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# Expert Commentary on the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission Report



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**Expert Commentary on the 2023  
Strategic Posture Commission Report**

**Edited by**

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## Preface

The 2023 Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States of America was a Congressionally-mandated bipartisan effort to examine how the United States can best prepare to meet evolving deterrence requirements in an increasingly dangerous threat environment. The Strategic Posture Commission's (SPC) report answered Congress' call with a unanimous set of 131 findings and 81 recommendations across a diverse range of topics, including: U.S. defense strategy, nuclear forces, conventional forces, missile defenses, advanced technologies, allies and partners, and risk reduction. The SPC report was nothing if not timely as Congress and Biden Administration officials consider the options for how the United States can best posture itself against China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, and their growing entente with one another.

National Institute for Public Policy has gathered in this *Occasional Paper* a collection of commentaries from expert scholars and practitioners that assesses the Strategic Posture Commission's report. First, James H. Anderson comments on the nature of strategy and whether the SPC was successful in covering its broad mandate of topics from Congress. Jennifer Bradley focuses on the SPC recommendations and how they may affect deterrence in a shifting threat environment. Matthew R. Costlow uses the SPC recommendations to assess how the United States can, in the words of the Commission, prepare for a future "with and without arms control." Michaela Dodge examines the SPC findings and recommendations through the lenses of U.S. allies and partners, and the unique factors affecting their threat perceptions. Susan Koch notes the significance of the bipartisan nature of the SPC report, its attention to the growing importance of alliances and partnerships, and its realistic approach to risk reduction. David J. Lonsdale

explores some of the important parallels between the emerging threat environment and the pre-World War II threat environment, and whether the Commission's recommendations appear to have learned vital lessons from the past. Keith B. Payne compares and contrasts the Strategic Posture Commission report and the 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* – documents written only one year apart, but with assumptions and assessments that are seemingly worlds apart. Michael Rühle assesses how the SPC report's findings and recommendations apply to NATO, specifically how European states will likely receive the report's messages and how the report will affect Europe. Mark B. Schneider generally approves of the SPC report's recommendations, particularly on the U.S. nuclear posture, but is concerned that the security environment may deteriorate more rapidly than the United States can, or perhaps will, adapt. Finally, David J. Trachtenberg commends many of the Commission's recommendations but warns that, as is the danger with all blue-ribbon panels, the Commission's lasting impact will be determined by whether the current and future administrations implement the report's recommendations.

I would like to thank the Sarah Scaife Foundation whose generous support helped make this publication possible. I hope you find this *Occasional Paper* insightful and informative, and look forward to your reactions.

*Matthew R. Costlow*  
*Editor*

# A Clarion Call to Improve America's Strategic Posture

James H. Anderson

## Introduction

In addition to reviewing strategic nuclear weapon requirements projected for the 2027-2035 timeframe, the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States (hereafter "Commission") addresses a broad range of related posture topics, to include space technologies, integrated air and missile defense, nuclear infrastructure, artificial intelligence, and allies and partners. The Commission imbues its report with a much-needed sense of urgency and provides a series of sensible and timely recommendations amid a deteriorating security environment.

Great power competition involves more than just maneuvering for geopolitical advantage in peacetime; it includes the potential for great power war. Given the possibility of combined Chinese and Russian aggression, the Commission declares the "United States and its Allies and partners must be ready to deter and defeat both adversaries simultaneously."<sup>1</sup> Yet massive increases to conventional force structure along these lines are unlikely for political reasons. This means, among other things, that the United States will have to rely more heavily on nuclear deterrence to preserve peace, which presents a tremendous challenge since its legacy-based posture was designed

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<sup>1</sup> Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, *America's Strategic Posture, The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, Institute for Defense Analyses, 2023, p. vii, available at <https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/a/am/americas-strategic-posture/strategic-posture-commission-report.ashx>.



primarily to deter the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The Commission rightly points out that deterring two peer adversaries in the not-too-distant future imposes the twin burdens of maintaining legacy systems while simultaneously bringing new platforms online.

