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Nuclear Modernization in Today's Environment?

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It is an honor to participate in this symposium today. I would like to add my thanks to ADM Haney, Gen. Kowalski, and Gen. Crosier and his team for organizing this excellent symposium.

The title of this panel is “Nuclear Modernization in Today’s Environment?”—with a question mark at the end. The focus of my remarks will be the on-going public debate regarding the Obama administration’s nuclear modernization program and why I believe there should be no question mark about it.

If measured by the ratio of pro and con articles in the national press, the public debate is running roughly 4:1 *against nuclear modernization*.

This lop-sided public debate reflects two competing narratives that have strikingly different premises about the value of US nuclear capabilities and US nuclear policy goals. The first, and more popular narrative, judging by the 4:1 ratio of articles *against* modernization, follows from the presumption that in the post-Cold War era, the priority goals of US nuclear policy are to promote non-proliferation by globally delegitimizing nuclear weapons to some extent, and reducing number deeply. Corresponding claims are that deterrence requirements can be met with ever-lower US nuclear capabilities, and that US nuclear weapons are of very narrow and declining value—in large part because nuclear crises with Russia and China are things of the past.

As a former Commander of STRATCOM, Gen. James Cartwright, put it in 2012: “The risk of nuclear confrontation between the United States and either Russia or China belongs to the past, not the future.”

The recommendations that typically follow from this narrative include moving from the nuclear triad to a dyad or monad, pursuing further deep nuclear reductions, eliminating forward-based US nuclear forces, precluding any new US nuclear capabilities, and terminating or truncating the Obama Administration’s nuclear modernization programs.

An alternative narrative, however, places higher priority on the deterrence of enemies and the assurance of allies than on the continued pursuit of deep reductions and anti-nuclear posturing for non-proliferation purposes. The recommendations that follow from this narrative typically include maintaining the triad and modernizing US nuclear forces.

These two different goals of US nuclear policy are not wholly mutually exclusive in principle. But they cannot both be *the* higher priority. When there are trade-offs in the pursuit of these different goals, as there must be, the goal deemed most important will determine those trade-offs and the policy course with regard to nuclear modernization.

So, the most basic question is: Which of these goals should be the priority?

This question may sound academic, but it has enormous practical meaning. A general understanding of the priority US nuclear policy goal and its implications for US forces is the most basic ingredient for a sustained consensus in Congress on the subject. If we don't get that right, nothing else will hold—which is why the lop-sided 4:1 public dialogue against modernization is so important: it shapes the general understanding of the public and in Congress.

My conclusions regarding these questions are that, at this time in history, the priority US goals are deterrence, assurance and non-proliferation. And correspondingly, that US nuclear modernization *is essential*.

I reach these conclusions easily from a few starting points:

For example, the value of and requirements for deterrence and assurance rise and fall depending on the character of the threat. Some deterrence goals simply are more demanding than others. Think of the different requirements to deter a cautious and naïve Neville Chamberlain as opposed to an overconfident, belligerent Adolf Hitler. Ultimately, the threat environment sets deterrence requirements, and the contemporary threat environment is particularly demanding because it is both severe and highly-dynamic.

We in the US tend to want static and easily-met deterrence requirements and, for many, the nascent post-Cold War threat environment promised a benign new world order with few and easily-met demands. Go back and read the literature of the 1990s; it was full of optimistic claims of an emerging new world order: the Cold War was over; US-Russian relations were moving to partnership; terrorism was the only real threat; US conventional superiority would be unbeatable forever; nuclear deterrence and weapons were increasingly irrelevant; and history supposedly was moving toward nuclear abolition (the favored term of the 1990s). In such an era, it was easy for the United States to put things nuclear on the back burner—which we largely did. The main issue was not modernization, but *which* nuclear forces to reduce and *how quickly*.

The current 4:1 ratio of articles against US modernization is not surprising; it generally reflects this comforting and undemanding post-Cold War narrative. An entire generation of Americans has grown up believing that post-Cold War nuclear deterrence is relatively easy and largely irrelevant; that convenient narrative will die slowly.

But, multiple studies from Democratic and Republican administrations now have explained the malign effect and extremely troubling consequences that post-Cold War narrative has on the morale of US military personnel.

In addition, today's realities are virtually the opposite of the expected new world order. Both Russia and China see great value in nuclear weapons to support expansionist foreign policies, and they show zero interest in reductions. Russia has a dedicated policy of noncompliance with inconvenient agreements, and its nuclear force modernization programs are particularly robust.

And, to put it straight, Russia now engages in near-daily coercive nuclear threats to protect its aggressive territorial grabs. We saw this in its 2008 military operations against Georgia, its 2014 occupation of Crimea and in Russia's ongoing direct military intervention in Eastern Ukraine. Russia's doctrine today is *not* a replay of "stable" mutual deterrence or NATO's Flexible Response doctrine. No, it includes nuclear coercion based on selective nuclear first-use threats in non-nuclear contingencies.

