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Nuclear Forces: Restore the Primacy of Deterrence

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Overview

U.S. nuclear deterrent forces have long been the foundation of U.S. national security and the highest priority of the Department of Defense. As President-elect Donald Trump has observed, nuclear weapons pose “the single greatest threat” to the nation. In the coming year, the new administration will review the state of U.S. nuclear forces, the nation’s nuclear policy and posture, and how the strategic environment has changed. With that comes the opportunity to send a strong signal that deterrence has returned to the top of the U.S. nuclear agenda, and that the United States is committed to modernizing the strategic triad.

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Issue

In 2010, during the last Nuclear Posture Review, the Obama administration announced that “for the first time,” it had put nuclear terrorism and the prospect of further proliferation “at the top” of the U.S. nuclear policy agenda. The administration furthermore emphasized the importance of “reducing the role of U.S. nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy.” In so doing, it may have also communicated a relative de-emphasis on the importance of nuclear deterrence.

The 2010 assessment was based on certain benign assumptions about the strategic environment, and in particular the U.S. relationship with Russia. Since then, however, the situation has worsened. After Russia’s incursions into Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, violation of the Intermediate

Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, and apparent Chinese nuclear buildup, the assumption of more benign relations is far more questionable. Indeed, the specter of great power competition and potentially conflict has again returned to the forefront of national security discourse. The Obama administration's policy of "strategic patience" with North Korea has also failed, and hopes are now more dim for rolling back their nuclear and long-range missile programs. North Korea is developing long-range ballistic missiles and testing nuclear weapons at an unprecedented pace, and doubts remain about the long-term nuclear status of Iran.

Despite its hopeful perspective about the strategic environment, the Obama administration embraced the necessity of recapitalizing the nuclear triad of delivery systems and continuing to extend the life of the nuclear stockpile. A path forward on nuclear modernization was identified in the 2009 Strategic Posture Commission Review and assumed greater salience with New START treaty reductions. This path forward has now been broadly accepted on a bipartisan basis within Congress.

President-elect Trump has likewise supported the need for nuclear modernization. He has noted that Russia had "gone wild with their nuclear program," whereas the United States nuclear force is, by comparison, "old and tired and exhausted." Indeed, many elements in the U.S. strategic arsenal have now well exceeded their expected service lives. The average weapon in the current U.S. nuclear stockpile is about 29 years old, and getting older every day. Delivery systems require significant recapitalization as well. The B-52H bomber first appeared in 1962 and the B-2 in 1993; the air-launched cruise missile (ALCM) in 1982; the Minuteman III ICBM in 1970; and the Ohio-class nuclear submarine in 1981. Critical uranium and plutonium facilities also need updating; in some cases, they date back to the Manhattan Project. All of this complicates the effort to maintain a safe, secure, reliable, and effective deterrent.

The United States needs a modern, flexible, and adaptable nuclear enterprise suited to the deterrence challenges of the 21st century. The procurement holiday enjoyed in past decades can no longer be sustained. The bill for these updates has now come due with special urgency, and the cost will be substantial. Even at its peak, however, the currently scheduled nuclear modernization programs will still only comprise five or six percent of the Department of Defense budget.

Recommended Changes

Although a nuclear posture review is not formally required by statute as it has been in the past, it seems quite likely that the Trump administration will conduct some kind of review, if only to assess where things stand. When that occurs, several changes might be considered:

Return deterrence to the top of the U.S. nuclear agenda. Trends in the international security environment suggest that the task of deterrence is becoming more complex, not less, requiring renewed emphasis on deterrence in planning nuclear force levels and capabilities, and a focus on adaptability in a changing world. This should be accompanied by a whole of government emphasis on the deterrence mission to communicate the seriousness of this shift in policy priorities. Particular attention should be paid to ensuring future adversaries cannot use nuclear weapons to escalate their way out of unsustainable conventional advances. Such an approach should include efforts to reassure allies and bolster extended deterrence through a renewed commitment to credible and flexible deterrent options.

Stay the course on modernization. The nuclear triad of survivable sea-launched ballistic missiles, distributed and hardened ground-based ballistic missiles, and flexible dual-capable aircraft remains a critical source of stability. The new administration should do no less on nuclear modernization than the efforts currently undertaken by the Obama administration. This includes maintaining Ohio-class SSBN replacement program, the Long-range Stand-off weapon (LRSO) to replace the aging ALCM, the new B-21 bomber, and the Ground-based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD) program to modernize of the ICBM leg of the triad. Even to retain the current earth penetrating capability possessed by the B61-11, some kind of successor will be needed, but no such plan has even yet been announced. A decision may also need to be made whether the B83 bomb should be retired or retained.

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Ask more of allies to contribute to nuclear burden-sharing. One way to enhance U.S. extended deterrence commitments is to work more closely with our allies. The United States currently provides nuclear weapons to support the defense of NATO. These weapons may be carried by both American and European dual-capable aircraft, but additional exercises and broader inclusion in nuclear mission-related pilot training may be a way to expand burden-sharing for the nuclear mission as well as demonstrate alliance resolve.

Reevaluate the “Three Nos.” In addition to staying the course on the current suite of nuclear modernization, the administration might also consider whether new weapons, capabilities, or missions are required. Greater diversity of delivery systems could also potentially enhance deterrence by restoring the capability for a nuclear capable fighter aircraft from an aircraft carrier, or perhaps nuclear armed sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs) to replace the Tomahawk Land Attack Cruise Missile (TLAM-N) retired by the Obama administration. Such diversity could improve the options and flexibility available to the president in a crisis, or potentially serve as a more cost effective hedge to expanding current programs. Additional capabilities may not be required, but these questions should again be raised.

Realistically assess Russian compliance with arms control treaties. Russian provocations and aggressive actions counsel the need to hedge against further deterioration of relations and non-compliance with arms control agreements. One way to accomplish this would be to explore new long-range strike and even maneuvering boost-glide vehicle options that could be deployed in the event of either INF Treaty collapse or more serious violation, or the expiration of New START in 2021. The administration should also refuse to link nuclear arms control negotiations to restrictions on U.S. or allied missile defenses.

Improve credibility and integrated quality of nuclear operations. To improve the credibility of the U.S. deterrent, more integration should be pursued with conventional forces, including with missile defense and strike capabilities. This may require crafting conventional capabilities with nuclear conflict in mind and improving resilience to hostile environments, as well as improving the survivability and resilience of command and control.

The 2010 NPR noted that the U.S would work to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in international affairs, but in fact their salience and importance may well be increasing. Today deterrence and extended deterrence have assumed new degrees of prominence. The future

security environment is likely to be more complicated, more unpredictable, and more nuclear. Of special concern is the use of nuclear weapons in a limited manner to coerce or blackmail the United States or its allies into backing down from alliance commitments. In the face of all this, the United States must make the sustainment of deterrence the highest defense priority.

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