### **The Threat Environment and Nuclear Posture**

The Commission's threat assessment addresses the current and projected military capabilities of China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran, with passing references to non-state actors. China and Russia rightly receive the most attention given their ideological animosity, military capabilities, and ongoing modernization programs. The Commission argues that the two-peer threat environment will "present the United States with a fundamentally new and pernicious set of challenges."<sup>2</sup> For a country that until just a few years ago relied on a small number of nuclear weapons, the size, scale, and scope of China's nuclear modernization program is striking. The Commission elaborates:

China is also developing and testing potentially destabilizing, new intercontinental range systems that include hypersonic as well as fractional or multiple orbital bombardment systems (FOBS or MOBS) that could potentially threaten an unwarned preemptive attack on the United States.<sup>3</sup>

China's nuclear trajectory means the United States can no longer consider China a "lesser included case" of Russia when calculating the requirements for an effective deterrent

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

force.<sup>4</sup> The Commission neatly summarizes the deterrent requirement:

In the emerging environment, the United States must maintain a resilient nuclear force that can absorb a first strike and respond effectively with enough forces to cause unacceptable damage to the aggressor while still posing a credible threat to the other nuclear power.<sup>5</sup>

To meet this requirement, the Commission recommends the U.S. nuclear force structure specifically include increasing the number of B-21 bombers, Columbia SSBNs, and Long-Range Standoff Weapons. Further, the Commission proposes “uploading” ICBM and SLBM warheads during the transition period from legacy systems to new platforms to maintain the overall number of warheads in the U.S. arsenal.<sup>6</sup>

Bolstering the U.S. posture along these lines is imperative to prevent adversaries from gaining political leverage short of war. In this vein, the Commission discusses the nature of “coercive attacks,” which are “potentially designed to dissuade and deter the United States from defending or supporting its Allies and partners in a regional conflict; keep the United States from participating in any confrontation; and divide U.S. alliances.”<sup>7</sup> Over the long term, China’s nuclear

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 45. For a more detailed analysis of the Commission’s report vis-à-vis nuclear requirements, see Mark Schneider, “The October 2023 Strategic Commission Report and U.S. Nuclear Weapons Requirements,” *National Institute for Public Policy, Information Series*, No. 568, December 1, 2023, available at [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/mark-b-schneider-the-october-2023-strategic-commission-report-and-u-s-nuclear-weapons-requirements-no-568-december-1-2023/](https://nipp.org/information_series/mark-b-schneider-the-october-2023-strategic-commission-report-and-u-s-nuclear-weapons-requirements-no-568-december-1-2023/).

<sup>7</sup> *America’s Strategic Posture*, p. 63.

modernization is likely to embolden such behavior from Beijing if the United States fails to strengthen its strategic capabilities.

The Commission is noticeably less specific when it comes to recommending theater-based systems. But it provides a helpful list of requirements – namely, that such systems should be survivable, forward deployed, and include low yield options.<sup>8</sup> Without mentioning any system by name, these requirements clearly point to the nuclear sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N).<sup>9</sup>

U.S. efforts to bolster regional and strategic deterrence are also important to offset Russian nuclear threats, which have multiplied since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022.<sup>10</sup> They are also critical for preventing China from intimidating the United States and its allies from helping Taiwan in the event China threatens to use armed force against the island. Against this backdrop, the Commission emphasizes that in the near future “China will also for the first time have survivable (mobile) theater nuclear forces capable of conducting low-yield precision strikes on U.S. and allied forces and infrastructure across East Asia.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>9</sup> For more analysis on the SLCM-N, see Robert Soofer and Walter B. Slocombe, “Congress should fund the nuclear sea-launched cruise missile,” *Atlantic Council*, August 3, 2023, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/congress-should-fund-the-nuclear-sea-launched-cruise-missile/>.

<sup>10</sup> See Mark Schneider, “Russian Use of Nuclear Coercion against NATO and Ukraine,” *National Institute for Public Policy, Information Series*, Issue No. 521, May 2, 2022, available at [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/mark-b-schneider-russian-use-of-nuclear-coercion-against-nato-and-ukraine-no-521-may-2-2022/](https://nipp.org/information_series/mark-b-schneider-russian-use-of-nuclear-coercion-against-nato-and-ukraine-no-521-may-2-2022/).

<sup>11</sup> *America’s Strategic Posture*, p. 9.

