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### **ICBMs and Their Importance for Allied Assurances and Security**

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Since the development of U.S. intercontinental-range ballistic missiles (ICBMs), every U.S. administration – both Republican and Democratic – has considered them indispensable to U.S. national security. However, ICBMs are important not only for deterrence, but to allied security as well.

The United States extends its nuclear security guarantees to more than 30 countries, including allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Other countries like Japan and South Korea, which rely on the so-called “nuclear umbrella” for their security, have nuclear-armed adversaries in their vicinity. In the past, U.S. nuclear guarantees have allowed allies to forego their own nuclear weapons programs, even though many have the technological know-how and access to nuclear materials to build them if they decided to do so. They have refrained from doing so in large part due to their confidence in U.S. nuclear guarantees, and that important role for U.S. nuclear weapons continues today.



## Strategic Systems and Allied Assurances

Extending deterrence and assuring allies and partners are primary objectives of U.S. nuclear force posture, as stated in the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR).<sup>1</sup> In the context of NATO, the 2018 NPR states “The United States will make available its strategic nuclear forces, and commit nuclear weapons forward-deployed to Europe, to the defense of NATO. These forces provide an essential political and military link between Europe and North America and are the supreme guarantee of Alliance security.”<sup>2</sup> The dependence of Asian allies on U.S. strategic nuclear capabilities is even more apparent because the United States does not forward deploy any nuclear warheads on allied territories in that region: “the United States currently relies almost exclusively on its strategic nuclear capabilities for nuclear deterrence and the assurance of allies in the region.”<sup>3</sup>

Allies appreciate the link between U.S. strategic nuclear weapons and nuclear assurance. When visiting U.S. Strategic Command in April 2018, Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary General, stated “we have to make sure that NATO continues to have credible and strong deterrence. And of course nuclear forces is a[n] absolutely necessary part of a credible deterrence from the Alliance.”<sup>4</sup> Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono issued a statement upon the release of the 2018 NPR that “Japan highly appreciates the latest NPR which clearly articulates the U.S. resolve to ensure the effectiveness of its deterrence.”<sup>5</sup> In the past, a Dutch official even went as far as to suggest that NATO ought to rely more heavily on U.S. strategic systems rather than develop a new dual-capable aircraft.<sup>6</sup>

The importance of U.S. strategic nuclear weapons for extended deterrence and allied assurance was also recognized by the bipartisan congressionally mandated Strategic Posture Commission Report in 2009. The Commission noted that requirements for extended deterrence in Europe and Asia are “evolving,” implying the need for a degree of flexibility in a way that the United States postures its nuclear forces.<sup>7</sup> The Commission also noted that allied “assurance that extended deterrence remains credible and effective may require that the United States retain numbers or types of nuclear capabilities that it might not deem necessary if it were concerned only with its own defense.”<sup>8</sup> The nuclear triad, including its ICBM leg, provides such flexibility, and linking U.S. strategic forces with U.S. nuclear assurances has been U.S. policy for decades. Even though ICBMs do not have the signaling potency and physical visibility of other U.S. delivery systems, particularly long-range nuclear-armed bombers and dual-capable aircraft, they create important synergies that contribute to deterrence.

Since ICBMs are dispersed over large swaths of U.S. territory, an adversary would have to spend hundreds of nuclear warheads in a direct attack on the U.S. homeland to destroy them. This reality – enforced by the U.S. deployment of ICBMs – likely serves to frustrate any nuclear attack planning against the United States. By bolstering deterrence of attacks on the U.S. homeland, ICBMs enhance the credibility of U.S. security guarantees to allies, as the United



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States is more likely to come to the defense of others when the risks to its own territory are minimized. Without ICBMs, adversaries could concentrate their attack on just three bomber bases and two submarine bases on U.S. territory, leaving submarines at sea as the only strategic system available for retaliation. Such a limited homeland attack would be well within the reach of other nuclear powers. And, without ICBMs, adversaries could then concentrate their resources and focus on countering U.S. submarines at sea. Moreover, without ICBMs, adversaries would have more warheads available to cause damage to U.S. cities.

