate nuclear arms control agreements, and has limited the ability of the president to make unilateral U.S. nuclear force reductions. All of these actions are consistent with the Congress' law-making responsibilities under the Constitution. In addition to imposing limitations and restrictions, the Congress has the ability to direct that certain actions be taken and to provide funding, through the authorization and appropriations process, to implement those actions. Therefore, the Congress has the ability to adapt U.S. nuclear posture by mandating and providing funding for enhancements to U.S. strategic nuclear programs. This includes directing and facilitating the upload of nuclear weapons on U.S. delivery systems to strengthen deterrence.

[3] James Madison, *Federalist 58*, available at https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed58.asp.

Importantly, for Congress to take actions that are legally binding on the administration, those actions must be agreed to on a bipartisan basis and incorporated in legislation signed into law by the president. The annual NDAA is the most relevant vehicle for addressing defense issues, as it contains thousands of provisions agreed to on a bipartisan basis by the two defense authorization committees (HASC and SASC). However, it may not always be possible to obtain bipartisan support within the individual defense committees for legally binding requirements on the administration. In such cases, committee report language offers an alternative means for expressing the committees' desires on major defense issues that may be too controversial or difficult to be included in statutory language. These HASC and SASC committee reports allow the authorization committees to explain their respective defense priorities and to direct that certain actions be taken even though they were not incorporated into the legally binding NDAA that is signed into law by the president.

Recommendations

Adapting U.S. nuclear posture to address the deterioration in the contemporary international security environment will require enhancements to existing legacy nuclear systems and the development and deployment of more modern, sophisticated nuclear capabilities to strengthen deterrence. Unfortunately, given the current state of the U.S. nuclear enterprise, options to improve the efficacy, reliability, and credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent are limited or will take years to implement. However, as noted previously, the most rapid option for bolstering U.S. nuclear capabilities is the upload of non-deployed warheads on ICBMs and SLBMs.

Specifically, there are several actions the Congress should take with respect to the upload of nuclear weapons,

which are highlighted below. Some of these can be incorporated into statutory language in the NDAA while others can be addressed in directive report language.

- Direct full implementation of the recommendations of the Strategic Posture Commission regarding the upload of U.S. nuclear weapons.

Sec. 1687 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 (Public Law 117–81) established a bipartisan "Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States." The commission issued its report in October 2023. Among its findings was that Russia has "added substantial warhead upload capacity to its ICBMs and Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs)" and that "Russia's modernized nuclear warhead design and production infrastructure have significant surplus capacity to implement a decision to upload."[4] Consequently, the commission recommended that the United States take several actions in response. These include preparing to upload a number of "hedge" warheads in the U.S. non-deployed nuclear stockpile and exercising the upload option on existing deployed ICBMs and SLBMs.[5]

The Congress should affirm the commission's recommendations and legislate as a matter of policy that the United States will act to implement them expeditiously as a national priority. This can be done through statutory language in the FY 2026 NDAA.

- Direct the Secretary of Defense to submit a report to the congressional defense committees in both

[4] Madelyn R. Creedon, Chair, Jon L. Kyl, Vice Chair, et al., *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, October 2023, pp. 9, 92, available at https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/a/am/americas-strategic-posture/strategic-posture-commission-report.ashx.

[5] Ibid., pp. 45, 48, 99.

classified and unclassified form on the state of Russian and Chinese warhead upload capacities and their supporting infrastructure should they decide to upload warheads on existing nuclear delivery platforms.

This report should provide details on Russian and Chinese industrial production capacities as they relate to nuclear warhead development and should assess the implications for deterrence of any decision by Russia and/or China to expand the size and capabilities of their nuclear arsenals by uploading nuclear weapons on ICBMs and SLBMs. Understanding the full potential of Russian and Chinese upload capabilities is essential for determining whether the U.S. upload potential is sufficient to negate any advantage Russia and China, together or separately, might perceive in pursuing this option. In addition, the report should assess the likely rationale for any Russian and/or Chinese decision to upload non-deployed warheads and the implications of such a decision for U.S. deterrence.

- Incorporate a Sense of Congress resolution into the FY 2026 NDAA expressing Congress' view that U.S. upload actions should be linked to Russian and Chinese nuclear weapons developments, aggressive goals, and related U.S. deterrence requirements for holding at risk what opponents value most.

Though not legally binding, a Sense of Congress resolution would be useful for several reasons. First, it would clearly note that U.S. upload actions are a response to, rather than the driver of, Russian and Chinese nuclear weapons developments. In other words, U.S. uploading would be an appropriate response to actions taken by Russia or China to shift the correlation of nuclear forces in their favor. Second, it would place U.S. uploading in the

context of meeting deterrence requirements, not "nuclear war-fighting." Third it would put the executive branch on notice that Congress, on a bipartisan basis, takes this issue seriously. Fourth, in doing so, it foreshadows more direct congressional action to ensure that the expansion of Russian and Chinese nuclear arsenals does not proceed unchallenged, including the potential legislative imposition of various certification requirements, prohibitions, or budgetary actions.

- Recommend suspension of U.S. implementation of the New START Treaty to allow for upload increases in the number of operationally deployed warheads on strategic delivery vehicles and prohibit funding for any New START implementation measures.

The New START Treaty places a limit of 1,550 on the number of operationally deployed, accountable strategic nuclear weapons. The United States, as a matter of policy, has remained bound by this limit, despite the fact that Russia announced it was suspending its participation in New START in 2023 and has ceased allowing the on-site inspections mandated by the treaty and necessary to verify its compliance. Unclassified reports suggest Russia may already have significantly exceeded the allowable New START Treaty limits.[6] In addition, earlier this year, the State Department conceded that Russia "may have exceeded the deployed warhead limit by a small number during portions

[6] See, for example, Mark B. Schneider, "The 2024 Edition of the Federation of American Scientists' Report on Russian Nuclear Weapons: Flaws and Fallacies," *Information Series*, No. 587 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, May 20, 2024), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/mark-b-schneider-the-2024-edition-of-the-federation-of-american-scientists-report-on-russian-nuclear-weapons-flaws-and-fallacies-no-587-may-20-2024/; Mark B. 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), available at https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Vol.-3-No.-8.pdf.

of 2024" and that "The United States is unable to make a determination that the Russian Federation remained in compliance throughout 2024 with its obligation to limit its deployed warheads on delivery vehicles subject to the New START Treaty to 1,550, due to Russia's proximity to the limit as of its last update and failure to fulfill its obligations with respect to the Treaty's verification regime."[7]

Russia's suspension of New START frees Moscow to upload nuclear weapons on several of its delivery systems. Continued U.S. unilateral adherence to the 1,550 quantitative limitation in New START greatly limits U.S. upload options. This situation should be remedied immediately. In addition, the New START Treaty limits should not be extended in any way beyond the treaty's February 2026 expiration date so the United States may adjust its nuclear force levels appropriately to respond to the deteriorating security environment.

- Authorize and appropriate the necessary funding for the Air Force and Navy to exercise the warhead upload option.

The House and Senate Armed Services Committees should be briefed by both the Air Force and Navy on the cost of ICBM and SLBM warhead upload options and the advantages and disadvantages of uploading a portion of the hedge force as opposed to the entire hedge force. The authorization of funds for uploading warheads should be contained in the FY 2026 NDAA with the actual appropriation of funds provided by the FY 2026 DoD Appropriations Act. Such funding is imperative if the proposed uploading actions are to be implemented.

[7] Department of State, *Report to Congress on Implementation of the New START Treaty*, January 17, 2025, p. 6, available at https://2021-2025.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/UNCLASS_NST-Implementation-Report_2024-FINAL-Updated-Accessible-01.17.2025.pdf.

- Direct the Secretary of Defense to submit a report to the congressional defense committees on specific upload options, associated costs, timelines for completion, and implications for deterrence of uploading forces or not doing so.

In addition to cost information provided by the Air Force and Navy, the House and Senate Armed Services Committees should direct the Secretary of Defense to submit a report to the congressional defense committees within 90 days that addresses 1) the timeline for implementing uploads on both ICBM and SLBM delivery systems; 2) the trade-offs involved in reducing the number of warheads in the "hedge" force through upload; 3) the effect of uploading warheads on the overall U.S. strategic deterrent, including the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent; and 4) options for restoring a hedge force of sufficient size and capability to further augment deterrence. The submission of such a congressional report is unlikely to be controversial, especially since it relates to recommendations proposed by the bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission that Congress established.

- Direct the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) to improve the pit production process so that pit production can be accelerated in accordance with prior legislative requirements and that additional warheads can be created to upload existing forces and stockpiled as a replacement hedge capability.

Section 4219 of the Atomic Energy Defense Act (50 U.S.C. 2538a) requires the NNSA to produce at least 80 pits per year by 2030; however, significant concerns exist regarding the ability of NNSA to meet this requirement. For

example, a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report in 2023 found that NNSA's pit production plans are likely to result in major delays and cost overruns.[8] Therefore, the Congress should direct NNSA to identify and implement procedures that will allow it to meet the 80-pit annual requirement by 2030.

- Mandate that DoD create and maintain a new, more modern, hedge stockpile of non-deployed warheads for possible future deployment.

As existing hedge warheads are uploaded on ICBMs and SLBMs, Congress should establish, as a matter of policy, that the United States will maintain a significant replacement hedge stockpile to guard against a further deterioration in the strategic environment that increases the risk of deterrence failure. This is necessary to ensure that U.S. nuclear forces are resilient against any such unforeseen changes. As one study noted more than 15 years ago, "For U.S. nuclear forces, resilience is the ability to recover from or adjust to unfavorable strategic developments, technical difficulties, operational challenges, or technological surprises."[9] Uploading nuclear weapons on existing platforms is one measure that can help ensure the resilience of the U.S. nuclear force. As this study further concluded, "a reserve of non-deployed warheads in the nuclear weapons stockpile is essential for resilience."[10]

As far back as the George W. Bush Administration, the need for a hedge capability of non-deployed warheads was described as "insurance against the re-emergence of a

[8] United States Government Accountability Office, *Nuclear Weapons: NNSA Does Not Have a Comprehensive Schedule or Cost Estimate for Pit Production Capability*, GAO-23-104661, January 2023, available at https://www.gao.gov/assets/820/814649.pdf.

[9] Dr. Keith B. Payne, Study Director, et al., *Planning the Future U.S. Nuclear Force, Volume I: Executive Report* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2009), p. 16.

[10] Ibid., p. 19.

hostile peer competitor."[11] More than two decades later, the United States faces not one but two hostile peer competitors. Therefore, if all existing hedge warheads are uploaded, the United States should create a more modern hedge stockpile of non-deployed warheads to hold in reserve.

The Biden Administration's *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* eliminated "hedging against an uncertain future" as a key role for U.S. nuclear weapons.[12] This overturned decades of policy direction, promulgated by administrations of both political parties, acknowledging the importance of hedging against the possible resurgence of a hostile Russia or more aggressive China. The ability to upload non-deployed reserve warheads was part of this hedging strategy.

In contrast to the Biden Administration, the Obama Administration validated the need for an "upload hedge." As one analysis described it:

> Specifically, the United States will maintain additional warheads in the nuclear stockpile, and the ability to upload those warheads on existing delivery systems to: (1) restore existing force levels in the event of a technical problem with a warhead or delivery system; or (2) field a larger deployed force, if required, in the event of a geopolitical reversal…. This hedge strategy was intended to provide response options against 'a change in the international landscape' or 'a geopolitical surprise' that would 'alter the U.S. calculus about the

[11] Donald H. Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense, *Department of Defense Annual Report to the President and the Congress* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2002), pp. 89-90.

[12] Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, October 2022, p. 7, available at https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.pdf.

necessary composition of the deployed force.'[13]

Conclusion

In short, there are a number of actions Congress can take to facilitate the upload of U.S. nuclear weapons in ways that strengthen deterrence and extended deterrence. These include requiring official reports to identify U.S. deployed deterrence force requirements, Russian and Chinese upload capability and U.S. response options; ensuring adequate fiscal resources are provided to implement upload decisions and actions; directing expedited infrastructure improvements to meet national requirements; and mandating the reconstitution of a modern hedge stockpile of non-deployed warheads in the event of a further deterioration in the strategic environment.

Adapting U.S. nuclear forces to strengthen deterrence in the face of growing threats by adversaries is an urgent imperative. Uploading U.S. delivery systems is the most rapid and effective way to improve the efficacy of the U.S. nuclear deterrent. The Congress should move out expeditiously to implement the actions proposed above.

[13] Department of Defense, *Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States Specified in Section 491 of 10 U.S.C.*, June 12, 2013, pp. 4-5, cited in Thomas Scheber and John R. Harvey, *Assessment of U.S. Readiness to Design, Develop and Produce Nuclear Warheads: Current Status and Some Remedial Steps* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2015), p. 13, available at https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Assessment-of-US-Readiness-for-web.pdf.

ON MISSILE DEFENSE

Time to Reassess U.S. Missile Defense Policy*

A recent Russian press story noted that a new Russian intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) armed with multiple nuclear warheads—dubbed the "Sarmat"—can "wipe out Texas" and circumvent any U.S. missile defense system.[1] Unfortunately, the United States has no defensive system designed to stop it and no apparent intention of building one. Residents of the Lone Star state can take some solace, however, in the knowledge that their vulnerability to nuclear attack from Russian missiles is shared by the rest of the nation.

While the importance of missile defenses for the protection of regional forces and the assurance of allies is no longer in dispute, the role such defenses should play in defending the American homeland remains controversial. Ironically, nearly a decade and a half after the United States withdrew from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which prohibited an effective nationwide defense against Soviet missile attack, the U.S. population remains hostage to Russian nuclear missile threats. As the chill in U.S.-Russian relations becomes deeper, it is time to reassess this policy.

Russian statements about the Sarmat highlight a troubling fact: Moscow is engaged in a massive nuclear modernization program, reportedly developing several new types of long-range missiles that can strike the United

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[1] "Russia's New ICBM Sarmat Can Penetrate Defense Shield, Wipe Out Texas," *Sputnik News*, May 8, 2016, http://sputniknews.com/russia/20160508/1039258053/russia-ballistic-missile-sarmat.html.

States.[2] The Sarmat, which according to Russian sources can carry a payload of up to 10 tons and deploy around a dozen independently-targetable warheads, is only one example.[3] The Russian press has noted that the Sarmat could attack a target "from any direction"—for example, it "could start from Russia and fly in the direction of Antarctica, make a circumterrestrial flight and hit targets on the other side of the planet from an unexpected direction."[4] It is not difficult to imagine at which targets "on the other side of the planet" Russia may be aiming.