## Evolving Homeland Threat

Foreign military threats are seldom static for any length of time. In the case of Russia and China, their evolution has important implications for the United States. The Commission points out:

Homeland defense traditionally focused on the intercontinental ballistic missile threat. However, U.S. adversaries' naval and aerospace capabilities are increasing, and modern missile ranges mean adversaries do not need to navigate near U.S. shores to pose a direct threat to the homeland.<sup>12</sup>

Hypersonic glide vehicles are a case in point. Both China and Russia have already deployed these weapons.<sup>13</sup> By combining the maneuverability of cruise missiles with the speed of ballistic projectiles, their capability to attack along multiple axes greatly complicates deterrence. As the Commission states, U.S. integrated air and missile defense (IAMD) "capabilities do not adequately protect the critical infrastructure necessary to project power and avoid coercion in light of growing Russian and Chinese nuclear and conventional threats."<sup>14</sup> By putting U.S. power projection capabilities at risk, the United States would have to "fight just to get to the fight" in the event a major conflict overseas.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>13</sup> China has deployed hypersonic glide vehicles on DF-17 medium-range ballistic missiles; Russia has deployed Avangard hypersonic glide vehicles on intercontinental ballistic missiles.

<sup>14</sup> *America's Strategic Posture*, p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> This phrase has become popular with senior U.S. military leaders. See, for example, Glen D. VanHerck and Jacqueline D. Van Ovest, "Fighting to Get to the Fight," *Military Times*, May 31, 2022, available at <https://www.militarytimes.com/opinion/commentary/2022/05/31/fighting-to-get-to-the-fight/>.

## The Growing Importance of Space

No analysis of posture considerations would be complete without examining space-related technologies. The Commission provides helpful recommendations here as well, recommending the United States “urgently deploy a more resilient space architecture and adopt a strategy that includes both offensive and defense elements to ensure U.S. access to and operations in space.”<sup>16</sup>

Advances in space technology have important implications for missile defense. When President Reagan announced his Strategic Defense Initiative in 1983, offensive weapons reigned supreme. Critics excoriated the idea that strategic stability could be based on anything other than mutual vulnerability. Over time, technological advances have strengthened the case for missile defense. The Commission emphasizes the connectivity between missile defense and space-based sensors:

Of note, U.S. missile defense benefits greatly from space-based sensors; its mission and other national security missions stand to gain even more from increasingly capable space-based networks, including the growing cost-effective commercial capabilities.<sup>17</sup>

Notwithstanding these advances, as well as the proven success of theater-based missile defense systems in combat, many critics still consider strategic missile defenses against Russia or China heretical, arguing that such efforts would be destabilizing and/or porous.<sup>18</sup> The inability to create a

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<sup>16</sup> *America’s Strategic Posture*, p. ix.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Jaganath Sankaran, “Delusions and Dangers of Missile Defense,” *Arms Control Today*, September 2023, available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2023-09/features/delusions-dangers-missile-defense>.

perfect defense is a poor rationale for opposing missile defense, as the Commission notes:

Given Russia's and China's technical capabilities and financial resources, the United States has not built an impenetrable missile defense "shield" over the entire U.S. homeland. *However, it does not need to for U.S. missile defenses to provide critical defense capabilities that contribute to deterrence.*<sup>19</sup>

The Commission correctly notes – and history has repeatedly demonstrated – that *some defense* is better than *no defense*. While not perfect, Israel's multilayer rocket and missile defense has still played a crucial role in defending Israeli citizens against missile and rocket attacks in its war against Hamas.

### **Next Steps on Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD)**

The current Program of Record (POR) supporting a limited missile defense system aimed at North Korea will not serve U.S. security interests; on the contrary, it will tempt adversaries to leverage their increasingly capable nuclear arsenals for coercive purposes. As the Commission argues: "To defend against a coercive attack from China or Russia, while staying ahead of the North Korean threat, the United States *will require additional IAMD capabilities beyond the current POR.*"<sup>20</sup> The Commission recommends: "The DOD should *urgently pursue deployment of any capabilities that prove feasible.*"<sup>21</sup> In other words, there should be no self-imposed policy constraints. The Commission's recommendation here marks a watershed moment of bipartisan support for

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<sup>19</sup> *America's Strategic Posture*, p. 63. Emphasis added.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104. Emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. x. Emphasis added.

deploying strategic defenses *beyond* the Ground-based Midcourse Defense system's current focus on rogue missile threats.<sup>22</sup>

### **Nuclear Infrastructure**

The Commission also deserves credit for drawing attention to many of the less visible, though no less important, requirements to recapitalize the aging U.S. nuclear infrastructure. The Commission points out problems associated with an aging workforce, including the difficulty of recruiting workers willing to undergo exhaustive background checks and forgo more lucrative careers in the private sector. Once new hires are brought into the system, the challenge then becomes one of retention.