Unlike ICBMs, other nuclear delivery systems can be destroyed by conventional weapons, notwithstanding the fact that an adversary would have a difficult time finding U.S. strategic submarines, at least for the foreseeable future. The vulnerability of these systems to conventional weapons could result in a substantive ambiguity as to the intentions of an adversary should a nuclear aircraft or a strategic submarine be lost to a conventional attack. Bombers and dual-capable aircraft flying conventional missions add to the complexity of this problem. No such ambiguity is plausible when an adversary chooses to destroy ICBMs.

### **De-Alerting Could Make U.S. Allies Nervous**

ICBMs are the most responsive leg of the nuclear triad. Unlike significantly slower bombers, ICBMs can reach any target in the world in about 30 minutes. Their speed makes it extremely difficult and costly for adversaries to develop countermeasures against them. ICBMs are always on alert and can be launched anytime within minutes of a presidential decision to do so. They can impose devastating costs on an adversary under the most extreme circumstances. Their promptness strengthens deterrence because an adversary seeking to attack the United States or allies must consider the prospect of a swift effective crippling counterattack in response.

The responsiveness of U.S. ICBMs should not be confused with assertions that they are on “hair trigger” alert and prone to causing an accidental nuclear war.<sup>9</sup> Such assertions are simply incorrect due to multiple command and control factors and launch arrangements designed to prevent such scenarios. The U.S. State Department notes that U.S. nuclear forces are not on hair-trigger alert because they are only “ready to launch upon receipt of an authenticated, encrypted, and securely transmitted order from the President of the United States.”<sup>10</sup> “De-alerting” would strip ICBMs of some of their most important attributes, including promptness and responsiveness, which could weaken their overall deterrent effect. No U.S. administration has supported an option to de-alert ICBMs. Even the Obama Administration’s 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) noted, “The NPR examined possible adjustments to the current alert posture of U.S. strategic forces [and] concluded that this posture should be maintained.”<sup>11</sup> Most recently, the 2018 NPR rejected the “de-alerting” option, concluding that it would create “the potential for dangerous deterrence instabilities.”<sup>12</sup>



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Current proponents of de-alerting argue that the United States would have the option to re-alert in a crisis. But re-alerting in the face of a crisis or conflict would likely prove difficult. Such steps could be interpreted as escalatory by U.S. adversaries – and by U.S. allies. Steps to re-alert ICBMs would likely lead to domestic opposition and could be politically challenging given the general U.S. aversion to nuclear weapons and any action that could be perceived as increasing the risk of nuclear conflict. Other countries, however, may not hold the same disdain for nuclear weapons as the United States. For example, some see nuclear weapons as a symbol of national pride and prestige. A Russian influential Orthodox priest recently called nuclear weapons “guardian angels.”<sup>13</sup> By contrast, the body politic in Western countries generally views nuclear weapons as a necessary evil at best, and the United States has consistently strived to decrease its reliance on them for its security.

Some argue that the United States should de-alert its ICBMs unilaterally to incentivize others to take similar steps. For example, a 2012 Global Zero U.S. Nuclear Policy Commission Report states “If unilateral U.S. de-alerting of its strategic offensive forces would cause Russia to follow suit, it would buy a large margin of safety against the accidental or mistaken launch of Russian missiles on hair-trigger alert aimed at the United States.”<sup>14</sup> That example of wishful thinking is not supported by history. Recent history between the two countries is instructive. As the United States decreased the number of its nuclear weapons and delayed or cancelled nuclear weapons modernization programs, Russia took the opposite approach. Disparities between the U.S. and other countries’ approaches to nuclear forces continue to negatively shape U.S. and allied national security and would be even more pronounced should the United States cancel the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent Program to replace the aged force of Minuteman III ICBMs.