The Russian ICBM force reportedly also is being augmented by other new silo-based and road-mobile systems, and a new rail-mobile ICBM is reportedly under development. In addition, a new strategic ballistic missile firing submarine and a new sea-launched ballistic missile are apparently under development.[5]

There are no serious U.S. defenses against these missiles; if launched, they would have a free ride to their targets. It will fall to the next president to exercise the constitutional

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[2] See National Institute for Public Policy, "Russia's Nuclear Posture," National Institute for Public Policy, 2015, http://www.nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Russias-Nuclear-Posture.pdf and National Institute for Public Policy, *Russian Strategy: Expansion, Crisis and Conflict* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2016), http://www.nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/FINAL-FOR-WEB-1.12.16.pdf.

[3] "'Satan' Replacement Sarmat Ready for Launch, Flight Trials Next Year—Report," *RT*, November 17, 2015, https://www.rt.com/news/322408-sarmat-icbm-ready-trials/.

[4] "Hypersonic Warhead for Future ICBM successfully tested in Russia—Report," *RT*, April 22, 2016, https://www.rt.com/news/340588-hypersonic-warhead-sarmat-tested/.

[5] National Institute for Public Policy, "Russia's Nuclear Posture," op. cit. For a detailed description of Russia's nuclear modernization programs, see Mark Schneider, "Russian Nuclear Modernization, the Ukraine Crisis, and the Threat to NATO," Remarks to the Air Force Association, National Defense Industrial Association, and Reserve Officers Association Capitol Hill Forum, 14 April 2015, https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/AFA/63e0124a-9fef-4973-95ab-b18225a8c855/UploadedImages/Events/Heussy/Spacepower/041415blankschneiderfinal.pdf. Also see Mark Schneider's comments on "Russia's New Strategic Doctrine and Capabilities" before the same forum on April 20, 2016.

responsibility to "provide for the common defense" by deciding if and how to address this unsettling reality.

Moscow's greater assertiveness on the world stage and its growing anti-American posture has led U.S. military officials to declare Russia the greatest threat to the United States.[6] The number of strategic nuclear weapons deployed by Russia against the United States has increased since the signing of the New START Treaty in 2010 while U.S. totals have declined.[7]

But U.S. policymakers remain wedded to the Cold War belief that defending against Russian nuclear attack would upset the supposed "balance of terror" and be "destabilizing." Consequently, our missile defense efforts are modest at best, directed against limited threats from rogue states like North Korea, and deliberately leave Americans exposed to nuclear annihilation from major nuclear powers like Russia and China.

For example, the Obama Administration's February 2010 Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report states, "Today, only Russia and China have the capability to conduct a large-scale ballistic missile attack on the United States, but this is very unlikely and not the focus of U.S. BMD [ballistic

[6] See, for example, J.D. Leipold, "Milley: Russia No. 1 Threat to US," *Army News Service*, November 4, 2015, https://www.army.mil/article/158386/Milley__Russia_No_1_threat_to_US/; and "U.S. Defense Secretary: Russia is Main Threat to U.S. Security," *The Moscow Times*, March 18, 2016, http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/us-defense-secretary-russia-is-main-threat-to-us-security/562932.html.

[7] According to official figures released by the U.S. State Department, the number of deployed Russian strategic nuclear warheads increased after the New START Treaty's entry into force from 1,566 as of 1 September 2011 to 1,735 as of 1 March 2016, while the U.S. total of deployed strategic nuclear warheads declined from 1,790 to 1,481 over the same time period. See New START Treaty Fact Sheets, http://www.state.gov/t/avc/newstart/c39906.htm. Also see Michaela Dodge, "New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty: Time to Stop the Damage to U.S. National Security," Backgrounder, *The Heritage Foundation*, June 20, 2016, http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2016/06/new-strategic-arms-reduction-treaty-time-to-stop-the-damage-to-us-national-security.

missile defense]."[8] In addition, the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review states that "our missile defenses… are designed to address newly emerging regional threats, and are not intended to affect the strategic balance with Russia."[9]

Some positive steps are being proposed to improve U.S. missile defense capabilities against limited threats, though these will have meager utility against Russia's formidable nuclear arsenal. For example, the United States expects to deploy by the end of next year an additional 14 Ground-Based Interceptors (GBIs) to augment the 30 GBIs already stationed in Alaska and California, which are intended to counter limited missile threats from the likes of North Korea.[10] In addition, planned capability improvements to the GBI include a new Redesigned Kill Vehicle (RKV) and a follow-on successor, the Multi-Object Kill Vehicle (MOKV).[11] Congress has also pressed for adoption of a third interceptor site on the east coast.[12]

These steps are necessary and prudent, but they will in no way counter the extensive nuclear firepower of

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[8] U.S. Department of Defense, *Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, February 2010), p. 4, http://archive.defense.gov/bmdr/docs/BMDR%20as%20of%2026JAN10%200630_for%20web.pdf.

[9] U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, April 2010), p. x, http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf.

[10] Rachel Oswald, "The Pentagon Wants To Buy 14 More Ground-Based Interceptor Missiles," *Global Security Newswire*, June 23, 2014, http://www.defenseone.com/technology/2014/06/hitting-bullet-bullet-us-missile-defense-gets-boost-after-successful-test/87073/.

[11] The Obama Administration has requested $274 million for the RKV and $71.5 million for the MOKV in fiscal year 2017. However, both programs are subject to modification as part of the ongoing defense appropriations process.

[12] The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013 (Public Law 112-239) directed a study on a potential third missile defense interceptor site in the United States. That study was recently completed. See Jen Judson, "MDA Poised To Choose Preferred East Coast Missile Defense Site," *Defense News*, June 2, 2016, http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/2016/06/02/mda-poised-choose-preferred-east-coast-missile-defense-site-soon/85288634/.

Moscow's strategic arsenal. Moreover, funding for these programs is problematic given the Obama Administration's fiscal priorities and the prospects for the return of arbitrary and damaging across-the-board budget cuts knows as "sequestration."[13] Even if fully funded, however, these improvements alone cannot protect Americans from Moscow's increasingly strident nuclear sabre rattling or defend the U.S. homeland against the multitude of newer and more sophisticated nuclear-armed missiles being developed and deployed by Russia.

It will take a significantly greater investment in advanced game-changing technologies, like directed energy systems, a reinvigorated test program, and a refocused effort to counter more sophisticated systems to protect the American people against Russia's growing nuclear threat. To date, the Missile Defense Agency (MDA) has expressed general support for directed energy systems to counter ballistic missile threats. MDA has declared that directed energy could "shift the calculus" of potential adversaries and "revolutionize missile defense, dramatically reducing, if not eliminating, the role of interceptors."[14] MDA's Director, Vice Admiral J.D. Syring, has testified that "non-kinetic technologies" like lasers deployed on unmanned

[13] The Bipartisan Budget Act of 2015 provided a two-year respite from the automatic budget cuts known as the "sequester" mandated by the Budget Control Act of 2011. However, without congressional action, additional cuts will be imposed beginning in fiscal year 2018. As Frank Kendall, Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics, has stated, "The specter of sequestration is alive and well, and will haunt us as we prepare the FY '18 budget next year." Frank Kendall, "Kendall: The Specter of Sequestration Will Haunt Us," *Defense News*, January 4, 2016, http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/commentary/2015/12/13/kendall-specter-sequestration-haunt-us/76906458/.

[14] Missile Defense Agency, "Fact Sheet: Advanced Technology," *Missile Defense Agency*, May 4, 2015, http://www.mda.mil/global/documents/pdf/advsys.pdf.

aerial vehicles, would be more cost-effective than the current ballistic missile defense system.[15]

But terrestrial-based systems alone have some significant limitations.[16] It likely will also take a robust commitment to develop space-based defenses—something the Obama Administration refuses to pursue—which can defeat missiles in their early stages of flight when they are easiest to track and target and most vulnerable to countermeasures.

Several studies have cited the potential advantages of space-based defenses. Such defenses "would provide the widest area of coverage and the greatest number of shots against enemy warheads."[17] They would also be able to counter ballistic missiles launched "from anywhere in the world."[18] Yet the Obama Administration believes such an approach would be costly and destabilizing. Admiral Syring has testified that the cost would be "overwhelming" and has expressed "serious concerns about the technical feasibility of interceptors in space and… the long-term affordability of a program like that."[19]

This effort undoubtedly is technologically challenging, but if effective, the payoff would be worth the effort and

[15] See testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, April 13, 2016, http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Syring_04-13-16.pdf.

[16] For a discussion of this point and the advantages provided by space-based systems, see Steven Lambakis, "Missile Defense From Space," Policy Review, *The Hoover Institution*, February 1, 2007, http://www.hoover.org/research/missile-defense-space. Also see Steven Lambakis, *The Future of Homeland Missile Defenses* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2014), http://www.nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Future-of-Homeland-Missile-Defenses.pdf.

[17] The Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, *Report of the Independent Working Group on Missile Defense, the Space Relationship, and the Twenty-First Century* (Washington, D.C.: The Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, 2009), p. 26, http://www.ifpa.org/pdf/IWG2009.pdf.

[18] Ibid., p. 26.

[19] J.D. Syring, "Prepared Statement," *House Armed Services Committee*, 114th Congress, April 14, 2016, http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS29/20160414/104621/HHRG-114-AS29-Wstate-SyringJ-20160414.pdf.

considerably shift the offense-defense cost-benefit ratio in favor of the defense. As one detailed assessment concluded, "Indeed, far from sparking a costly and deadly arms race, the deployment of a robust, global, space-based missile defense is likely to make it more expensive, and therefore less attractive, for other states to build missiles or to engage in regional arms races based on the deployment of missiles."[20]

In their respective versions of the annual National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, both the House and Senate Armed Services Committees recognized the importance of countering Moscow's nuclear threats and called for developing and integrating space-based missile defenses into the U.S. missile defense architecture. The Senate Armed Services Committee also called for more robust flight testing of missile defense interceptors and both committees support a policy of broadening U.S. territorial defense against more than just "limited" ballistic missile strikes.[21]

These important steps would help make it clear that continued American vulnerability to Russian nuclear missiles is unacceptable. However, the White House "strongly objects" to this approach, reiterating that "the U.S. homeland missile defense system is designed and deployed to counter limited attacks (in number and sophistication) from Iran and North Korea, and not to counter the strategic deterrence forces of Russia and China."[22]

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[20] Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, *Report of the Independent Working Group on Missile Defense, the Space Relationship, and the Twenty-First Century*, op. cit., p. 47.

[21] For example, section 1656 of the House-passed National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2017 (H.R. 4909) calls for planning to research and develop a space-based missile defense capability and section 1665 would amend U.S. policy in support of a "robust layered defense system." Section 1663 of the Senate Armed Services Committee version of the FY17 NDAA amends existing law to allow for research and development of a space-based layer to the ballistic missile defense system.

[22] See Office of Management and Budget, "Statement of Administration Policy," June 7, 2016, p. 6,

Critics assert that more robust missile defense efforts that could offer at least a modicum of protection against Moscow's formidable nuclear missile arsenal—including space-based systems that could have utility against the newer generation of more sophisticated and deadly Russian ballistic missiles—are unnecessary, unworkable, and unaffordable. Unnecessary because the Russian nuclear threat is overblown and exaggerated. Unworkable because the technologies to counter sophisticated missile systems, including those using decoys, maneuvering warheads, and other penetration aids are nascent and difficult if not impossible to perfect. And unaffordable because the financial cost of proceeding down this path would be prohibitively expensive, especially in an era of budgetary constraints.[23] These arguments are flawed or open to question.

According to Russian officials, Russia's strategic nuclear modernization program is a top priority, suggesting that Moscow does not share the widely held Western view that nuclear weapons have declining relevance and utility in the 21st century.[24] Russia's military doctrine identifies the United States and NATO as the main external military threats to the Russian Federation[25] and, as Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work and former Vice Chairman of the

https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/legislative/sap/114/saps2943s_20160607.pdf.

[23] See, for example, Union of Concerned Scientists, "Space-Based Defenses: Fact Sheet," *Union of Concerned Scientists*, May 2015, http://www.ucsusa.org/sites/default/files/attach/2015/06/Space%20Based%20Missile%20Defense%20Fact%20 Sheet.pdf; Also see Steven Pifer, "Overblown: Russia's Empty Nuclear Sabre-Rattling," *The National Interest*, March 17, 2015, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/overblown-russias-empty-nuclear-sabre-rattling-12432.

[24] The Chief of Russia's General Staff, Army General Valery Gerasimov, has stated "Supporting the strategic nuclear forces is our priority." See Dmitriy Rogulin, "Russian Armed Forces to Get 9 Upgraded Strategic Bombers in 2016—General Staff," *TASS*, January 22, 2016, http://tass.ru/en/defense/851596.

[25] See "The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation," December 25, 2014, http://rusemb.org.uk/press/2029.

Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral James Winnefeld have testified, "includes what some have called an 'escalate to deescalate' strategy, a strategy that purportedly seeks to de-escalate a conventional conflict through coercive threats, including limited nuclear use."[26] In addition, the magnitude and scope of Russia's strategic force exercises involving nuclear forces and simulated nuclear strikes is unprecedented.[27] It would be irresponsible to dismiss these developments as irrelevant to U.S. strategic deterrence and defense requirements.

Development of space-based missile defenses and directed energy systems should not be dismissed as impossible. At one point, even the "hit to kill" technology on which all current U.S. missile defense systems are based was considered unrealistic because of the difficulty of "hitting a bullet with a bullet."[28] U.S. missile defense technology has advanced significantly over the decades, past research efforts in this area can be leveraged, and promising new concepts are worthy of exploration and exploitation.[29] The path to success may not be easy or quick,

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[26] Robert Work and James Winnefeld, "Prepared Statement," House Armed Services Committee, 114th Congress, June 25, 2015, http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS00/20150625/103669/HHRG-114-AS00-Wstate-WinnefeldJrUSNJ-20150625.pdf.

[27] National Institute for Public Policy, "Russia's Nuclear Posture," op. cit. Also see National Institute for Public Policy, "Foreign Nuclear Developments: A Gathering Storm," National Institute for Public Policy, 2015, http://www.nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Foreign-Nuclear-Developments-7.15.pdf.; For additional detail on Russian nuclear exercises, see National Institute for Public Policy, *Russian Strategy: Expansion, Crisis and Conflict* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2016), http://www.nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/FINAL-FOR-WEB-1.12.16.pdf.

[28] One analyst cited the "convincing arguments" of missile defense critics that "missile defence is technologically impossible: how in any credible way to hit a bullet with a bullet?," See Bertel Heurlin, "Missile Defense in the United States," in Bertel Heurlin and Sten Rynning, editors, *Missile Defence: International, Regional, and National Implications* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), pp. 65, 68.