The Commission provides helpful recommendations to revitalize the nuclear infrastructure. These include more incentives to streamline building projects and employment practices.<sup>23</sup> All these prescriptions require a sense of urgency. The Commission underscores that corrective efforts "will require nothing short of a government-wide focus akin to the U.S. moonshot of the 1960s."<sup>24</sup> This is a tall challenge since, aside from large and highly visible delivery platforms, much of the nuclear enterprise remains out of sight – and out of mind.

### **Artificial Intelligence (AI)**

The Commission recognizes emerging technologies will play an increasingly important role in the health of the U.S. strategic posture. The Commission calls on the Secretary of

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<sup>22</sup> U.S. tactical and theater-based missile defense systems such as PAC-3 and THAAD have long enjoyed strong bipartisan support.

<sup>23</sup> *America's Strategic Posture*, p. 61.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

Defense to “immediately direct an analysis of the policy and posture effects of the threats posed by emerging and disruptive technologies, including AI.”<sup>25</sup> This is a sensible prescription, and will help inform future efforts to counter such threats.

AI-related technologies are likely to be the most consequential over the next two decades. Among other things, AI will drive the development of unmanned platforms in the air, sea, land, and space in the coming years; these systems are likely to play a major role in any U.S.-China military confrontation. AI technologies will help China operationalize its Multi-Domain Precision Warfare concept, which aims to incapacitate U.S. command and control networks in the event of conflict.<sup>26</sup>

The opaque nature of the Chinese system makes it hard to discern the full extent of Chinese AI-related developments. But this much is clear: China aims to be the world leader in AI by the end of the decade while sparing no expense to achieve this goal. The United States must take China’s stated intention seriously.

The ability to employ AI-related technologies at scale is critical. Last summer, the Pentagon announced its Replicator Initiative to produce and deploy thousands of AI- guided drones in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>27</sup> It remains an open question whether the Pentagon can follow through given

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, Annual Report to Congress, October 2023, p. 34, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/1/2023-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>.

<sup>27</sup> For more details on the Pentagon’s drone initiative, see Noah Robertson, “Replicator: An inside look at the Pentagon’s ambitious drone program,” *Defense News*, December 19, 2023, available at <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2023/12/19/replicator-an-inside-look-at-the-pentagons-ambitious-drone-program/>.



the shrunken and dilapidated state of America's Defense Industrial Base.

### **Arms Control**

Notwithstanding the contest for military advantage, the Commission recognizes that great power competition does not rule out the possibility of cooperation with adversaries. It concludes, rightly, that the United States should be open to verifiable arms control agreements that would serve its security interests. This could include, for example, confidence building measures and agreements to reduce the risk of accidental war. That said, the United States should also guard against any temptation to use its existing or projected missile defense technologies as a bargaining chip in future arms control negotiations.

In the near term, the Commission acknowledges that the prospects for strategic level agreements with Russia and or China appear "unlikely in the near future."<sup>28</sup> In February 2023, Russia announced that it was "suspending" its participation in the New START Treaty. For its part, China has shown zero interest in participating in strategic level talks, claiming such efforts are aimed to lock it into an inferior position.

### **Allies and Partners**

Emphasizing the importance of allies and partners, the Commission mentions the landmark 2021 agreement with Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States (AUKUS) and the F-35 joint development program. The Commission also draws attention to the fact that "Japan is moving quickly to develop and mass produce long-range missiles, which could significantly increase security for both the

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<sup>28</sup> *America's Strategic Posture*, p. 83.

United States and Japan.”<sup>29</sup> Such improvements can come none too soon, as concerns mount about the inadequacy of the U.S. Defense Industrial Base.<sup>30</sup>

Beyond this, however, the Commission offers few specifics on how allies and partners can assist the United States to strengthen its overall posture. In this, the Commission missed an opportunity to float bolder proposals. Consider the challenge presented by China’s growing navy, which has become the world’s largest.<sup>31</sup> Despite U.S. efforts to increase the size of its own fleet, China’s lead is expected to widen in the coming decades. In response, the United States should consider an AUKUS-like agreement among Indo-Pacific allies to build more surface warships. The United States could, for example, explore collaborating with South Korea and Japan—two countries that have sizeable ship-building industries.

## Conclusion

Overall, the Commission makes a valuable contribution to the posture debate. The report’s many recommendations reflect a strong non-partisan consensus, which is a

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>30</sup> See Seth Jones, “Empty Bins in a Wartime Environment: The Challenge to the U.S. Defense Industrial Base,” *A Report of the CSIS International Security Program*, January 2023, available at <https://features.csis.org/preparing-the-US-industrial-base-to-deter-conflict-with-China/>; and, Luke Nicastro, “The U.S. Defense industrial Base: Background and Issues for Congress,” *Congressional Research Service*, October 12, 2023, available at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47751>.

