



## Number One Priority: Nuclear Deterrence

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What do you do when the nation's senior-most military figure says that today's global security environment "is the most unpredictable" he has seen in his 40 years of service? The first thing you should do is listen up. The second thing you should do is ask "why?" and "what should we do?"

General Martin E. Dempsey, the outgoing Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently introduced the latest version of the "[National Military Strategy of the United States of America](#)." The unremarkable title and relatively quiet roll-out of this document mask some of the significant conclusions President Obama's top military advisers have come to, namely, "global disorder has significantly increased while some of our comparative military advantage has begun to erode."

While malicious state and nonstate actors and technology competitions are nothing new on the international stage, one conclusion the Joint Chiefs of Staff came to is somewhat surprising: that there is a "growing" risk of "war with a major power." Additionally, the Joint Chiefs of Staff expect that "future conflicts between states may prove to be unpredictable, costly, and difficult to control."

Likewise, the [National Intelligence Council](#) believes that "the employment of new forms of warfare such as cyber and space warfare" will allow states to "escalate and expand future conflicts beyond the traditional battlefield."

So not only is there a growing risk of the United States being involved in a war with a major power, but the number and type of potential crises that could spark a war is rising.

That answers the question of "why" the threat environment is unpredictable. The subsequent question then is, "what should we do about it?"

The Joint Chiefs of Staff ranked their priorities in this unpredictable world and one mission stood out above the rest. The number one priority as defined by President Obama's top military

advisers is sustaining and modernizing the U.S. nuclear triad of bombers, submarines, and missiles.

The Obama administration, as well as previous ones, has determined rightly that ensuring the United States possesses a [flexible and resilient](#) nuclear force now is the best hope for deterring existential threats both now and in the uncertain future. Nuclear weapons can help deter the only existential-level threats facing the United States in ways that conventional, economic, or political power alone cannot.

This recognition is not, as some critics have claimed, anachronistic thought coming from long-slumbering Cold Warriors. It is a clear-eyed admission of reality that is, while unpleasant, supremely necessary.

A recently-released report titled “[Project Atom](#),” which surveyed four of the leading think-tanks on this issue, shows there is remarkable agreement across most of the ideological spectrum. All four think tanks concluded that all three legs of the nuclear triad should not only be retained, but modernized.

Critics at this point may concede that nuclear weapons are necessary for America’s defense, but claim current modernization plans are “[unaffordable](#)” and just as much deterrent effect could be squeezed out of a smaller nuclear force. Advocates of this position point to President Obama’s [pledge](#) in Berlin in 2013 to seek up to a one-third cut in deployed U.S. nuclear weapons.

What proponents of further nuclear cuts fail to realize, however, is that President Obama’s pledge was not a call for unilateral U.S. disarmament, but rather a [proposal](#) for negotiated nuclear reductions with Russia. Little more than seven months after the speech, Russian troops occupied Crimea, and Russia now rejects further negotiations. Alas, the unpredictability of international relations remains a cruel constant.

As for the affordability of U.S. nuclear modernization plans, [new research](#) shows that U.S. nuclear forces will indeed be affordable as the U.S. defense budget shifts to accommodate upcoming expenses. Again, it is a matter of ranking military priorities, and U.S. military leaders agree that the modernization of U.S. nuclear forces ranks right at the top.

While the U.S. nuclear force is the top military priority, this does not mean it is silver bullet that can address every security threat facing America today, it was never meant to. Just as tanks are useless against cyber-attacks and artillery cannot defend satellites in space, U.S. nuclear weapons have defined roles for limited missions, namely: deterring massive attacks on the United States, defeating an enemy and limiting damage should deterrence fail, deterring attacks on our allies and assuring them of our capabilities, and limiting coercion by state and non-state actors.

Deterrence, as a strategy, is not fool-proof and guarantees nothing. But every presidential administration, Republican and Democrat alike, since the dawn of the atomic age has recognized the immense value U.S. nuclear weapons have in deterring catastrophic attacks and affecting the behavior of international leaders.

Choosing not to modernize U.S. nuclear forces or cutting their numbers drastically will result in a less adaptable force in an international system that enforces one rule ruthlessly: evolve or die.

Like debates in Washington D.C. always seem to do, conversation will inevitably gravitate towards the question of affordability in a tight budget environment. Yet, this is at best a secondary issue. The real question is, what priority should we give U.S. nuclear modernization in an uncertain and unpredictable world? The answer: number one.

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