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Trump's Nuclear Deterrence Challenge

America's nuclear triad is sorely out of date, left to age by a president who saw it as a relic of the Cold War.



By Franklin Miller and Keith Payne, The Wall Street Journal, Nov. 20, 2016,
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President-elect Donald Trump will soon be working with his national security team to establish priorities on security and defense policy. Two challenges will demand immediate and unrelenting attention.

Throughout the campaign Mr. Trump emphasized the need to destroy Islamic State, also known as ISIS, as a functioning terrorist organization. Since there is no way to negotiate with or reliably deter medieval zealots willing to murder and die for their misbegotten cause, military force is the only answer at this point. The next president also must keep the defense and intelligence communities focused on preventing the remnants of ISIS from obtaining weapons of mass destruction—particularly nuclear weapons.

But Mr. Trump has inherited the even greater threat of an increasingly precarious nuclear balance. All three elements of America's nuclear triad—land-based and sea-based missiles, and bombers—are now approaching obsolescence. A hostile Russia that miscalculates U.S. will and deterrence capabilities poses a mortal nuclear threat to our existence.

President Vladimir Putin has set out to re-establish Russia's domination of the lands previously under the Soviet Union, changing European borders by force and occupying neighboring territories militarily. Russia has also made explicit threats to initiate nuclear war against the U.S., our allies and even neutral European states.

Nuclear first-use—a policy that includes the threat of initiating a nuclear war and the option of doing so—is a key part of Mr. Putin's expansionist political and military strategy. First-use is emphasized in [open](#) Russian military statements, at least as far back as the official 2003 Russian military doctrine. Backing up this doctrine, Russia is deploying new intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles, ballistic-missile submarines and nuclear-tipped cruise missiles launched from the ground, sea and air.

Russia also is developing a new ICBM that will carry “no fewer than fifteen” nuclear warheads each, according to Russian [descriptions](#). Its size and payload suggest the missile is specifically designed for nuclear first strikes. Mr. Putin has overseen “snap,” i.e., sudden, nuclear exercises to demonstrate the ability of his nuclear forces to strike instantly. Moscow has even begun to practice Cold War-style nuclear-survival drills on a massive scale.

Mr. Putin also has allowed his most-senior officials to issue threats of nuclear attack not heard since the days of Nikita Khrushchev. A chilling example came on March 16, 2014, two days before Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean peninsula. Dmitry Kiselyov, the Putin-appointed head of the government's international news agency, boasted on his TV show that “Russia is the only country in the world capable of turning the U.S. into radioactive ash.” Subtle.

Early this month, in response to the planned deployment in 2017 of 330 U.S. marines to Norway, Frants Klintsevtj, a deputy chairman of Russia's defense and security committee, said, “This is very dangerous for Norway and Norwegians. . . . We have never before had Norway on the list of targets for our strategic weapons. But if this develops, Norway's population will suffer.”

China is also in the process of a major nuclear buildup while pursuing similarly aggressive, expansionist policies in the South and East China Seas at the expense of U.S. allies. China is destabilizing the region and has threatened Japan with war.

The danger is that Russia or China will misinterpret America's aging nuclear capabilities as a lack of will and an invitation to aggression. To prevent such miscalculation, the U.S. strategic nuclear forces remaining from the Cold War must be modernized.

This modernization could have begun in the George W. Bush administration, but did not, and the Obama administration further delayed it during its first term, based on the mistaken view that nuclear weapons are irrelevant after the Cold War. The administration has since begun the

program, but current plans will not place a new U.S. bomber, strategic submarine, cruise missile or ICBM in the field until the mid-to-late 2020s.

Finding a way out of this dismal situation is President-elect Trump's challenge. As seriously as he considers how to deal a death blow to ISIS, he and his advisers need to make swift decisions about how to sustain much-needed nuclear modernization. As the military-service chiefs have testified, deterrence is our highest priority, and our nuclear forces are the essential foundation for deterrence and all other military operations. This is especially important for preventing further Russian, Chinese and North Korean adventurism.

Effective deterrence is the product of the necessary capabilities and manifest political will. Our national safety depends on being able to communicate these to the world, especially to the Kremlin. A good start would be for the Trump administration to work with Congress to repeal the application of the Budgetary Control Act to the Defense Department, thus ending the budget-cutting demands on defense of sequestration—and to direct the Pentagon to move U.S. strategic nuclear-force modernization plans forward without delay.

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