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, Annual Report to Congress, October 2023, p. 55, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/2023-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>.

noteworthy achievement in and of itself. Yet it is far from assured that Congress will embrace the recommendations in a bipartisan fashion.

The Commission correctly points out that “No U.S. defense strategy can be successful without the sustained support of the American people.”<sup>32</sup> It thus calls on political leaders to make the case for improving America’s military posture. Last fall, Congress held hearings on the Commission’s findings and recommendations. This is a useful start. But the Commission’s clarion call to action must be matched by the political resolve to provide, in a sustained and predictable fashion, the U.S. military with greater resources to counter the growing two-peer threat. Anything less and the United States will lose—perhaps irrevocably—the opportunity to strengthen deterrence by bringing its strategic posture into alignment with its global responsibilities.

*The Honorable James H. Anderson served from 2018 to 2020 as Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans, and Capabilities and as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.*

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<sup>32</sup> *America’s Strategic Posture*, p. 6.

# **Hard Truths and Uncomfortable Facts: The Strategic Posture Commission Report**

**Jennifer R. Bradley**

## **Introduction**

The United States finds itself in an unfamiliar and uncomfortable situation. For the first time in decades, it is confronting a security environment not characterized by U.S. military superiority, but rather the challenges posed by the growing and diverse threats posed by Russia and China—two nations dissatisfied with the current international order. This is the backdrop from which the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States undertook its review. It concluded that the United States is facing an increasingly dangerous security environment with the emergence of two peer nuclear adversaries in the 2027-2035 timeframe which require the United States to adapt its defense strategy and strategic posture. However, for a nation accustomed to military superiority and the sense of invulnerability which that position brings, the conclusions of the Commission are uncomfortable and challenge national complacency in the face of emerging existential threats.

## **Combatting Complacency**

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 occurred at the same time the United States was capitalizing on advances in information technology to enhance its military capability. This resulted in the United States possessing unrivaled military power.<sup>1</sup> This military superiority was

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<sup>1</sup> David A. Ochmanek, Anna Dowd, Stephen J. Flanagan, Andrew R. Hoehn, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Michael J. Lostumbo, and Michael J.

demonstrated repeatedly in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, just to name a few. At the same time, great power competition seemed to be a feature of the past. The Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China could not rival the military or economic power of the United States and its allies, and the challenges the United States and allies faced from international terrorist organizations or rogue states, while dangerous, cannot be likened to a peer competitor. The United States enjoyed escalation dominance in any domain over any adversary it faced – this is a very comfortable position.

Unfortunately, this dominance is fleeting. While the United States sought to build better relationships with Russia and China, conflicting values and cultures resulted in increasingly adversarial relationships, with Russia and China building a strategic partnership to counter the United States and its allies. Further, as foreign policy analyst Angela Stent has stated, “China and Russia are revisionist powers in as much as they share a commitment to creating a ‘post-West’ global order which takes their interests into account and is conducive to authoritarian rule.”<sup>2</sup> This has led to increased competition with Russia and China for influence and leadership in the U.S.-led rules-based international order.

Further, Russia and China, two autocratic nations obsessed with regime survival, viewed the unmatched power of the United States as a potential existential threat and began modernizing and expanding their militaries accordingly. As the Strategic Posture Commission points out, Russia is completing its strategic nuclear

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Mazarr, *Inflection Point: How to Reverse the Erosion of U.S. and Allied Military Power and Influence* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Angela Stent, “Russia and China: Axis of Revisionists?” *Brookings Institution*, February 2020, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/russia-and-china-axis-of-revisionists/>.

modernization, and improving its existing forces while also creating new nuclear capabilities. The Commission also concluded that Russia is violating the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) and the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) by actively pursuing these capabilities.<sup>3</sup> And while its conventional capabilities remain inferior to that of the United States and its allies, this may force Russia to rely more on its nuclear capabilities to achieve its objectives. This is increasingly dangerous as Putin has demonstrated a high risk-taking propensity which could lead to miscalculation.