[29] For a brief discussion of space-based missile defense options, see Marvin Baker Schaffer, "Time to Revive Debate About Space-Based Missile Defense," *National*

but one thing is clear—we will never succeed if we refuse to try.

Finally, the critics' charge that investment in more robust missile defenses would be unaffordable is a false narrative. Affordability is simply a reflection of national priorities. Additional investment in anything is criticized as "unaffordable" when it competes against higher priority items. But it is difficult to argue that protecting Americans against threats from a country that possesses the world's largest nuclear arsenal, is increasingly hostile to American interests, and has brazenly threatened to use nuclear weapons does not merit higher priority than the lack of attention it has received to date.

Given that the entire $8 billion missile defense budget constitutes just over one percent of all defense spending, the unaffordability argument is baseless; yet it has become a convenient rationalization for those who argue that additional missile defense capabilities would be destabilizing and should not be pursued.[30] Likewise, the notion that additional investment in missile defenses would deprive other more urgent or useful programs of necessary resources—an argument often made by opponents of U.S. nuclear modernization—is logically flawed.[31] If spending more money on missile defense is "unaffordable," why would spending that money on other programs be

Defense, October 2014, http://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/archive/2014/October/Pages/TimetoReviveDebateAboutSpaceBasedMissileDefense.aspx.

[30] One critic has referred to the cost of earlier space-based missile defense efforts as "astronomical" and cited former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates as saying more robust missile defenses would be "unbelievably expensive." See Philip Coyle, "'Limited' Missile Defense Must Remain So," *Breaking Defense*, June 22, 2016, http://breakingdefense.com/2016/06/limited-missile-defense-must-remain-so-philip-coyle/.

[31] Some critics have argued that missile defense funds should be spent on "more pressing security priorities." See, for example, Robert Gard and Philip Coyle, "America's Massive Missile Defense Mistake," *The National Interest*, June 30, 2014, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/americas-massive-missile-defense-mistake-10768.

"affordable"? Critics of a more robust U.S. nuclear and missile defense posture never explain this logical inconsistency. These are matters of priority.

As Moscow's nuclear threats mount, it is essential to convince Russia that the United States will not continue a policy of unmitigated vulnerability to Moscow's threats. The next administration must act forcefully and unequivocally. Doing so will bolster deterrence and strengthen American security. It can also enhance the credibility of extended nuclear deterrence, as U.S. allies are likely to put greater stock in American security guarantees if the U.S. homeland is no longer vulnerable to Russian nuclear threats. Finally, like President Reagan's "peace through strength" policy, it will also demonstrate a level of seriousness and resolve that will likely garner a measure of respect in the Kremlin in ways that could ultimately prove beneficial to our longer-term relationship with Russia.

The message to Russian President Vladimir Putin must be "Don't mess with Texas"—and don't threaten the United States of America.

Defending America: The Next Steps in Homeland Missile Defense*

Introduction

Among the more consequential decisions the second Trump Administration must confront is whether to allow America's continued vulnerability to coercive nuclear threats from China and Russia to remain unchallenged or to take steps to mitigate and alleviate the threats to the U.S. homeland posed by both countries' growing nuclear arsenals.

Both China and Russia are seeking to overturn the established international order and displace the United States from the position of global dominance it has held since the end of World War II. And the growing entente between Beijing and Moscow, augmented by increasing cooperation and collaboration with the likes of North Korea and Iran, suggest that the United States has entered a period of unprecedented vulnerability to the whims of malignant actors. In this dangerous environment, President Trump must seriously rethink whether it makes sense to continue to leave the American people vulnerable to Chinese and Russian nuclear threats or whether it is time to move forward—deliberately and with all due urgency—to build and deploy defenses that can not only help deter potential aggression against the U.S. homeland but can also help protect Americans from nuclear Armageddon should deterrence fail.

It will take determined leadership and a solid commitment to overturn obsolete Cold War orthodoxy—accompanied by adequate funding to translate policies into

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programmatic reality—to implement the necessary adjustments to U.S. missile defense posture, and to do so with the urgency required. President Trump has already taken the first step in this direction by issuing an Executive Order on January 27, 2025, calling for an "Iron Dome for America" and the deployment of a "next-generation missile defense shield" to defend the United States against all types of missile attacks from both rogue states and peer and near-peer adversaries.[1] This now must be followed by the allocation of sufficient budgetary resources to implement the president's direction and to do so with alacrity.

Evolution of the Threat

Over the past several decades, the missile threat to the United States has evolved in ways that complicate defense of the homeland. Ballistic missiles have been seen as the weapon of choice for states seeking to reign terror upon an adversary, as they are difficult to counter. Today, more than 30 countries possess ballistic missiles of varying ranges and capabilities. Yet, the ballistic missile threat has been augmented by newer, more sophisticated, types of missiles that are even more difficult to counter. These include hypersonic missiles, cruise missiles, and other types of unmanned aerial systems like drones. As the *2022 Missile Defense Review* noted, "missile-related threats have rapidly expanded in quantity, diversity and sophistication. U.S. national security interests are increasingly at risk from wide-ranging missile arsenals that include offensive

[1] The White House, Executive Order 14186, "The Iron Dome for America," January 27, 2025, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2025-02-03/pdf/2025-02182.pdf. Since the promulgation of this Executive Order, the "Iron Dome" program has been renamed "Golden Dome." See Jen Judson, "Iron Dome for America gets a golden makeover," *Defense News*, February 25, 2024, https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2025/02/25/iron-dome-for-america-gets-a-golden-makeover/.

ballistic, cruise, and hypersonic weapons…."[2] And as one former Biden Administration official put it more starkly in congressional testimony, "Offensive missiles are increasingly weapons of choice for Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran, for use in conflict and to coerce and intimidate their neighbors."[3]

The growing threat of faster, longer-range, and more deadly ballistic, cruise, hypersonic, and other unmanned missiles and systems means that the United States is increasingly at risk of more complex missile attacks, including those employing sophisticated countermeasures. As one study concluded:

> Defenses for the homeland have largely focused on long-range ballistic threats, while cruise missile defense and other air defense efforts have focused on regional and force protection applications to the exclusion of the homeland. The lingering homeland-regional dichotomy creates a vulnerability that near-peer adversaries are seeking to exploit.[4]

Consequently, missile defense of the U.S. homeland must address these multiple types of threats, either singly or in combination, on an urgent basis.

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[2] Department of Defense, *2022 Missile Defense Review*, p. 1, https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.pdf.

[3] Testimony of Dr. John Plumb before the Senate Armed Services Committee Strategic Forces Subcommittee, May 18, 2022, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/ASD%20Plumb%20SASC%20SF%20Missile%20Defense%20Written%20Statement%20-%20May,18%202022_FINAL.pdf.

[4] Tom Karako, Matt Strohmeyer, Ian Williams, Wes Rumbaugh, and Ken Harmon, *North America Is a Region, Too: An Integrated, Phased, and Affordable Approach to Air and Missile Defense for the Homeland*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2022, pp. X, 1, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/220714_Karako_North_America.pdf?VersionId=BhIKa8jHHF_kV94NXRMx6D4m2o6LQqUf.

In 2023, the congressionally mandated, bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission concluded that "to date the United States has chosen to not build homeland missile defenses against major powers. U.S. homeland IAMD [integrated air and missile defense] capabilities do not adequately protect the critical infrastructure necessary to project power and avoid coercion in light of growing Russian and Chinese nuclear and conventional strike threats."[5] Consequently, the Commission recommended that the United States "develop and field homeland IAMD capabilities that can deter and defeat coercive attacks by Russia and China,"[6] and proposed that:

> The Secretary of Defense direct research, development, test and evaluation into advanced IAMD capabilities leveraging all domains, including land, sea, air, and space. These activities should focus on sensor architectures, integrated command and control, interceptors, cruise and hypersonic missile defenses, and area or point defenses. The DOD should urgently pursue deployment of any capabilities that prove feasible.[7]

The Trump Administration should publicly endorse the bipartisan conclusions of the Strategic Posture Commission and move out expeditiously to enhance U.S. missile defense capabilities in light of the growing missile threat to the homeland.

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[5] Madelyn R. Creedon, Jon L. Kyl, et al., *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, October 2023, p. 28, https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/a/am/americas-strategic-posture/strategic-posture-commission-report.ashx.

[6] Ibid., pp. X, 72, 105.

[7] Ibid., p. x.

From Mutual Vulnerability to Defense Against Rogue State Missile Threats

During the Cold War, U.S. policy makers assumed that the best way to prevent nuclear war was to remain vulnerable to the Soviet Union's nuclear weapons. Any U.S. action that would appear to the Soviets to undermine their own nuclear deterrent was considered provocative and destabilizing. This was the environment that led to the negotiation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 1972—a treaty that was intended to codify a mutual hostage relationship between the United States and Soviet Union and a relationship that became known as Mutual Assured Destruction—in order to decrease the risk that either side would strike the other first given the risk of retaliation in kind.

The ABM Treaty prohibited nationwide missile defense, and the United States quickly abandoned its sole missile defense site at Grand Forks, North Dakota. It was not until 30 years later that President George W. Bush announced the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in order to allow a limited defense against possible rogue state (e.g., North Korean) missile attack. Despite the U.S. withdrawal, American missile defense policy has remained relatively consistent throughout subsequent administrations.

The Obama Administration continued to foreswear the development of U.S. missile defense capabilities that could be useful to deter or defeat coercive missile strikes from either China or Russia in the belief that neither great power posed a significant nuclear threat to the United States and that both Moscow and Beijing would adopt a more benign security posture and take a more cooperative stance toward the United States. The 2010 *Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report* noted, "Today, only Russia and China have the capability to conduct a large-scale ballistic missile attack on the territory of the United States, but this is very unlikely

and not the focus of U.S. BMD. As the President has made clear, both Russia and China are important partners for the future, and the United States seeks to continue building collaborative and cooperative relationships with them."[8] Further, it stated:

> As the United States has stated in the past, the homeland missile defense capabilities are focused on regional actors such as Iran and North Korea. While the [Ground-Based Midcourse Defense] GMD system would be employed to defend the United States against limited missile launches from any source, it does not have the capacity to cope with large scale Russian or Chinese missile attacks, and is not intended to affect the strategic balance with those countries.[9]

The first term Trump Administration's missile defense policy also acknowledged that the rudimentary U.S. missile defense capability was insufficient to defend the homeland against the larger and more sophisticated ballistic missile arsenals of Russia and China. However, unlike previous Missile Defense Reviews (MDRs), the Trump MDR did not, as a matter of policy, state that the United States would not seek to improve U.S. missile defense capabilities to defend against Russia or China in order to preserve "strategic stability." In fact, the term "strategic stability" did not appear at all in the 2019 MDR.

Nevertheless, the 2019 MDR fell short of President Trump's own description of what U.S. missile defense policy should be. In a speech at the Pentagon to unveil the MDR, Trump stated, "Our goal is simple: to ensure that we can detect and destroy any missile launched against the

[8] Department of Defense, *Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report*, February 2010, pp. 4-5, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/BMDR/BMDR_as_of_26JAN10_0630_for_web.pdf.

[9] Ibid., p. 13.

United States—anywhere, anytime, anyplace." He also stated that "Regardless of the missile type or the geographic origins of the attack, we will ensure that enemy missiles find no sanctuary on Earth or in the skies above." To help achieve this objective, he declared that the United States "will invest in a space-based missile defense layer."[10] In reality, however, U.S. missile defense programs remained limited in scope, directed toward defeating rogue state missile threats, and lacked a space-based defensive component other than sensors.

The Biden Administration's *2022 Missile Defense Review* maintained a prohibition against expanding U.S. homeland missile defense posture to defend against coercive nuclear strikes from China or Russia, despite noting that China "has dramatically advanced its development of conventional and nuclear-armed ballistic and hypersonic missile technologies and capabilities," and acknowledging that Russia "has prioritized modernization of its intercontinental range missile systems and is developing, testing, and deploying new, diversified capabilities that pose new challenges to missile warning and defense of the U.S. homeland."[11] The Biden Administration's refusal to adapt U.S. missile defense policy to the emerging Russian and Chinese missile threats it identified highlighted a significant disconnect between an acknowledgment of those threats and the U.S. response. It now falls to the second Trump Administration to correct a Cold War policy that has survived through the post-Cold War era and is in need of significant modification.

[10] The White House, "Remarks by President Trump and Vice President Pence Announcing the Missile Defense Review," January 17, 2019, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-announcing-missile-defense-review/.

[11] Ibid., pp. 2-3.

The Benefits of Homeland Missile Defense

Despite the views of those who still cling to the erroneous Cold War belief that homeland missile defenses would be destabilizing, provocative, prohibitively costly, technologically infeasible, and strategically unnecessary, there are numerous benefits that would accrue to the United States by having a more robust and resilient defense against missile attack. In the face of growing nuclear threats, an expanded U.S. homeland missile defense posture makes strategic sense.[12] It would complicate the attack calculus of any aggressor contemplating a potential attack against the United States.[13] It would also diminish the value of adversary coercive nuclear threats or threats to engage in limited nuclear strikes. Moreover, given the heightened threat environment, there is always the risk that deterrence might fail—by design, accident, or miscalculation.

Protecting the homeland against the failure of deterrence by the deployment of more robust active missile defenses would not only save lives but is the morally justifiable and prudent course of action in an increasingly dangerous and uncertain geo-strategic environment.

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[12] For a comprehensive treatment of the benefits of a more robust homeland missile defense system, see Matthew R. Costlow, *Vulnerability is No Virtue and Defense is No Vice: The Strategic Benefits of Expanded U.S. Homeland Missile Defense, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 2, No. 9 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 2022), https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/OP-Vol.-2-No.-9.pdf.

[13] As one recent study noted, "The objective of the missile defense system is to create enough doubt in the adversary's mind about the prospect of a successful attack that the adversary concludes such an attack is not worth the risk—especially alongside fears of enormous consequences. In other words, such an attack would be futile and fatal." See Robert Soofer, et al., "*'First, we will defend the homeland': The case for homeland missile defense,* "Atlantic Council, January 4, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/first-we-will-defend-the-homeland-the-case-for-homeland-missile-defense/.

The Role of Congress

The U.S. Congress has responsibility for authorizing and appropriating funds for defense programs. Yet, the Congress also has the power to create or modify policy and has done so numerous times with respect to U.S. missile defense policy. Despite repeated legislative language over the years favoring effective, layered missile defense capabilities and multiple expressions of congressional support for more robust homeland missile defense capabilities, little has been done to implement congressional directives. Although some upgrades have occurred and additional more modern interceptors are planned, the U.S. homeland missile defense program remains essentially unchanged from the initial deployment of 44 Ground-Based Interceptors (GBIs) that began in 2004. While some capability enhancements have been made, protection of the U.S. homeland from ballistic missile threats remains focused on a limited number of terrestrial-based mid-course and terminal phase interceptors. The United States has not moved forward with a space-based intercept component to counter ballistic missiles in their boost or ascent phases. Nor (with the exception of support for defense against cruise missiles)[14] has it sought to develop or deploy more capable active defenses against peer nuclear missile threats.