No one knows how far Russia will push this expansionist strategy backed by nuclear coercion, but in late 2014 Putin claimed that Russian troops could be in 5 NATO capitals in 2 days. As Deputy Defense Secretary Work said recently, Russia is "playing with fire," and Gen. Joseph Dunford, in his recent nomination hearing, said that Russian behavior, "Is nothing short of alarming." That is the stark contemporary reality.

Yet, the public commentary against US nuclear modernization remains couched in the goals and language of the old Post-Cold War narrative. It is as if the 1990s never ended and the threat environment has not shifted dramatically since then. In contrast, the noted Russian journalist, Alexander Golts, recently observed, "The West has forgotten how it had used nuclear deterrence to coexist with the Soviet Union. Now it will have to open up that playbook once more."

Golts is right. The value of US nuclear weapons for deterrence has not been superseded by anything. Just ask the Ukrainians—many of whom regret giving up nuclear deterrence in return for the now-worthless Russian guarantees in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. We are in a severe and dynamic threat environment, with little or no evidence that it will become more benign.

The Socialist President of France, perhaps best captured the new post-Cold War realities: "The international context does not allow for any weakness. . . .The era of nuclear deterrence is therefore not over. . . . In a dangerous world—and it is dangerous—France does not want to let down its guard. . . . The possibility of future state conflicts concerning us directly or indirectly cannot be excluded."

What does this discussion suggest about US nuclear modernization? Just this: In a threat environment that is both severe and highly-dynamic, deterrence is neither easy nor are its requirements highly predictable. We cannot set some easily-met, fixed capability standard and say "job done" because requirements are not static. The deterrence goal should be to have flexible and credible US options that can be adapted to deny opponents any anticipation of advantage at any plausible level of escalation. Why so? Because we want to deter at phase zero of a crisis before it escalates, and at every subsequent plausible level of escalation that an opponent may choose. In the contemporary threat environment, that goal suggests the great value of flexible and resilient US nuclear capabilities to help provide the most reliably adaptable and effective approaches to deterrence and assurance possible. And, to the specific point, after twenty-five years of near-nuclear slumber and 80% reductions, US flexibility and resilience will degrade steadily and significantly in the absence of modernization.

Given today's threat environment, deterrence and assurance are priorities. And, the unavoidable reality is that we will lose *potentially important capabilities* to support deterrence and assurance *in the absence of US nuclear modernization*. As the Vice Chair of the JCS, Adm. James

Winnefeld, said in recent testimony, “The choice right now is modernizing or losing deterrent capability.” He went on to say, “That’s the stark choice we’re faced with.” Precisely right.

I would only add that this stark choice also includes our assurance capability. Many allies, especially in Central Europe and Asia, never bought into the claim that *conventional deterrence* is adequate for their security—especially as they face coercive *nuclear* threats. They want a credible and forward-deployed or deployable US nuclear umbrella. In its absence, some will reconsider their non-nuclear status, with the potential for a cascade of nuclear proliferation. Again, this points to the value of US modernization.

The continued aging and expiration of US nuclear forces also would be evidence of a US lack of resolve in response to blatant, continuing coercive nuclear threats. In the face of such realities, as Air Force Secretary Deborah James has said, “This is no time in any way to signal a lack of resolve”. Indeed, effective deterrence is about perceptions of US resolve at any level of escalation that an opponent might otherwise see as its least miserable option.

In short, US nuclear modernization is critical because in today’s threat environment, flexible and resilient US nuclear capabilities are central to prudent preparations to support US deterrence and assurance goals, and modernization is necessary to retain flexible and resilient capabilities.

We can discuss the details of various pathways—but, let’s first at least recognize that the old post-Cold War narrative of a benign new world order with its expectations of nuclear irrelevance is not a prudent basis for planning. The relevant question now is how needed US modernization programs can be sustained politically against heavy criticism.

Fortunately, the Obama administration’s nuclear modernization programs appear to fully recognize these contemporary realities and will advance the flexibility and resilience of US capabilities. Unfortunately, the public debate is dominated by voices opposed to them.

I will close by saying that, despite the lop-sided public debate, the needed US nuclear modernization will likely be sustained, particularly if concerned stakeholders who typically do not deign to engage publicly will now join the dialogue as appropriate; it is time to step up. That is how our system works. We must be able to explain clearly, simply and publicly why the comforting old post-Cold War narrative and the anti-nuclear agenda it spawned *do not fit* contemporary realities. President Putin’s crude nuclear heavy-handedness helps to make the case for US modernization, but we should not count on him alone.

Thank you.