Like Russia, China's nuclear modernization and expansion is well underway. It is expanding both the size and sophistication of its nuclear arsenal at a pace described as "breathtaking" by former U.S. Strategic Command Commander, Admiral Charles Richard.<sup>4</sup> The Commission echoed the previously released *Report on the Military Power and Security Developments of the People's Republic of China*, stating that China will most likely reach quantitative nuclear parity with the United States by the mid-2030s.<sup>5</sup> Like Russia, China is also making advancements in biological and chemical capabilities that may be in violation of the BWC and CWC. Unlike Russia, China's advancements in electronic warfare coupled with its conventional military modernization "can deny, disrupt, or

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<sup>3</sup> Madelyn R. Creedon and Jon L. Kyl, Chair and Vice Chair, *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2023), p. 10, available at <https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/a/am/americas-strategic-posture/strategic-posture-commission-report.ashx>.

<sup>4</sup> David Vergun, "China, Russia Pose Strategic Challenge for U.S., Allies, Admiral Says," *Defense.gov*, August 12, 2021, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2729519/china-russia-pose-strategic-challenges-for-us-allies-admiral-says/>.

<sup>5</sup> Creedon and Kyl, *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. 8.

diminish U.S. conventional forces' ability to project power effectively, and can threaten both U.S. NC3 and the critical national infrastructure that supports it."<sup>6</sup> In short, China can challenge the United States in any domain across the spectrum of conflict.

The Strategic Posture Commission report is not the first report to warn of diminishing U.S. military capability and increased vulnerability, though it may be the most prominent. Analysts and strategists have been warning for years about the increased threat posed by Russia and China coupled with the United States losing its unrivaled military superiority, but the warnings have gone unheeded. The latest warnings from RAND have been most blunt, "The U.S. defense strategy has been predicated on U.S. military forces that were superior in all domains to those of any adversary. This superiority is gone. The United States and its allies no longer have a virtual monopoly on the technologies and capabilities that made them so dominant against adversarial forces."<sup>7</sup> Why then, do we remain complacent in preparing to address what the Strategic Posture Commission report calls "an unprecedented and growing threat to U.S. national security and potentially the U.S. homeland"?<sup>8</sup>

This complacency may stem from both a lack of imagination and a sense of invincibility, potentially triggering a host of the 50 plus cognitive biases that can influence decision making and undermine critical thinking.<sup>9</sup> Cognitive biases are systematic errors in human decision making that can make it difficult to make good choices. The

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ochmanek, et al., *Inflection Point*, op. cit., p. viii.

<sup>8</sup> Creedon and Kyl, *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Iain King, "What Do Cognitive Biases Mean for Deterrence?," *The Strategy Bridge*, February 12, 2019, available at <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2019/2/12/what-do-cognitive-biases-mean-for-deterrence>.

last war between great powers was in 1945 and even then the U.S. homeland was left mostly unscathed, protected by large oceans. In the living memory of current policy makers and military strategists, there has not been a conflict in which U.S. influence and power could be matched. This historical experience can lead to the overconfidence bias, where we overestimate our abilities, or the normalcy bias, where we fail to plan for a crisis because it has not yet occurred.<sup>10</sup> These biases tend to make leaders risk averse and reluctant to act.

The conclusions of the Strategic Posture Commission report challenge this complacency and its recommendations suggest prudent actions to increase the agility of the United States to deter and, if necessary, confront future threats. Though the report was focused on the strategic posture of the United States, its recommendations were more holistic in nature, including recommendations to “implement a truly integrated, whole-of-government strategy to address the 2027-2035 threat environment,” and a host of non-nuclear capabilities to reduce risk and maintain the technological edge of the United States and Allies.<sup>11</sup> But it was the warning that “the current U.S. strategic posture will be insufficient to achieve the objectives of U.S. defense strategy” and the recommendation that the nuclear force be supplemented to “address the larger number of targets due to the growing Chinese nuclear threat” that garnered the most attention.<sup>12</sup> Pundits immediately decried the Commission’s “doomsday thinking”<sup>13</sup> and suggested it

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<sup>10</sup> Shana Lebowitz, Ebony Flake, and Samantha Lee, “You might not be as Impartial as you think. Here are 20 Cognitive Biases that can screw up your Decisions,” *Business Insider*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/cognitive-biases-that-affect-decisions-2016-7>.

<sup>11</sup> Creedon and Kyl, *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. x.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. viii, 35.

<sup>13</sup> Amy J. Nelson, “Doomsday Thinking Leads the Strategic Posture Commission Astray,” *Brookings Institution*, November 13, 2023, available



contained “echoes of Dr. Strangelove”<sup>14</sup> while warning it is “potentially destabilizing.”<sup>15</sup> While rehashing the worn Cold War tropes to argue against the Commission’s recommendations may be eye-catching, doing so distracts from the serious issues the report is attempting to address.