Enacted legislation is not advisory and must not be treated as such. It is time for Congress to step up to the plate and demand that the executive branch fulfill the legislative mandates directed by Congress and signed into law by the president. This is especially true when those mandates involve the protection of the nation and its citizens, and the executive branch openly declares that defense of the homeland is the nation's top priority.

[14] Ibid.

Adapting Existing Law to Current Realities

Some may question whether congressional statements of policy have any practical effect on U.S. missile defense programs, as it is generally assumed that the executive branch establishes national security policy and decides which specific programs to pursue. However, once enacted as law, congressional policy statements are as legally binding as the other legislative provisions that provide funding, establish requirements, and provide guidance and direction to the Department of Defense.

Others may argue that a congressional statement of policy simply reflects current practice rather than establishing policy direction in perpetuity. In other words, stating that it is U.S. policy to rely on nuclear deterrence to address Russian and Chinese strategic missile threats to the U.S. homeland is nothing more than an acknowledgement of existing reality, similar to the language used in the 2019 MDR. However, the 2019 MDR was not a legally binding document while the annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) is U.S. law. Moreover, unlike general policy statements that express the sentiments of the legislative branch through non-binding resolutions, codifying a policy in law means that the policy remains valid and legally binding unless and until it is amended or otherwise overturned by subsequent legislation.

If Congress mandates that the United States will rely on deterrence rather than active defense to protect the homeland against strategic missile threats from peer nuclear adversaries, then industry may be reluctant to develop capabilities that are perceived as inconsistent with policy guidelines established by law. In this way, a simple statement of policy, embedded in and codified in law, may have an unintentional or inadvertent negative impact on both industry's willingness to produce capabilities that are

perceived as contrary to legal guidance and the government's willingness to ask industry to do so.

This congressional policy statement may also become an issue as U.S. missile defense capabilities seek to keep pace with the development of more sophisticated rogue state missile capabilities, in that improved U.S. missile defenses designed to defeat increasingly sophisticated rogue state missile threats may also have some latent capability against peer nuclear threats. If U.S. policy eschews active defenses against peer nuclear missile threats, will industry be willing to improve systems to defend against rogue state threats if doing so will also provide some capability to counter Russian or Chinese strategic missile forces in contravention of U.S. policy established in law?

As President Trump stated in releasing the 2019 MDR, "We are committed to establishing a missile defense program that can shield every city in the United States…. Regardless of the missile type or the geographic origins of the attack, we will ensure that enemy missiles find no sanctuary on Earth or in the skies above."[15] This cannot be done as long as the United States continues to rely solely on nuclear deterrence to protect the nation against Russian and Chinese missile threats. Indeed, a policy that allows the U.S. homeland to remain vulnerable to coercive nuclear threats from Russia and China seems incongruous with repeated statements that defending the homeland is DoD's "top priority."[16]

Congress should clearly articulate, through the NDAA process, a new direction for U.S. missile defense policy that acknowledges the need to defend the homeland not only against rogue state nuclear threats but against more significant and sophisticated peer nation nuclear missile

[15] The White House, "Remarks by President Trump and Vice President Pence Announcing the Missile Defense Review," January 17, 2019, op. cit.

[16] See, for example, Department of Defense, *2022 Missile Defense Review*, op. cit., p. 6.

threats. This will help expedite greater understanding of the urgency of improving U.S. homeland missile defenses as well as help ensure that confusion is avoided, industry is unfettered by imprecise or unclear policy direction, and that the United States can go forward expeditiously with a much needed and more robust missile defense capability to protect the homeland.

The Cold War mentality that argues missile defense against peer nuclear threats is "destabilizing" must be relegated to the proverbial dustbin of history. Statutory language must make it clear that it is U.S. policy to defend the nation by providing for a layered defense against all types of missile threats, launched from any location, in all stages of flight. Such policy language is a necessary prerequisite to action, would be consistent with the president's Executive Order, and would serve as an important catalyst to the budgetary and programmatic decisions required to protect the U.S. homeland from expanding missile threats.

The Advent of Advanced Technology: From Brilliant Pebbles to Starlink

The United States relies on space for a multitude of societal needs ranging from satellites that provide everything from telecommunications to navigation to intelligence and surveillance activities, to position, navigation, and timing in support of military operations. As such, space is becoming increasingly contested and is now considered a warfighting domain.[17]

The demise of the ABM Treaty in 2002 opened the door to the development and deployment of more

[17] Steve Lambakis, *Space As a Warfighting Domain: Reshaping Policy to Execute 21st Century Spacepower* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, May 2021), https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Space-as-a-Warfighting-Domain-pub-5.21.pdf.

technologically sophisticated missile defense capabilities no longer prohibited by the treaty. Nevertheless, despite U.S. technological advances across the board, the United States has limited its missile defense efforts to improvements in sensors, the Command, Control, Battle Management, and Communications (C2BMC) system, and the deployment of terrestrial interceptor systems—primarily focusing on intercepting incoming ballistic missiles in their mid-course or terminal phases of flight from the land and from the sea.

The benefits of developing a space-based intercept capability are numerous. It would allow longer-range missiles to be countered in their boost- or ascent-phases, when they are most vulnerable due to the highly visible signature while their engines are burning. A boost- or ascent-phase defense would also allow the destruction of missiles over enemy territory rather than over U.S. soil. This, in itself, could serve as a powerful deterrent to missile attack. Moreover, as one report concluded, "Boost- or ascent-phase defense can mitigate many of the technical challenges associated with intercept in later phases of flight, where targets can deploy countermeasures and execute evasive maneuvers."[18]

In addition to the development of space-based kinetic and non-kinetic intercept capabilities, the United States should move forward expeditiously with improvements to both terrestrial and space-based sensors that can provide early warning and detection of offensive missile launches—whether ballistic, cruise, or hypersonic—as well as improved tracking and discrimination capabilities. The technology has advanced dramatically and a "layered

[18] Ian Williams and Masao Dahlgren, et. al, *Boost-Phase Missile Defense: Interrogating the Assumptions*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2022, p. 1, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/220624_Karako_BoostPhase_MissileDefense.pdf?VersionId=WjJxlNM58oru1LK21LC9untewoK_UAQD.

sensor architecture" can enhance the effectiveness of all intercept systems.[19]

As a matter of policy, the Trump Administration should seek expeditiously to implement the president's Executive Order to incorporate space-based kinetic and non-kinetic options into a comprehensive missile defense posture that fulfills the president's earlier commitment to "invest in a space-based missile defense layer" that will allow the United States to "detect and destroy any missile launched against the United States—anywhere, anytime, anyplace."[20] Nothing less will address the suite of emerging offensive missile threats to the U.S. homeland.

Investing Resources

Despite repeated assertions that deterring attacks on and defending the U.S. homeland is the "top priority" of the Department of Defense, the budget for missile defense activities has remained relatively constant for many years. In fact, of the $28.4 billion the Biden Administration requested for missile defense in Fiscal Year (FY) 2025,[21] only $2.7 billion was requested for homeland missile defense activities—an actual *decrease* from the $3.3 billion requested in the previous year and a particularly significant decrease

[19] For additional details, see Dr. Steve Lambakis, *Moving U.S. Tracking Sensors to Space, Information Series, No. 575* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, February 12, 2024), https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/IS-575.pdf. Also see Steve Lambakis, *Space Sensors and Missile Defense* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2023), https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Space-Sensors-2023.pdf.

[20] The White House, "Remarks by President Trump and Vice President Pence Announcing the Missile Defense Review," January 17, 2019, op. cit.

[21] This figure includes funding for a variety of homeland and theater missile defense capabilities. See Department of Defense News Release, *Department of Defense Releases the President's Fiscal Year 2025 Defense Budget, Statement by Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III on the President's Fiscal Year 2025 Defense Budget*, March 11, 2024, https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3703410/department-of-defense-releases-the-presidents-fiscal-year-2025-defense-budget/.

given inflation.[22] Most missile defense funding is allocated for defense against non-strategic ballistic missile attacks and for the protection of U.S. deployed forces, allies, and strategic partners.

Likewise, the budget for the Missile Defense Agency (MDA) has remained relatively stagnant for well over a decade, with a relative downward trend in overall MDA funding since 2005.[23] The FY 2025 MDA budget request was $10.4 billion, roughly a $500 million decline from the previous year and nearly $1 billion less than what was planned for FY 2025 one year earlier.[24] As the Senate Armed Services Committee noted, this decrease will negatively impact the ability of the United States to counter hypersonic missile threats, field appropriate directed energy systems, and provide missile defense interceptors with the capability to counter the growing threat from relatively inexpensive unmanned aerial systems.[25]

The proposed U.S. defense budget for FY 2025 is $883.7 billion. Yet the requested budget for missile defense activities represents only three percent of the overall defense

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[22] Peppino DeBiaso and Robert M. Soofer, "A Homeland Missile Defense Agenda for the Next President," *The National Interest*, October 16, 2024, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/homeland-missile-defense-agenda-next-president-213226.

[23] Tom Karako, Ian Williams and Wes Rumbaugh, *The Missile Defense Agency and the Color of Money*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2016, p. 4, https://missilethreat.csis.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/MDA-and-the-Color-of-Money.pdf.

[24] See Jen Judson, "Missile Defense Agency requests $500 million less in new budget," *Defense News*, March 11, 2024, https://www.defensenews.com/smr/federal-budget/2024/03/11/missile-defense-agency-requests-500-million-less-in-new-budget/. Also see statement of Rep. Doug Lamborn, cited in Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance, "The Overall Level of Funding is Inadequate Given Today's Threat Environment," April 12, 2024, https://missiledefenseadvocacy.org/alert/the-overall-level-of-funding-is-inadequate-given-todays-threat-environment/.

[25] Senate Armed Services Committee, *Report to Accompany S. 4638, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025* (Report 118-188), p. 319, https://www.congress.gov/congressional-report/118th-congress/senate-report/188/1.

budget request, the MDA budget request is barely one percent of the overall defense budget request, and the amount proposed for the homeland missile defense mission is 0.003 percent of the total. This hardly reflects a level of effort commensurate with what repeatedly is said to be the Department of Defense's "top priority."

The trend in missile defense funding reflects an approach that is anything but serious. U.S. homeland missile defense efforts have essentially been treading water and have not kept pace with the evolution of missile threats to the homeland. This must change—and quickly.

Avoiding the Arms Control Trap

There are those who still remain wedded to the Cold War proposition that missile defenses are destabilizing and that any enhancements to U.S. missile defense posture will inevitably prompt adversaries to increase their offensive missile capabilities in accordance with an "action-reaction" dynamic. This thinking ignores historical realities that clearly demonstrate the fallacy of this argument.[26]

It is imperative that the Trump Administration avoid falling into the trap of believing that constraints on U.S. missile defenses will lead either Russia or China to abandon their quests for nuclear supremacy and to agree to additional offensive nuclear arms reductions. Such a belief is not supported by history and ignores the divergent goals and objectives of Moscow and Beijing, both of which seek to displace the United States as the predominant global power

[26] For a more detailed analysis refuting the offense-defense "action-reaction" dynamic, see Hon. David J. Trachtenberg, Dr. Michaela Dodge, and Dr. 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.

and reorient the global geo-political landscape more to their liking.[27]

Bureaucratic and Organizational Impediments to Progress

Progress in expanding U.S. homeland missile defense capabilities has been stymied by outdated concepts of "strategic stability," fealty to arms control agreements, erroneous claims of technological immaturity or impossibility, and legislative restrictions. In addition to these impediments, bureaucratic and organizational roadblocks have created additional challenges.

The Missile Defense Agency has the responsibility to develop and mature various missile defense technologies and systems; however, the procurement, operation, and maintenance of missile defense systems is the responsibility of the individual Services. Yet, the Services have failed to prioritize the homeland missile defense mission over the acquisition of other capabilities seen as more urgent or responsive to existing military requirements. As long as the Services consider the homeland missile defense mission a lower priority than other missions, little progress in bolstering the U.S. homeland missile defense posture can be expected.

In 2019, the U.S. Space Force was created as a separate branch of the U.S. armed forces. Yet, the mission of the Space Force is mostly relegated to space surveillance and domain awareness. Nevertheless, the role of the U.S. Space Force should be elevated by giving it greater responsibility to defend the nation against space-based threats, including

[27] For a comprehensive treatment of the strategic goals and objectives of the emergent Sino-Russian entente, see David J. Trachtenberg, "Deterrence Implications of a Sino-Russian Entente," in James H. Anderson and Daniel R. Green (eds.), *Confronting China: US Defense Policy in an Era of Great Power Competition* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024), pp. 169-192.

long-range missiles that travel through space to attack their targets. This can be done by executive branch action, consistent with the FY 2025 NDAA, and reinforced by congressional authorization and appropriations in the FY 2026 NDAA and Department of Defense Appropriations Act.

Recommendations and Near-Term Courses of Action

In the face of increasingly provocative nuclear threats by Russia and more belligerent behavior by China, coupled with their extensive nuclear weapons buildups, the Trump Administration has a unique opportunity to change the course of American national security policy by moving forward expeditiously to improve the nation's protection against missile threats from U.S. adversaries. Though some actions have long lead times and may not be completed within President Trump's second term, other decisions and actions can be taken now to expedite progress toward defending the American people against deliberate, accidental, or coercive nuclear threats.

Specifically, they include:

- Directing the full implementation of the president's Executive Order (E.O.) on "The Iron Dome for America" to improve U.S. missile defenses to defend against both rogue state and peer nation nuclear missile threats, including requesting the necessary fiscal resources to implement the E.O. in an urgent manner.
- Avoiding a lengthy and bureaucratic *Missile Defense Review*, and instead building on the 2019 MDR.
- Acknowledging the importance of a space-based missile defense layer including both sensors and shooters that can counter offensive missiles in their

early stages of flight, well before they approach U.S. territory, and requesting the necessary resources to initiate the requisite kinetic and non-kinetic defensive programs.