Others argue that if Russia and the United States do not de-alert, the chances of an accidental launch will increase.<sup>15</sup> Yet there is no evidence to support the proposition that an alert posture increases the risk of accidental launches. In fact, even in the extremely unlikely circumstance of an accidental launch, U.S. ICBMs are not targeted against Russia (or other countries) during normal, everyday operations – and have not been since 1994. Rather they are aimed at broad ocean areas that minimize the risk to populated land masses.

### **Nuclear Postures and Conventional Operations**

One cannot think of nuclear deterrence and allied assurance as separate and distinct from conventional operations. Nuclear deterrence overshadows states’ conventional conduct. In fact, conventional scenarios are more likely to occupy the minds of U.S. allies on a day-to-day basis. Russia’s aggressive actions in the vicinity of NATO borders and North Korea’s provocative actions – such as the sinking of the South Korean corvette Cheonan – demonstrate that allies must deter conventional conflicts of various intensities day in and day out.



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In this context, Polish nuclear expert Jacek Durkalec observed, “NATO’s greater confidence in facing nuclear threats from Russia would give the allies greater confidence during conventional combat which would probably be accompanied by Russian nuclear threats.”<sup>16</sup> Russia’s nuclear weapons modernization programs (including tactical nuclear weapons), military exercises with a nuclear dimension, and public statements of its leadership point to what the 2018 NPR calls Russia’s “mistaken confidence that limited nuclear employment can provide a useful advantage over the United States and its allies.”<sup>17</sup> Even those who deny Moscow’s adoption of a so called “escalate-to-deescalate” or “escalate-to-win” doctrine admit there is evidence that Russia’s doctrine contains coercive elements.<sup>18</sup>

### **Diminishing Prospects for Arms Control**

If there is one nuclear issue that makes allies nervous, particularly in Europe, it is the perception of a lack of progress on arms control. With Russia’s failure to comply with a whole host of international obligations, including most prominently the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces and Open Skies treaties, the arms control process appears to be moribund.

A unilateral elimination of U.S. ICBMs would cost the United States leverage in any future arms control process. Unilateral U.S. nuclear reductions have often gone unreciprocated. The 1990s Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) are instructive. PNIs were a series of reciprocal political commitments between the United States and the Soviet Union to withdraw from operational deployment and eliminate various short-range nuclear weapons.

While the United States delivered on its PNI pledges, Russia did not follow suit. The result is at least a 10:1 advantage in short-range nuclear weapons in Russia’s favor in the European theater. Russia’s battlefield weapons directly threaten U.S. forward-deployed forces and allies. Russia has no incentive to give up its superiority in non-strategic nuclear forces, particularly given NATO’s conventional advantage. If meaningful reductions in this class of weaponry were possible at all, Russia would likely propose trade-offs that would significantly hamper U.S. and allied security and be therefore unacceptable to the United States and NATO. For example, Russia could ask the United States to dismantle components of its missile defense system in Europe in return for nominal reductions in Russia’s tactical nuclear forces that would not significantly diminish Moscow’s clear advantage.

### **Conclusion**

Allies perceive changes to U.S. nuclear weapons posture in the broad context of overall U.S. defense policy. These changes are more than just a sum of their operational implications. While allied assurances require a lot more than modernization of a single nuclear weapons delivery system, U.S. unilateral elimination of the ICBM leg of the triad is unwise at this time and for the foreseeable future. It would leave adversaries free to exploit coercive advantages, eliminate



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U.S. leverage for arms control negotiations, place greater stress on the other elements of the Triad that may not be available for allied defense, elicit doubts on the part of U.S. allies about the credibility of U.S. commitments to their security, and encourage others to seek nuclear weapons as a result—a course of action that could be potentially fatal for the nonproliferation regime the United States has championed for decades.

In the face of pressures on the incoming Biden Administration to eliminate the ICBM leg of the U.S. strategic Triad, such a move would be dangerously destabilizing to allies who rely on the U.S. nuclear umbrella for their ultimate security. Unless we want to face a more unpredictable world with yet more nuclear players, it is critical that U.S. allies remain convinced of credibility of U.S. nuclear assurances. ICBMs are an integral part of that credibility.

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