It is a certainty that the strategic environment is changing in ways that the United States cannot prevent. Further, the challenge of deterring and competing with two nuclear peers is an unprecedented threat that the United States and allies are not yet sufficiently equipped to confront. Former U.S. Northern Command Commander, General Charles Jacoby suggests that the changing strategic environment may present the United States with a “transformational opportunity” as long as we are agile enough to capitalize on it, stating that agility requires “the organizational capacity to effectively detect, assess, and respond to environmental changes in ways that are purposeful, decisive, and grounded in the will to win.”<sup>16</sup> Specifically, the time for complacency has ended and the time for action is now.

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at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/doomsday-thinking-leads-the-strategic-posture-commission-astray/>.

<sup>14</sup> William Hartung, “Strategic Posture Review: Echoes of Dr. Strangelove,” *Responsible Statecraft*, October 16, 2023, available at <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/strategic-posture-commission-nuclear-weapons/>.

<sup>15</sup> Caroline Russell, “NTI’s Lynn Rusten on the Costly and Potentially Destabilizing Recommendations in the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission Report,” *NTI*, November 20, 2023, available at <https://www.nti.org/atomic-pulse/ntis-lynn-rusten-on-the-costly-and-potentially-destabilizing-recommendations-in-the-2023-strategic-posture-commission-report/>.

<sup>16</sup> Leo M. Tilman and Charles Jacoby, “The Most Agile Day” *Strategy + Business*, February 24, 2020, available at <https://www.strategy-business.com/article/The-most-agile-day>.

## Conclusion

The Strategic Posture Commission Report was full of hard truths and uncomfortable facts about the future security environment and the ability of the United States to meet the challenge. It may be tempting to delay taking action or disregard some of the warnings. However, the Commission seemed to understand this temptation by outlining up front what exactly is at stake if the United States fails to act. Not only do Russia and China pose an existential threat to the United States and allies, their desire to reshape “the foundational principles of the international order that the United States and its Allies have painstakingly built over the past 75 years—self-determination, territorial integrity, political sovereignty, individual freedoms, human rights, free markets, access to the global commons and information—will be lost.”<sup>17</sup> These values were hard-fought and achieved by taking action.

The recommendations made by the Commission were bipartisan and unanimous, making them more powerful. That does not mean they are not without risk, but the United States cannot let risk aversion dominate decision making. This does not mean taking risks blindly, but analyzing and deliberately deciding when to accept risk and how to mitigate them. This will require reimagining processes and procedures in order to address the shortfalls the Commission identified with a sense of urgency. Retired General John Hyten identified this problem while he was Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, lamenting, “we’re still moving unbelievably slow. We’re so bureaucratic and we’re so risk averse.”<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, failing to accept risk

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<sup>17</sup> Creedon and Kyl, *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. 4

<sup>18</sup> Mikayla Easley, “Just In: Hyten Says Pentagon Moving ‘Unbelievably Slow’ with Modernization,” *National Defense*, September 13, 2021, available at <https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2021/9/13/hyten>

now may mean the United States may have to accept a tremendous amount of risk later or be forced to accept unfavorable outcomes or dangerous conditions.

The security environment is transforming, and the United States needs to transform with it. Facing two nuclear peers will be difficult, but taking prudent steps now will ensure the U.S. nuclear force remains safe, secure, reliable and able to confront a greater threat. It will be uncomfortable; there will be risk, but taking prudent steps now will ensure deterrence remains credible and the United States and allies continue to prosper. As the Strategic Posture Commission stated, “The challenges are unmistakable; the problems are urgent; the steps are needed now.”<sup>19</sup> Americans have never avoided hard or uncomfortable situations; we should not start now.

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-says-pentagon-is-moving-unbelievably-slow-in-defense-modernization.

<sup>19</sup> Creedon and Kyl, *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. xi.

# Developing a Nuclear Posture with and without Arms Control

Matthew R. Costlow

## Introduction

After surveying the bleak near-term prospects for nuclear arms control with Russia or China, the 2023 bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission (SPC) issued its consensus conclusion that the United States must develop its nuclear posture in preparation for “a future with and without arms control agreements.”<sup>1</sup> This article examines how the United States can implement this policy recommendation, with special emphasis given to the other findings and recommendations contained in the Commission’s final report, *America’s Strategic Posture*, that could aid the process. Specifically, there are three SPC recommendations that are directly related to preparing for a future with and without nuclear arms control.