- Bolstering the missile defense role of the U.S. Space Force and directing the Secretary of Defense to designate the Chief of Space Operations as the senior U.S. official responsible for designing and developing an integrated air and missile defense system for the United States.
- Having Congress amend U.S. missile defense policy in the NDAA to allow for homeland missile defense protection against missiles of any type, in all phases if flight, and regardless of launch location. This includes clearly supporting space-based missile defense capabilities and revoking any policy statement in law that explicitly or implicitly endorses exclusive reliance on strategic deterrence to defend the nation against strategic missile threats from nuclear peer adversaries.
- Directing the deployment of a third ground-based interceptor site in the United States to augment the existing GBI sites at Fort Greely, Alaska and Vandenberg Space Force Base (SFB), California.
- Proceeding with hardware and software upgrades to the 44 currently deployed GBIs to improve their capability to defend against rogue state missile threats from North Korea or Iran.
- Expediting development and deployment of the Next Generation Interceptor (NGI) with multiple kill vehicles as an adjunct to, and ultimately replacement for, GBI.
- Upgrading the SM-3 Block IIA interceptor to provide it with an anti-ICBM capability and

restoring production of the SM-3 Block IB for regional defense.

- Deploying Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) interceptors as part of a defensive "underlayer" to protect critical installations in the United States, including nuclear command and control sites and selected ICBM deployment locations.
- Employing Unmanned Aerial Systems (UASs) and manned fighter aircraft such as the F-35 with advanced interceptors that can be used for boost-phase defense.
- Expediting the development of kinetic and non-kinetic intercept technologies to defeat hypersonic missiles.

Conclusion

Progress in homeland missile defense has been stymied by outdated Cold War notions, declining funding, lack of prioritization, organizational and bureaucratic roadblocks, and ideologically based political opposition. Reluctance to improve active defenses for the nation has been evident throughout successive administrations, both Republican and Democratic. In light of the growing threats to U.S. security from both peer nuclear adversaries and rogue states, the time has come to abandon the outdated thinking that American vulnerability to missile attack is a stabilizing feature of the international environment.

The U.S. homeland is more vulnerable than ever to offensive missile strikes from all kinds of missiles—ballistic, cruise, and hypersonic. America's main rivals are seeking to overturn the existing U.S.-led international order and are using their expanding nuclear weapons capabilities to underpin their more aggressive behavior and coercive

threats. Allowing the homeland missile defense status quo to continue is no longer a prudent option—if it ever was.

The Trump Administration now has a unique opportunity to take America's missile defense policy and programs in a new direction. Acknowledging the benefits of protecting the homeland against missile strikes of any kind, launched from anywhere, is the first step. This should be followed by changes in policy guidance and direction from the White House to the Department of Defense that clearly demonstrate that defense of the homeland is a true "top priority." The president should reiterate his earlier calls for a missile defense posture that can effectively "detect and destroy any missile launched against the United States—anywhere, anytime, anyplace."[28]

The administration should then propose to implement the programs identified in this *Information Series* and should provide adequate funding to do so in the president's initial budget request to Congress, consistent with his Executive Order on "The Iron Dome for America." In addition, as part of the budget process, the Trump Administration should identify fixes to existing law and propose legislative language to Congress that will remove any confusion or uncertainty over U.S. homeland missile defense policy and the need for a more robust national missile defense effort.

While some programs will take years to come to fruition, decisions can be taken now to move the ball forward. It will take presidential leadership and a serious commitment by senior level appointees to effectuate the necessary changes. Nothing short of this will suffice. It is time to ensure that the United States is not self-deterred from protecting its national security interests by coercive nuclear threats. The time for action is now. Hopefully, the Trump Administration is up to the task.

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[28] The White House, "Remarks by President Trump and Vice President Pence Announcing the Missile Defense Review," January 17, 2019, op. cit.

ON ARMS CONTROL

Is There A (New) Strategic Arms Race?*

In a series of excellent analyses in the 1970s, strategist Albert Wohlstetter challenged the conventional wisdom that the United States was the leading cause of an arms race with the Soviet Union.[1] Through a detailed empirical analysis of arms racing dynamics, Wohlstetter demonstrated that the United States was not the instigator of an arms race with the USSR. Likewise, Colin Gray, in several seminal publications, described how arms competitions are fueled by a plethora of unique national considerations.[2] They are not simply automatic reactions to the actions of others. It appears these lessons need to be relearned today.

In recent weeks, critics of the Trump Administration have been hyperventilating over assertions that the United States is instigating a new arms race with Russia. These critics assert that U.S. actions will invariably result in similar and dangerous Russian reactions that will jeopardize the security of the nation and, in fact, the world. The U.S. actions that will be responsible for triggering this impending disaster vary depending on the critic, but they generally include efforts to modernize the nation's aging nuclear deterrent, the perceived dismemberment of Cold War arms control regimes, and the possibility of a resumption of U.S. nuclear testing.

The battle cry of today's critics mimics the assertions of those in previous decades who predicted that U.S. actions

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*Original publication: David J. Trachtenberg, "Is There A (New) Strategic Arms Race?," *Information Series*, No. 464, August 5, 2020.

[1] See Albert Wohlstetter, "Is There a Strategic Arms Race?," *Foreign Policy*, No. 15, Summer 1974, pp. 3–20. Also see Albert Wohlstetter et al., "Is There a Strategic Arms Race? (II): Rivals but No 'Race,'" *Foreign Policy*, no. 16 (1974), pp. 48–92.

[2] See, for example, Colin S. Gray, *The Soviet-American Arms Race* (Lexington, MA: Saxon House Studies, 1976); Colin S. Gray, "The Arms Race Is about Politics," *Foreign Policy*, no. 9 (1972), pp. 117–129; and Colin S. Gray, "The Arms Race Phenomenon," *World Politics*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1971), pp. 39–79.

to fortify its strategic deterrent against adversary threats would be counterproductive and spark an arms race. Moreover, the corollary argument that U.S. strategic restraint would engender similar restraint on the part of opponents was also proffered as a rationalization for U.S. inaction.[3] In reality, neither the action-reaction nor inaction-inaction models accurately reflect the historical record. Wohlstetter and Gray demonstrated this in the 1970s and their analyses have stood the test of time.

The notion of an uncontrollable action-reaction arms race predates the birth of the nuclear age. For example, by the end of the 19th century, Great Britain was the world's dominant sea power, but that dominance was under siege as continental powers challenged Britain for naval supremacy. Germany, most notably, began to build battleships to assert its own naval dominance. By the early 1900s, Britain's seafaring stature—patriotically embodied in the song, "Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves!"—was on the wane, with some in Britain conceding that "we have lost our [naval] superiority and are distinctly dropping to the rear."[4]

While British leaders debated how best to respond, some warned of the consequences of starting a naval arms race with Germany, calling concern over Germany's arming

[3] For example, the 1994 *Nuclear Posture Review* noted that the United States would "demonstrate leadership" and "help shape [the] future" by "reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. security" at a time when "the proliferation of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, rather than the nuclear arsenal of a hostile superpower, poses the greatest security risk." See Department of Defense, News Release, "DoD Review Recommends Reduction in Nuclear Force," September 22, 1994, p. 2, http://nautilus.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/dodpr092294.pdf. Also see Department of Defense, "Nuclear Posture Review," (slides), September 22, 1994, http://nautilus.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/dodnprslides092294.pdf.

[4] Cited in Kenneth L. Moll, "Politics, Power, and Panic: Britain's 1909 Dreadnought 'Gap'," *Military Affairs*, Vol. 21, Fall 1965, p. 431.

"naval scare-mongering."[5] Consequently, Britain scaled back its naval armaments program. Yet Britain's restraint was not matched by Germany—quite the opposite, as Germany increased its warship production—demonstrating that inaction by one party does not necessarily lead to similar inaction on the part of others. In this case, Germany's actions helped fuel a quest for supremacy that led to the first truly global conflict of the 20th century—"the war to end all wars"—in 1914.

More than half a century later, a similar dynamic was in evidence as the United States sought (and indeed, welcomed) strategic "parity" with the Soviet Union while the Soviets forged ahead rapidly with an extensive nuclear buildup, intended—as former Harvard professor Ricard Pipes noted in the late 1970s—to provide them with the ability to fight and win a nuclear war if deterrence failed.[6] The sophistry of the inaction-inaction paradigm was demonstrated by the unrealized expectation that U.S. restraint would engender similar Soviet restraint and was best captured by former Secretary of Defense Harold Brown when he stated: "When we build, they build; when we cut, they build."[7]

Of course, neither the United States nor other great powers make decisions on their respective nuclear postures in a vacuum. But the arms interactions that have occurred generally do not track with the simplistic supposition of a U.S.-led arms race. In some cases, adversaries have reacted

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[5] Quoted in Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era 1904-1919, Volume I: The Road to War, 1904–1914* (Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD, 1961), cited in ibid., p. 438.

[6] Richard Pipes, "Why the Soviet Union Thinks It Could Fight & Win a Nuclear War," *Commentary*, July 1977, https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/richard-pipes-2/why-the-soviet-union-thinks-it-could-fight-win-a-nuclear-war/.

[7] Testimony of Secretary of Defense Harold Brown before the Senate Budget Committee, 21 February 1979, reprinted in the *Congressional Record*, 21 February 1979, p. S1547.

to U.S. decisions in ways that were completely contrary to the expectations of those who believed the United States was initiating a new spiral in the arms race.

For example, the Soviet response to the Reagan Administration's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI)—which was considered by critics to be the harbinger of an arms race in space and the death knell for arms control—was neither. In fact, it was the Reagan Administration that concluded the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which led (at the time) to the complete elimination of U.S. and Soviet ground-based, intermediate-range nuclear delivery systems. SDI was also credited as a major impetus toward Soviet reforms that contributed to the USSR's ultimate demise. Nearly two decades later, Russia agreed to an arms control treaty that mandated the deepest reductions to date in strategic offensive nuclear arsenals—the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty ("SORT," or "Treaty of Moscow")—only one month before the U.S. withdrawal from the 1972 U.S.-Soviet Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty took effect, freeing the United States to deploy an initial, missile defense capability against limited threats.

There are also examples where U.S. inaction—expected to set an example for others to follow—resulted in unexpected adversary reactions. For example, the U.S. decision to cap its ICBM deployments and forego strategic missile defenses after the ABM Treaty opened the door to an expansion of Soviet ICBM capabilities that could hold U.S. missile silos at risk. This Soviet action was contrary to what many predicted. One former senior U.S. official asserted at the time, "there would be little excuse for the Russians to continue building additional ICBM sites. In such a situation of frozen stable deterrence, they would not be needed."[8] Unclassified estimates indicate, however, that

[8] Herbert Scoville, "Next Steps in Limiting Strategic Arms," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (March 1972), p. 11.

the growth in the Soviet nuclear weapons stockpile increased dramatically after the ABM Treaty was signed.[9]

Clearly, many of the traditional indicators of arms racing are not present when looking at U.S. nuclear programs. The United States has not built a new nuclear weapon or deployed a new nuclear delivery system in decades and has not conducted a nuclear explosive test since 1992. In fact, the U.S. nuclear stockpile today is at an historic low, having been reduced by more than 85 percent from its peak.[10] The percentage of defense spending devoted to sustaining the U.S. nuclear arsenal is less than three percent—significantly smaller than during the modernization cycles of the 1960s and 1980s.[11] Even at the peak of the current modernization program, U.S. spending on nuclear weapons will remain a single digit percentage of the overall U.S. defense budget. Moreover, the increased focus on advanced conventional technologies like hypersonics reflects a continuing desire to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy. By contrast, Russia, China, and North Korea have forged ahead with their own nuclear weapons programs over the last two decades, building and deploying a variety of new nuclear weapons and delivery systems.

This stark contrast in approaches suggests that the answer to the question "Is there a new strategic arms race?" is emphatically "no"—or that if there is an arms race, the United States is not a participant.

In short, it is time to cast a skeptical eye on assertions that the United States is leading another round of the arms race and that U.S. actions will—like Newton's third law of

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[9] Hans M. Kristensen & Robert S. Norris, "Global nuclear weapons inventories, 1945–2013," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist*s, 2013, Vol. 69, Issue 5, pp. 75-81, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1177/0096340213501363.

[10] U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, February 2018, pp. I, V, 6, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF.

[11] Ibid., pp. XI, 51-52.

motion—inevitably spur reactions on the part of others. Such predictions have been wrong in the past and are equally specious today. They are based on a theory of international relations that ignores the various unique national considerations that factor into a leadership's armaments decisions—considerations expertly analyzed years ago by both Wohlstetter and Gray and that refute the simplistic action-reaction paradigm.

Today's critics would be well advised to go back and study their history lessons again.

Overselling and Underperforming: The Exaggerated History of Arms Control Achievements*

Introduction

"The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." This quote, often attributed to Albert Einstein, may epitomize the Biden Administration's approach to arms control.

The United States and Russia will soon initiate a new round of strategic stability talks, intended "to lay the groundwork for future arms control."[1] President Biden has stated that arms control is important to stem the development and deployment of "new and dangerous and sophisticated weapons that are coming on the scene now that reduce the times of response, that raise the prospects of accidental war."[2] But has arms control achieved what its most passionate proponents have promised? And have the results of arms control treaties matched expectations, as conveyed to the Congress and the American public by various administrations?

While arms control theoretically can contribute to stability, historical experience suggests that many arms control agreements not only failed to achieve the results

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* Original publication: David J. Trachtenberg, "Overselling and Underperforming: The Exaggerated History of Arms Control Achievements," *Information Series*, No. 497, July 22, 2021.

[1] The White House, "U.S.-Russia Presidential Joint Statement on Strategic Stability," June 16, 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/16/u-s-russia-presidential-joint-statement-on-strategic-stability/.

[2] "Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference," Hôtel du Parc des Eaux-Vives, Geneva, Switzerland, June 16, 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/06/16/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-4/.

*Original publication: David J. Trachtenberg, "Why Arms Control Must Fail," *Information Series*, No. 627, June 12, 2025.

advocates confidently predicted but at times facilitated precisely the kinds of destabilizing Soviet and Russian nuclear weapons deployments they were meant to preclude.

For the past half century, the United States has looked to arms control as a means of managing the strategic arms competition and forestalling an "arms race." Arms control treaties were thought to be useful in maintaining strategic "stability," avoiding unnecessary economic expenditures, allowing the reallocation of scarce resources for other military priorities, reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy, and demonstrating the declining utility of nuclear weapons in international relations.

During the Cold War, the United States pursued arms control in the belief that both the Soviet Union and United States shared the same goals and objectives. However, a significant body of evidence suggests that U.S. and Soviet arms control approaches reflected diametrically different views of nuclear weapons and nuclear strategy. While the United States sought arms control agreements as a means of codifying deterrence stability via a "balance of terror," the Soviet Union sought to exploit arms control negotiations to attain a meaningful nuclear superiority and coercive capability over the United States. While the United States sought to limit counterforce capabilities and to preserve mutual vulnerability, the Soviet Union sought to achieve the opposite—a significant growth in its own counterforce capabilities and the protection of its national territory against nuclear attack.

With the demise of the Soviet Union and a decline in Russia's conventional military capabilities, Moscow placed increased reliance on its nuclear forces to compensate for the asymmetry in conventional forces. This increased emphasis on nuclear weapons in Russian military strategy was exactly the opposite of U.S. policy, which sought to

decrease reliance on nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy. These competing objectives carried over into arms control negotiations.

The Lessons of History

Consistent with U.S. arms control objectives and the perceived threat environment, the United States reduced the size of its nuclear stockpile by more than 75 percent since the end of the Cold War[3] and deferred necessary modernization of its strategic delivery platforms to the point where they now face block obsolescence. Neither Russia nor other nuclear powers have followed a similar trajectory. In fact, Russia has continued the development, production, and deployment of new and more sophisticated nuclear systems to the point where—according to Russian President Vladimir Putin—more than 85 percent of its strategic nuclear forces have been modernized.[4]

Despite these divergent trends, many in the West continue to see arms control as necessary for providing stability, transparency, and predictability in the U.S.-Russia bilateral relationship; fulfilling U.S. obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty; reducing the size of nuclear arsenals and the risks of nuclear use; fostering allied cooperation; and maintaining a bipartisan consensus in support of the current U.S. nuclear modernization program. Yet, an objective analysis that weighs arms control expectations against achievements demonstrates that arms control as a Cold War process has failed to live up to its promise of reducing nuclear risks.[5] Indeed, the

[3] See Department of State, "Fact Sheet: Transparency in the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Stockpile," April 27, 2015, https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/241377.pdf.

[4] See remarks by Vladimir Putin at a meeting of the Defense Ministry Board, December 21, 2020, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64684.

[5] Even some arms control supporters have acknowledged its shortcomings. See, for example, Thomas C. Schelling, "What Went Wrong With Arms Control?,"

contemporary affinity by arms control supporters for more agreements reflects the idealistic sentiments of the disarmament community and may actually undermine support for necessary U.S. nuclear modernization efforts. Importantly, it overlooks the fundamentally different strategic objectives of the parties and downplays or ignores the history of Russian violations.

Contrary to the predictions of arms control advocates, the various arms control agreements negotiated by the United States did not lead to reduced military expenditures. In fact, many of the agreements arrived at were portrayed by various U.S. administrations and sold to the Senate as requiring full funding of all U.S. nuclear modernization programs. For example, the SALT I agreement and SALT II Treaty (which was fatally flawed and never entered into force) were portrayed by the Nixon and Carter Administrations as beneficial to U.S. security only if key nuclear modernization programs were carried out. And the Senate's approval of the New START Treaty was conditioned on assurances that the Obama Administration was committed to a wholesale recapitalization of the U.S. strategic nuclear Triad.[6]

As history demonstrates, the United States was successful in significantly reducing the size of its nuclear

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Foreign Affairs (Winter 1985/86), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1985-12-01/what-went-wrong-arms-control.

[6] In its Resolution of Ratification for the New START Treaty, the U.S. Senate declared that "the United States is committed to accomplishing the modernization and replacement of its strategic nuclear delivery vehicles, and to ensuring the continued flexibility of United States conventional and nuclear delivery systems." See "New START Treaty: Resolution Of Advice And Consent To Ratification," December 22, 2010, https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/rls/153910.htm. The Obama Administration also pledged a robust nuclear modernization effort in connection with the New START Treaty in the update to its "Section 1251 Report." See *November 2010 Update to the National Defense Authorization Act of FY2010, Section 1251 Report, New START Treaty Framework and Nuclear Force Structure Plans*, https://www.lasg.org/budget/Sect1251_update_17Nov2010.pdf.

arsenal under various arms control treaties yet often failed to modernize the residual nuclear capabilities considered to be essential for ensuring that U.S. deterrent capabilities would remain effective under the terms of the arms control treaties reached. On the other hand, the Soviet Union, and subsequently Russia, routinely developed and deployed strategic forces of increasing sophistication and capability, circumventing or outright violating provisions of arms control agreements that were intended to constrain Moscow's ability to threaten the United States and U.S. allies. Consequently, the narrative that arms control has benefitted U.S. security by stabilizing the bilateral strategic relationship and moderating a Soviet/Russian nuclear arms buildup is questionable at best.

A Record of Unfulfilled Expectations from SALT I and the ABM Treaty to New START

The first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I) was signed in 1972 after several years of negotiations with the Soviet Union. It was intended as an interim measure to halt the growth in Soviet hard target counterforce capabilities, deemed by the United States at the time to be destabilizing and reflective of a Soviet doctrine that emphasized the importance of striking first—despite subsequent Soviet propaganda statements suggesting the USSR maintained a policy of nuclear "no first use."[7] Congressional testimony by treaty supporters cited official Nixon Administration

[7] As stated in the Soviet publication *Whence the Threat to Peace*, "Soviet military doctrine is of a strictly defensive nature. It contains no pre-emptive strike concepts or guidelines for first use of nuclear weapons…. In contrast, US military doctrine has been based on pre-emptive strike and a constant readiness for first use of nuclear weapons virtually from their inception." See *Whence the Threat to Peace*, Fourth Edition (Moscow, USSR: Military Publishing House, Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1987), p. 11, https://paxsims.files.wordpress.com/2020/07/whence-the-threat-to-peace-1987.pdf.

statements suggesting that SALT I would "provide for a more stable strategic balance" and be a useful step toward preventing an "arms race."[8]

A former Harvard University professor involved in national security research and studies in the 1970s assessed the three major U.S. objectives for SALT this way:

> The first objective was to achieve essential equivalence in the strategic forces permitted to each side; the second was to find limitations that would improve the stability of these forces in times of crisis and, in this and other ways, reduce the risk of nuclear war; the third was to reduce arms competition and, in time, military expenditures…. At first glance, essential equivalence may seem to have been established by the equal ceilings. But these in fact represent only very vague limitations in the simplest categories of judging strategic force. Moreover, they appear to have been made possible by settling on numbers sufficiently high to allow deferment of many problems that would have had to be solved had the numbers been lower….
>
> Progress toward the second objective has been even more limited. The principal achievement has been the limitation of anti-ballistic missiles to negligible numbers. This was supposed to allow

[8] See, for example, President Richard M. Nixon, "Message to the Senate Transmitting the Antiballistic Missile Treaty and the Interim Agreement on Strategic Offensive Arms," June 13, 1972, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Richard Nixon, 1972* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974), p. 674. Also see prepared statement of Dr. Jerome H. Kahan before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, June 28, 1972, in *Strategic Arms Limitation Agreements: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Ninety-Second Congress, Second Session* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), p. 210, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-92shrg80942O/pdf/CHRG-92shrg80942O.pdf.

> both sides to forego multiplying their strategic forces to compensate for those that might fail to penetrate the defenses of the other side. However, this opportunity has not been grasped: the multiplication of warheads through MIRVing has instead become the major occupation of both strategic establishments. With the number of warheads growing toward a figure that is more than tenfold greater than that originally thought adequate for deterrence, with continued improvements in yield and accuracy, and with a growing effort on both sides to find ways to reduce the invulnerability of the sea-based deterrent of the other, we certainly do not seem to be moving toward a strategic environment that is more stable in times of crisis. That the third objective, the reduction of the arms competition and military budgets in the strategic area, has receded rather than come closer is evident in the budgets and planned strategic programs on both sides.
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> Thus the objectives that the United States government had set for SALT remain unrealized.[9]

Critics of the agreement, including the late Professor William R. Van Cleave, a member of the original U.S. SALT negotiating delegation, argued that there was an "apparent inconsistency" between arguing that the treaty would accomplish its major goals, but only if the United States pursued essential modernization programs unconstrained by the treaty. Van Cleave argued that the SALT I agreement (and its corollary Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty limiting strategic defenses) "do not solve or even ease our strategic force problems." By contrast, he noted, "They do, unfortunately, accept higher numerical levels of the threat

[9] Paul Doty, "Strategic Arms Limitation After SALT I," *Daedalus*, Vol. 104, No. 3 (Summer, 1975), p. 64.

than we ever before contemplated and do restrict at the same time U.S. ability to cope with the threat." "Their tendency, therefore, is toward less rather than more stability," he noted, stating, "Unless our expectations of their promotional value are shortly fulfilled and unless in the meantime we push compensatory programs, there is a strong risk that they could be wildly destabilizing."[10] Indeed, after the signing of the SALT I Interim Agreement, the Soviet Union dramatically expanded the number of MIRVed ICBM warheads, improving their accuracy and counterforce capability despite U.S. efforts to limit this growth.

Also signed in 1972, the U.S.-Soviet ABM Treaty prohibited nationwide defenses against strategic ballistic missile attack. The treaty was thought to be useful for preserving strategic stability, in that it codified a situation of mutual vulnerability—considered essential to deterring a first strike by either party.

In negotiating the ABM Treaty, the United States sought to convince the Soviets that strategic defenses were destabilizing and unnecessary. Strategic missile defenses also came to be regarded in the United States as an obstacle to achieving negotiated offensive arms limitations via arms control because U.S. deployment of missile defense was expected—per a U.S.-led action-reaction cycle—to compel the Soviet Union to expand its offensive missile capabilities to overcome U.S. defenses. Consequently, it was argued that U.S. strategic missile defense would be both ineffective and an impediment to arms control—as well as prohibitively expensive.[11]

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[10] Testimony of Dr. William R. Van Cleave before the Senate Armed Services Committee, July 25, 1972, printed in *International Negotiation: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on National Security and International Operations of the Committee on Government Relations*, part 7, July 25, 1972, p. 230.

[11] Ironically, similar arguments are being voiced today by those who believe the United States should negotiate limits on missile defense as an inducement to obtain Russian agreement on offensive nuclear reductions. For example, see

These arguments posited that if the United States stopped its missile defense program, the Soviet Union would halt its fast-paced strategic offensive missile program, i.e., U.S.-led inaction-inaction. Despite this contention, however, the Soviet Union actually accelerated the expansion of its strategic offensive capabilities after the United States scaled down, refocused, and eventually terminated its deployment of strategic missile defenses. The number of Soviet strategic nuclear weapons reportedly grew from approximately 2,500 in 1972 to more than 10,000 in the late-1980s.[12] Other published unclassified, unofficial estimates indicate the total Soviet nuclear weapons stockpile nearly tripled from roughly 15,000 in 1972 to more than 40,000 at its peak in the mid-1980s.[13] This was precisely the opposite effect that arms control proponents had predicted.[14]

Jeffrey Lewis, "The Nuclear Option: Slowing a New Arms Race Means Compromising on Missile Defenses," *Foreign Affairs*, February 22, 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-02-22/nuclear-option; Steven Pifer, "Should U.S. Missile Defenses Be a Part of Arms Control Negotiations With Russia?," *The National Interest*, January 26, 2021, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/should-us-missile-defenses-be-part-arms-control-negotiations-russia-177092; and Daryl G. Kimball, "Why Biden and Putin Should Restart Talks on Strategic Stability and Nuclear Arms Control," *Just Security*, June 14, 2021, https://www.justsecurity.org/76911/why-biden-and-putin-should-restart-talks-on-strategic-stability-and-nuclear-arms-control/.

[12] See Amy F. Woolf, *Russia's Nuclear Weapons: Doctrine, Forces, and Modernization*, Congressional Research Service, CRS Report R45861, July 20, 2020, pp. 8-9, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/R45861.pdf. Also see Robert S. Norris and Thomas B. Cochran, *Nuclear Weapons Databook: US-USSR/Russian Strategic Offensive Nuclear Forces 1945-1996*, National Resources Defense Council, Inc. (Washington, D.C., January 1997), https://fas.org/nuke/norris/nuc_01009701a_181.pdf.

[13] Hans M. Kristensen & Robert S. Norris, "Global nuclear weapons inventories, 1945–2013," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2013, Vol. 69, Issue 5, pp. 75-81, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1177/0096340213501363.

[14] For a detailed analysis of this point, see David J. Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge, and Keith B. Payne, *The "Action-Reaction" Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2021), https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Action-Reaction-pub.pdf.

Judging from the scale of Soviet strategic offensive and defensive missile programs after the ABM Treaty was signed, the Soviet Union obviously did not adhere to the U.S. concept of a stable balance of terror or the associated action-reaction logic that U.S. defensive systems were the reason for its missile buildup. In this case also, U.S. arms control goals appear to have been unfulfilled.

Likewise, the officially espoused U.S. objectives for "stability," "transparency," and "predictability" that were trumpeted as expected outcomes of subsequent strategic arms control treaties never materialized. For example, despite then-Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's testimony that SALT II "will greatly assist us in maintaining a stable balance of nuclear forces" and "will slow the momentum of Soviet strategic programs,"[15] critics noted that "the provisions of SALT II permit the Soviets to do those things necessary from their standpoint to create an intolerable threat"[16] to the U.S. deterrent force and that it would "neither enhance deterrence nor add to stability."[17]

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[15] Testimony of Cyrus Vance before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, July 9, 1979, printed in U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *SALT II Senate Testimony*, July 9-11, 1979, p. 1.

[16] Testimony of Paul Nitze before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, September 11, 1979, printed in *Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, First Session, on the Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Treaty on the Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms and Protocol, Thereto, Together Referred to as the SALT II Treaty, Part 4*, p. 401, https://books.google.com/books?id=gHlWYhEl6g4C&pg=PA402&lpg=PA402&dq=nitze+I+see+nothing+in+SALT+II+which+relieves+our+missile+problems.+In+fact+I+see+the+reverse.+It+is+quite+clear+that+the+provisions+of+SALT+II+permit+the+Soviets+to+do+those+things+necessary+from+their+standpoint+to+create+an+intolerable+threat+to+our+Minutemen&source=bl&ots=sseuYDP7l_&sig=ACfU3U2L3dEjvelo2cG9ue3nbykNfn8d2A&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi4zLbjyMLxAhUUAZ0JHQGsCdMQ6AEwAHoECAIQAw#v=onepage&q&f=false.

[17] Testimony of Lt. Gen. Edward Rowny before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, August 1, 1979, printed in *Military Implications of the Treaty on the Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms and Protocol Thereto (SALT II Treaty), Hearings Before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, Part 2*, 96th Congress, First Session, July 30-August 2, 1979, pp. 688-690.

More than a decade later, a Congressional Budget Office report on the 1991 START I Treaty concluded:

> START would not, however, fulfill many of the ambitions that some hold for nuclear arms control. Its mandated reductions in forces would be only about half as great as the 50 percent cuts Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev originally envisioned at Reykjavik in 1986. They would do no more than return U.S. and Soviet arsenals to their levels of 1982, when the START negotiations began. Moreover, modernizing nuclear arsenals could continue unconstrained, provided that enough older systems were retired from service to keep total deployed weapons below the specified ceilings.[18]

Similarly, proponents of the 2010 New START Treaty—which the Biden Administration has extended for another five years—argued that it would help reset relations with Russia after years of animosity and distrust, fostered by more aggressive Russian behavior directed against the United States and its NATO allies; that it would help strengthen U.S. nonproliferation goals, consistent with obligations in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty; and that it would help lay the groundwork for additional movement toward the ultimate goal of eliminating nuclear weapons. President Obama declared that with New START, the United States and Russia would be "setting the stage for further cuts and cooperation between our countries."[19]

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[18] Congressional Budget Office, The START Treaty and Beyond, October 1991, p. xi, https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/102nd-congress-1991-1992/reports/1991_10_thestarttreaty.pdf.

[19] See President Obama's remarks at a news conference, April 13, 2010, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Barack Obama, 2010* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2013), p. 486, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-2010-book1/pdf/PPP-2010-book1.pdf.

Indeed, the Obama Administration argued that without ratification of New START, further arms control agreements—including limitations on Russia's significant advantage in non-strategic nuclear forces—would be impossible to negotiate. In fact, Russia has to date rejected additional arms control restrictions that would limit the development of its new strategic nuclear weapons or compromise its advantage in non-strategic nuclear weapons, despite the New START Treaty and its extension.

Opponents of New START contended it was an unnecessary and irrelevant Cold War solution to a decidedly post-Cold War problem—that of rogue state proliferation and the potential for nuclear terrorism. Moreover, the treaty was criticized for establishing an inflexible cap of 1,550 strategic nuclear weapons over the next decade, when changes in the strategic environment might require greater flexibility for deterrence and assurance purposes. Importantly, the treaty's ostensibly "equal" limits on deployed strategic weapons were set at a level that allowed Russia to build up to the limits while requiring the United States to reduce. And because of the New START Treaty's counting rules—which count a bomber as one weapon regardless of how many weapons it could carry—critics argued that in reality Russia could not only exceed the treaty's 1,550 cap on deployed strategic nuclear weapons but could also possess a strategic arsenal that exceeded the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT, or the "Moscow Treaty") maximum limit of 2,200.[20]

In addition, although the New START Treaty was hailed by its supporters as restoring transparency and predictability to the U.S.-Russia relationship, its verification

[20] See, for example, Mark B. Schneider, "Russian Nuclear Force Expansion and the Failure of Arms Control," *RealClear Defense*, October 24, 2019, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/10/24/russian_nuclear_force_expansion_and_the_failure_of_arms_control_114810.html.

procedures were less robust than those contained in the original START I Treaty, undermining the treaty's verifiability.[21] Consequently, its value as a tool for improving the bilateral relationship is not only problematic, but its purported benefits—as sold by supporters to the Congress and the American people—far exceeded its accomplishments.

Moreover, Russian arms control behavior reflects a pattern of selective compliance—hardly an exemplar of predictability. Indeed, Russian cheating on the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the Open Skies Treaty led the Trump Administration to withdraw from both in 2019 and 2020, respectively.

Conclusion

Overall, the issue of whether arms control treaties accomplished their intended goals and objectives, as presented by the Executive branch of government to the American public and to the Senate for its advice and consent, is open to debate; however, there is reason to believe that the promoted benefits of arms control either did not fully materialize or fell far short of predictions. Although the various arms control treaties the United States agreed to were thought by their proponents to be a way of fostering greater stability in the U.S.-Russia relationship, in reality the United States today faces a much more assertive Russia than before—one that has:

- revised its military doctrine to place increasing emphasis on the role of nuclear weapons;

[21] For an excellent analysis of this issue, see Bryan Smith, "Verification After the New START Treaty: Back to the Future," *Information Series*, No. 463, July 16, 2020, https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/IS-463.pdf.

- engaged in aggressive military actions to change the borders of Europe through the use of force for the first time since World War II;
- exercised its military and nuclear forces more frequently and on a greater scale than seen during the Cold War;
- increased its nuclear threats against other states, including NATO allies;
- accelerated an extensive nuclear modernization program, including the continued development of non-strategic nuclear weapons;
- developed a range of new strategic nuclear weapons systems, including some that are not captured by any arms control treaty; and
- violated its arms control commitments, including the INF and Open Skies treaties.

These developments suggest that the bilateral strategic relationship is not characterized today by a greater degree of openness, transparency, predictability, or stability. Indeed, numerous commentators have suggested that the strategic situation today is one of greater risk and uncertainty, and that the potential for nuclear conflict is greater than ever.[22] Hence, the main objectives of arms control espoused by its proponents appear to be ephemeral at best, if not completely illusory.

Another quote—this one variously attributed to George Santayana or Edmund Burke—is relevant here: "Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it." Indeed,

[22] For example, former Secretary of Energy Ernest J. Moniz has written: "Nearly 30 years after the Cold War, the risk of a nuclear weapon's being used is higher than at any other time since the U.S. and the Soviets came to the brink of nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis." See "The risk of a nuclear attack is back at historic levels, 75 years after Hiroshima," *NBC THINK*, August 6, 2020, https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/risk-nuclear-attack-back-historic-levels-75-years-after-hiroshima-ncna1235925. Also see Tom Miles, "Risk of nuclear war now highest since WW2, UN arms research chief says," *Reuters*, May 21, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-nuclear/risk-of-nuclear-war-now-highest-since-ww2-un-arms-research-chief-says-idUSKCN1SR24H.

history is an excellent teacher. When it comes to arms control, the Biden Administration should take a lesson from history before rushing to conclude yet another treaty that fails to live up to its promises.

Why Arms Control Must Fail*

Introduction

Americans typically believe that fundamental disagreements can be overcome through the patient application of logic, reasoning, and common sense. In international relations, creative diplomacy is often seen as the key to solving intractable problems. This applies to negotiations with adversaries; it is often assumed that international tensions and the risk of war, especially nuclear war, can be alleviated through arms control agreements. Though a noble sentiment, this view is naïve, unsupported by history, ignores contemporary realities, and is unlikely to produce the desired positive results.

This stark conclusion runs counter to the American cultural belief that disagreements among opponents can always be overcome with good faith dialogue and discussion. Such a belief is premised on the notion that all sides share a common desire to bridge their differences in ways that lead to mutually beneficial outcomes.

This is a culturally egotistical view that assumes opponents share the same goals and objectives as the United States and that, with due diligence, the United States can succeed in concluding agreements that not only enhance U.S. security but provide outcomes that make the overall strategic environment more stable and secure.

The central problem with this belief is that there is a growing body of evidence supporting the proposition that U.S. adversaries do not share such goals and objectives. In simple terms, both China and Russia—which pose the greatest threat to U.S. security—are not interested in "stability" as the United States defines it. Rather, their goal is to work against a stability that preserves the status quo. These opposing objectives are what make meaningful arms control impossible.

*Original publication: David J. Trachtenberg, "Why Arms Control Must Fail," *Information Series*, No. 627, June 12, 2025.

Different Worldviews, Irreconcilable Differences

The United States is a status quo power. The focus of U.S. foreign policy is on maintaining or restoring stability in the international environment. Why? Because global instability heightens the risk of upheaval and conflict, which can have catastrophic results with decidedly negative consequences for U.S. global interests. The view that arms control is the best way to ensure stability among rival powers has been reflected over the years in numerous policy and strategy documents. Most recently, for example, as the Biden Administration's *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) stated, "The United States will pursue a comprehensive and balanced approach that places a renewed *emphasis on arms control*, non-proliferation, and risk reduction *to strengthen stability*…."[1] Indeed, arms control is described as a way to "enhance strategic stability with the PRC [People's Republic of China] and Russia…" and as offering "the most effective, durable, and responsible path to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our strategy and to prevent their use."[2] Yet the 2022 NPR also acknowledged that U.S. and Russian "priorities are not identical, underscoring the importance of dialogue, when conditions permit, to address each side's differing goals and perceptions of military systems that affect strategic stability."[3] Indeed, the stability that the United States seeks to "strengthen" and "enhance" is one that works to resolve conflicts via international law and institutions vice the use of military force—characteristics of a world order created and nurtured by the United States after World War II. This is clearly not the kind of stability

[1] Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, October 27, 2022, p. 1, https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.pdf. (emphasis added)

[2] Ibid., p. 16.

[3] Ibid., pp. 16-17.

America's adversaries have in mind or wish to cement in practice.

Indeed, America's primary rivals, China and Russia, believe the time has come to change the existing world order in a way that displaces the United States as the predominant global power—militarily, economically, and politically. They seek a world order more accommodating to their authoritarian worldviews and interests. And their expanding military cooperation reflects a belief that they will more likely succeed by working together rather than separately. In the contemporary political environment, the phrase, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts," often attributed to Aristotle,[4] can be interpreted as meaning that Beijing and Moscow can accomplish more in support of their common purpose through collaborative and coordinated actions than by acting separately.

The United States now must confront not one, but two, major nuclear powers. This is an unprecedented development that greatly complicates deterrence, as what may deter one party may be insufficient to deter the other, and the risks of opportunistic aggression may grow.[5] In addition, U.S. allies may feel less secure as the United States tries to balance the demands of deterring both powers simultaneously while assuring allies of the U.S. commitment to their own security.

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[4] See, for example, https://se-scholar.com/se-blog/2017/6/23/who-said-the-whole-is-greater-than-the-sum-of-the-parts#:~:text=SE%20Philosophy%2C%20Emergence-,%E2%80%9CThe%20whole%20is%20greater%20than%20the%20sum%20of%20the%20parts,properties%20of%20a%20system%3A%20Emergence.

[5] For a comprehensive discussion of this point, see Matthew R. Costlow, *Deterring the New Pacing Threats: Opportunistic and Coordinated Aggression, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 2025), https://nipp.org/papers/matthew-r-costlow-deterring-the-new-pacing-threats-opportunistic-and-coordinated-aggression/.

The Dangers of Wishful Thinking

Unfortunately, the United States has yet to come to grips with how best to address deterrence in a world of two nuclear peers. This has led to calls by some to advance arms control efforts as if limitations on armaments will help solve the deterrence problem by codifying a situation of strategic stability. For example, the chief American negotiator for the New START Treaty has argued that the United States should conduct "two parallel negotiations" with Russia and China and "exercise mutual restraint in order to avoid a nuclear arms race—in other words, arms control."[6] Another former arms control negotiator opined, "Looking to the expiration of New START, the United States could pursue an interim regime of mutual restraint with Russia…. Decades of nuclear arms control have improved strategic stability and reduced the risk of nuclear conflict. Continued mutual restraint might help sustain these gains if risks can be managed."[7]

Others contend that resuming arms control negotiations with Russia is imperative, noting that divisive issues like Ukraine "should not delay prompt attention by the United States and Russia to a restart of the dialogue on a post-New START agreement…. Ending or pausing their arms control dialogue will contribute to unnecessary force building and more uncertainty about the qualities of their weapons inventories."[8]

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[6] Rose Gottemoeller, "Arms Control Is Not Dead Yet: America Should Pursue Parallel Nuclear Negotiations With China and Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, April 15, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/arms-control-not-dead-yet.

[7] William Courtney. "Averting Unconstrained Nuclear Risks with Russia," RAND, April 15, 2025, https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/04/averting-unconstrained-nuclear-risks-with-russia.html.

[8] Lawrence J. Korb and Stephen Cimbala, "Why Trump Should Embrace Nuclear Arms Control," *The National Interest*, April 16, 2025, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-trump-should-embrace-nuclear-arms-control.

The Arms Control Association has argued, "Today, nuclear arms control and disarmament are more important than ever. Now is the time to call on your Representative and Senators to show there is bipartisan support for strong U.S. leadership for nuclear arms control."[9] Last year, a resolution introduced in the House of Representatives called on the Biden Administration "to pursue nuclear arms control and risk reduction dialogue with the Russian Federation to maintain strategic stability."[10] An identical resolution was introduced in the Senate several days later.[11] However, the notion that the path to stability lies through arms control is illusory, as the parties differ in what they seek to accomplish and how they see arms control as a tool to accomplish it.

This advocacy wrongly assumes a commonality of interests and objectives among Washington, Moscow and Beijing. For example, suggesting that arms control now will reverse China's nuclear ambitions ignores the reality that Beijing's nuclear buildup underpins its desire to expand its power and influence at America's expense—a goal that China is unlikely to abandon by agreeing to negotiate arms limitations in the interest of "stability." Similarly, decades of Soviet/Russian arms control cheating, coupled with the massive buildup of Russian nuclear forces and the plethora of nuclear threats expressed by Russian officials, show that Moscow has no interest in "mutual restraint."

There is no reason to believe China or Moscow have any interest in arms control to facilitate the U.S. definition of "stability." Rather, they seek to upset the existing world order with assertive behavior and extensive military and

[9] Arms Control Association, "Enough is Enough," April 2024, https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2024-04/inside-aca.

[10] H. Res. 1079, March 13, 2024, https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-resolution/1079/text.

[11] S. Res. 593, March 19, 2024, https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-resolution/593/text.

nuclear capabilities—the antithesis of stability. Wishful thinking that they share U.S. goals is more likely to encourage further delays in the necessary and long-overdue U.S. strategic modernization program, further undermining the efficacy and credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent, including the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent. At a time when nuclear deterrence is under significant stress, this would be dangerous folly.

The Trilateral Challenge

In support of its national objectives, China has become increasingly aggressive in its posturing and its military activities, creating military bases in the South China Sea, challenging the territorial sovereignty of its neighbors, rejecting international arbitration of territorial disputes, threatening the autonomy of Taiwan, improving its military forces, and dramatically expanding its nuclear capabilities. China seeks to overturn American dominance and to take what Beijing envisions as its rightful place of prominence on the world stage. Indeed, as one former Chinese military official has declared, China's rise is "unstoppable," noting, "Even if the US wants to contain China, it can't. The United States is tired of policing the world."[12] As the commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command recently testified, "Beijing's aggressive maneuvers around Taiwan are not just exercises—they are dress rehearsals for forced unification."[13] Moreover, the Chinese leadership appears to have abandoned its self-proclaimed policy of minimal

[12] Cited in Seong Hyeong Choi, "China's rise 'unstoppable' as US grows tired of policing the world: Zhou Bo," *South China Morning Post*, April 8, 2025, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3304275/chinas-rise-unstoppable-us-grows-tired-policing-world-zhou-bo.

[13] Statement of Admiral Samuel J. Paparo before the House Armed Services Committee, April 9, 2025, p. 3, https://armedservices.house.gov/uploadedfiles/indopacom_posture_statement_2025.pdf.

nuclear deterrence in favor of an aggressive buildup of its nuclear forces, which the former commander of U.S. Strategic Command has referred to as "breathtaking" and a "strategic breakout."[14]

Russia likewise has decided to work against U.S. interests virtually across the board as it, too, seeks to upend the existing world order. Indeed, Russia considers NATO, and particularly the United States, its "main enemy."[15] Vladimir Putin has stated that "We are witnessing the formation of a completely new world order, nothing like we had in the past…. The former world arrangement is irreversibly passing away, actually it has already passed away, and a serious, irreconcilable struggle is unfolding for the development of a new world order." Calling for "the development of a new international system that aligns with the interests of the global majority," he noted Moscow's desire to work with those who share Russia's objectives—notably China—stating that "the level of trust between Russia and China is at its highest point in recent history…. China is our ally…."[16] Russia's military and nuclear buildup over the past several decades has been astounding. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated, "We're self-sufficient. We have everything. We know how to ensure our defense capability. If they [the United States] feel that their nuclear arsenals are very outdated and continue to become obsolete against the backdrop of our upgraded weapons,

[14] John Vandiver, "'Breathtaking expansion': US Strategic Command leader expects further revelations of China's nuclear weapons advancement," *Stars and Stripes*, October 18, 2021, https://www.stripes.com/theaters/europe/2021-10-18/china-us-russia-nuclear-weapons-hypersonics-stratcom-3283272.html.

[15] A new Russian naval doctrine signed in 2022 declared NATO to be an existential threat to Russia AFP, "Russia Says U.S., NATO "Main Threats" to National Security," *The Moscow Times*, July 31, 2022, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/07/31/russia-says-us-nato-main-threats-to-national-security-a78453.

[16] Vladimir Putin, "Valdai Discussion Club meeting," November 7, 2024, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/75521.

then they should be probably interested in somehow correcting this discrepancy."[17]

Moscow and Beijing appear committed to an "irreconcilable struggle" to create a new world order. Such fundamental objectives cannot be papered over by arms control agreements. In this environment, arms control based on wishful thinking is a palliative that seeks to address the symptoms rather than the cause of the different political goals that drive Russian and Chinese armaments. Arms control advocates often confuse cause with effect. As Ronald Reagan used to say, "We don't mistrust each other because we're armed; we're armed because we mistrust each other."[18]

A Dangerous Entente

In isolation, considering China's and Russia's increasingly aggressive behavior and their respective military buildups that underpin their more arrogant posture is worrisome enough. What U.S. policy makers must confront today is the reality of greater cooperation and collaboration between these two nuclear armed powers and the implications of this confederation for deterrence, extended deterrence, and Western security.[19]

Russia's growing entente with China appears to be more than just a marriage of convenience. The breadth and scope of Moscow's cooperation and collaboration with Beijing is

[17] "Russia not to 'offer anything to anyone' on New START Treaty — Lavrov," *TASS*, April 14, 2025, https://tass.com/politics/1943571.

[18] Quoted in The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute, "Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev" (undated), https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/the-presidency/mikhail-gorbachev.

[19] For a more detailed discussion of this point, see David J. Trachtenberg, "Deterrence Implications of a Sino-Russian Entente," in James H. Anderson and Daniel R. Green (eds.), *Confronting China: US Defense Policy in an Era of Great Power Competition* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, Inc., 2024), pp. 169-192.

unprecedented. Numerous joint military exercises, including air and naval operations, have been conducted, with both countries' strategic bombers landing in the other's territory for the first time ever a few years ago. Sino-Russian cooperation extends to virtually all areas of the military sphere—from the joint development of novel offensive weapons systems and space technology to cooperation on defensive capabilities such as early warning and integrated air and missile defense systems.[20] China is assisting Russia in its brutal war against Ukraine and, as the commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command has stated, is helping Moscow "rebuild its war machine" in exchange for Russian military assistance in other areas.[21]

Discussions, *Da*; Negotiations, *Nyet*

Although arms control is unlikely to produce any meaningful results, this is not to argue against discussions or the desirability of engaging in open and regular communications. As Winston Churchill said in 1954, "Meeting jaw to jaw is better than war."[22] Yet, while supporters of increased dialogue tend to believe that this

[20] See, for example, Dmitry Gorenburg, Elizbeth Wishnick, Paul Schwartz, and Brian Waidelich, "How Advanced Is Russian-Chinese Military Cooperation?," *War on the Rocks*, June 26, 2023, https://warontherocks.com/2023/06/29000/ and Brian G. Carlson, "The Growing Significance of China-Russia Defense Cooperation," U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, September 18, 2024, https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/SSI-Media/Recent-Publications/Display/Article/3908561/the-growing-significance-of-china-russia-defense-cooperation/.

[21] Lolita C. Baldor, "China, North Korea and Russia military cooperation raises threats in the Pacific, US official warns," *Associated Press*, April 10, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/pacific-russia-china-north-korea-weapons-ukraine-8ad7156898f1391557d5e53d5d09a02c.

[22] Former UK Prime Minister Harold Macmillen later adapted this phrase to say that "jaw-jaw is better than war-war." See "Red Herrings: Famous Quotes Churchill Never Said," International Churchill Society, https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour/finest-hour-141/red-herrings-famous-quotes-churchill-never-said/.

will lead to greater understanding among the parties[23] and, hence, expose areas of common agreement that may have been elusive, it is also possible, and likely probable, that greater dialogue, rather than narrow the areas of disagreement, may actually expose more of them and highlight the "irreconcilable" nature of the parties' goals and objectives.

Indeed, it strains credulity to believe that open lines of communication will reduce tensions and improve the overall strategic environment when the parties' goals and objectives are diametrically opposed. Similarly, it is unlikely that greater "transparency" in armaments will lead Moscow or Beijing to accommodate the U.S. desire to preserve the existing world order, which they both believe is decidedly unfavorable to them. Tellingly, leading Russian spokespersons have declared Russia to be already at war with the United States. For example, as the director of the Center for Middle Eastern and Central Asian Studies in Moscow stated, "The United States is the enemy. It is our enemy. It is a hostile state that aims to destroy our country… We are at war!"[24] Such views, increasingly spread by Russian propagandists, reflect the worldview of a Russian leadership that believes, as Putin has stated, that Moscow is in an "irreconcilable struggle" with the United States and the West over the nature of the world order. In this struggle, Western notions of arms control as a mutually beneficial endeavor and a stabilizing factor in international relations do not align with Russia's strategic objectives and, therefore, cannot succeed.

The United States has historically deluded itself into believing that U.S. strategic restraint would be reciprocated

[23] One former arms control official has stated, "Washington should engage with Beijing to understand its objectives… the United States should be trying to build mutual understanding with China…." See Gottemoeller, op. cit.

[24] Cited in Julia Davis, *In Their Own Words: How Russian Propagandists Reveal Putin's Intentions* (Hannover, Germany: ibidem-Verlag, 2024).

by adversaries; that American accommodation and good will would prompt China and Russia to become partners with the West rather than adversaries; that neither side benefits from escalating tensions or instability; and that arms control agreements would serve as a catalyst for improved political relations. Each of these expectations, and similar optimistic hopes, have been dashed by reality. As one trenchant analysis concluded, the U.S. government's "systemic delay" in calling out Russia's repeated arms control violations, the "enduring lack of government openness regarding the immense Chinese nuclear build-up," and the long-delayed U.S. nuclear modernization program have not produced the kind of reciprocal restraint or improved political relationships that U.S. decision makers expected. Indeed, U.S. arms control policy has been driven by self-deception.[25] And in today's environment, there is little reason to believe the results will be different. As the statement, often attributed (or misattributed) to Albert Einstein, goes, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."[26]

There are existing channels for communication that could be resuscitated in an effort to seek greater insight into Russian posture and programs. For example, although the Congress severely restricted U.S.-Russian military-to-military interactions after Russia's illegal invasion of Crimea in 2014, the legislation did not prevent military-to-

[25] Keith B. Payne, *Deterrence and Arms Control: Ending the Deceptive "Holiday from History," Information Series*, No. 616 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, February 10, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-deterrence-and-arms-control-ending-the-deceptive-holiday-from-history-no-616-february-10-2025/.

[26] Christina Sterbenz, "12 Famous Quotes That Always Get Misattributed," *Business Insider*, October 7, 2013, https://www.businessinsider.com/misattributed-quotes-2013-10.

military communication.[27] But even military-to-military discussions are liable to prove disappointingly inadequate as long as Russian strategic objectives remain contrary to U.S. national security interests. Above all, the United States should refrain from turning dialogue into a negotiation with the expectation that concrete results can be achieved to the benefit of all parties as though this is a zero-sum game. It is not. The United States must be prepared to acknowledge and accept that certain disputes are unbridgeable, no matter how creative U.S. diplomacy is and how determined American diplomats are in seeking common ground. Even Russian officials have acknowledged that political realities make meaningful arms control negotiations with the United States unlikely. As Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov recently stated, "At the moment, it is very difficult to imagine the beginning of such negotiations."[28]

The Lessons of History

The eminent strategist Colin Gray often said that arms control works best when needed least.[29] In other words,

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[27] Kevin Baron and Patrick Tucker, "After Secret Trump Meeting, Russia Offers to Resume Military Relations," *Defense One*, July 18, 2018, t https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2018/07/russia-wants-resume-us-military-relations-after-mysterious-trump-putin-meeting-surprising-pentagon-congress/149865/. Also see, "Ukraine crisis: US suspends military cooperation with Russia," *The Telegraph*, March 4, 2014, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/ukraine/10674777/Ukraine-crisis-US-suspends-military-cooperation-with-Russia.html.

[28] Guy Faulconbridge and Dmitry Antonov, "Russia says the future of nuclear arms control with US and others looks bleak for now," *Reuters*, April 8, 2025, t https://www.reuters.com/world/kremlin-says-it-is-hard-imagine-talks-with-us-new-nuclear-arms-reduction-treaty-2025-04-08/.

[29] Cited in Keith B. Payne and David J. Trachtenberg, *Arms Control in the Emerging Deterrence Context, Information Series*, No. 559 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 19, 2023), https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-and-david-j-trachtenberg-arms-control-in-the-emerging-deterrence-context-no-559-july-19-2023/#:~:text=Colin%20S.,have%20inimical%20foreign%20policy%20objectives.

arms control agreements are easier to reach among countries who share the same worldview, political goals, and objectives. But these are precisely the countries for which arms control agreements are unnecessary. The United States neither wants nor needs arms control agreements with Britain or France. Where arms control is seen as necessary, however, is with adversaries. Yet, the differing goals and objectives of U.S. adversaries make such agreements either impossible to conclude or unlikely to benefit U.S. national security interests.

This basic principle was either forgotten or ignored during the Cold War, when it was thought the Soviet Union's agreement to arms control treaties reflected a common belief and a shared commitment to stability. In fact, the Soviet approach was to seek unilateral advantage and to stem American technological progress in areas where the Soviets were lacking. The 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty was the poster child for this approach. U.S. officials believed the treaty reflected a common belief in the principle of Mutual Assured Destruction and that banning nationwide strategic defenses and leaving the American population deliberately vulnerable to Soviet nuclear attack would dissuade the Soviets from building large offensive nuclear forces. In reality, the opposite was the case as the greatest buildup of large Soviet counterforce capabilities occurred after the ABM Treaty was signed.[30] In general, the results of arms control have often been the opposite of what U.S. officials hoped for and expected.[31] Importantly, as a

[30] For additional details, see Hon. David J. Trachtenberg, Dr. Michaela Dodge and Dr. Keith B. Payne, *The "Action-Reaction" Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 2021), https://nipp.org/monographs_cpt/the-action-reaction-arms-race-narrative-vs-historical-realities/.

[31] Keith B. Payne and David J. Trachtenberg, *Arms Control in the Emerging Deterrence Context, Information Series*, No. 559, op. cit. Also see 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

recent analysis concluded, "Russia's and China's actions are governed by their own perceptions of national security requirements and their own foreign policy goals and objectives; they are not simply mechanistically fashioned to be in line with U.S. requirements and goals—however self-evidently reasonable Washington believes its own policies and goals to be."[32]

Repeated instances of Soviet cheating on arms control agreements also demonstrated that Soviet goals did not align with those of the United States, as the Soviets sought to exploit the American penchant to comply with its arms control obligations while cheating to achieve unilateral advantage. In fact, the record of Soviet arms control violations is a sobering one, and the Russian Federation's record is hardly any better. Lest one forget, it was Moscow's violation of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the Open Skies Treaty that led President Trump in his first term to withdraw the United States from those agreements.

Conclusion

As long as Russia and China continue to view the United States as the main impediment to their drive for global supremacy, arms control is destined to fail. It is simply unrealistic to assume that Moscow or Beijing will agree to any meaningful limitations on their respective military buildups, as those buildups underpin their drive for global dominance.

Both Russia and China recognize that the United States is reluctant to escalate a crisis and that instead Washington seeks de-escalation "off ramps" that will not upset the status quo. Yet, both Moscow and Beijing are willing to

Institute Press, August 2022), pp. 60-66, https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/OP-Vol.-2-No.-8.pdf.

[32] Ibid.

pursue escalation when they believe it will work to their relative advantage.[33] The American concept of "stability" does not align with theirs. The Western desire to maintain the status quo, grounded in norms and rules of behavior intended to preserve the sanctity of national borders, runs counter to their desire to change the status quo and establish a new world order in their favor. Under these conditions, meaningful arms control that advances American security and national interests is a chimera.

This reality, disappointing though it may be, must be recognized and acknowledged lest the United States repeat past follies and suffer the disillusionment of policy failures yet again. In the current international environment, such failures can have catastrophic consequences.

[33] As Vladimir Lenin famously said, "You probe with bayonets: if you find mush, you push. If you find steel, you withdraw." Quoted at https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/6874779-you-probe-with-bayonets-if-you-find-mush-you-push.

About the Author

Hon. David J. Trachtenberg is a Senior Scholar with National Institute for Public Policy, a nonprofit research center in Fairfax, Virginia and teaches in Missouri State University's graduate School of Defense and Strategic Studies.

Mr. Trachtenberg was confirmed by the U.S. Senate on October 17, 2017 as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and served in this capacity until his retirement from government service in July 2019. He previously served as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy and as a Professional Staff Member with the House Committee on Armed Services (HASC) where he was head of the committee's policy staff and staff lead for the HASC Special Oversight Panel on Terrorism.

Mr. Trachtenberg is a two-time recipient of the Department of Defense Medal for Distinguished Public Service. He holds an A.B. in International Relations from the University of Southern California and a M.S. degree in Foreign Service from Georgetown University. He is the author of *The Lawgivers' Struggle: How Congress Wields Power in National Security Decision Making*, National Institute Press, 2020.

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