First, the SPC recommends developing deterrence requirements for the U.S. nuclear force before proposing any arms control offers – that is, the choice of strategy helps produce requirements against which to evaluate arms control proposals. Second, the SPC recommends expanding the U.S. nuclear production infrastructure, both delivery systems and warheads, to leave open options for future U.S. leaders to adjust the size and makeup of the force. Third, the SPC recommends planning to invest in additional U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> Madelyn R. Creedon and Jon L. Kyl, chair and vice chair, *America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Senate Armed Services Committee, 2023), p. 81, available at [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/americas\\_strategic\\_posture\\_the\\_final\\_report\\_of\\_the\\_congressional\\_commission\\_on\\_the\\_strategic\\_posture\\_of\\_the\\_united\\_states.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/americas_strategic_posture_the_final_report_of_the_congressional_commission_on_the_strategic_posture_of_the_united_states.pdf).

strategic nuclear capabilities while supplementing the non-strategic nuclear force, which will help meet deterrence requirements and could prove useful for creating the conditions for arms control negotiations.

### **Arms Control as a Tool, Not a Strategy**

The 2023 Strategic Posture Commission followed the well-worn pattern, famously expounded by the Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz, of identifying first the policy goal that the United States should pursue, and then the means of pursuing that policy. As Clausewitz stated, “The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose.”<sup>2</sup> The Commission concluded the United States should pursue, in the broadest policy sense, staying “engaged in international affairs to maintain and further its national interests, prevent armed aggression and escalation if possible, and prevail in armed conflict if necessary.”<sup>3</sup> More narrowly focused, the Commission recommended: “The objectives of U.S. strategy must include effective deterrence and defeat of simultaneous Russian and Chinese aggression in Europe and Asia using conventional forces. If the United States and its Allies and partners do not field sufficient conventional forces to achieve this objective, U.S. strategy would need to be altered to increase reliance on nuclear weapons to deter or counter opportunistic or collaborative aggression in the other theater.”<sup>4</sup>

To achieve this policy objective, it recommended maintaining a nuclear strategy based on six fundamental tenets: assured second strike; flexible response to achieve national objectives; tailored deterrence; extended

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<sup>2</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, author, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds., *On War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p. 99.

<sup>3</sup> Creedon and Kyl, *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

deterrence and assurance; calculated ambiguity in declaratory policy; and, hedge against risk.<sup>5</sup> The Commission then proceeded to explain the composition of the U.S. strategic posture necessary to fulfill its recommended strategy, both conventional and nuclear forces.

After explaining the composition and characteristics needed in a U.S. strategic posture to support the Commission's recommended strategy, the report's "Risk Reduction" section then recommends:

... a strategy to address the two-nuclear-peer threat environment be a prerequisite for developing U.S. nuclear arms control limits for the 2027- 2035 timeframe. The Commission recommends that once a strategy and its related force requirements are established, the U.S. government determine whether and how nuclear arms control limits continue to enhance U.S. security. The United States cannot properly evaluate a future nuclear arms control proposal that will serve the U.S. interest, by reducing risk and avoiding the costs of an unconstrained nuclear arms competition, without knowing what the U.S. nuclear force requirements will be. Any future arms control proposal must be consistent with U.S. nuclear force requirements.<sup>6</sup>

This is a logical conclusion given the Commission's commitment to the ends, ways, and means model. Yet, despite its inherent logic, multiple proponents of nuclear reductions disputed the Commission's prioritization of developing strategy first and arms control criteria later.

Analysts at the Federation of American Scientists, for instance, stated that, "The Commission recommends

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 85-86.

subjugating nuclear arms control to the nuclear build-up...” and, “Put another way, this constitutes a recommendation to participate in an arms race, and then figure out how to control those same arms later.”<sup>7</sup> Another analyst from the Union of Concerned Scientists stated, “The commission even seems to question whether the US government should continue to pursue arms control in the future at all.”<sup>8</sup> These comments are a fundamental misrepresentation of the Commission’s findings and recommendations and, more broadly, demonstrate a lack of understanding of the role of arms control within national strategy.

If the United States is to prepare for a future with or without arms control agreements, as the Commission recommends, then there is no other prudent way forward than determining the force requirements for deterrence first. Once complete, those requirements become a standard against which the United States can then judge arms control proposals. To reverse this prioritization would be to stand strategic logic on its head by making the tool of arms control the driver of national policy. What is worse, the tool of arms control is cooperative in nature—thus, elevating arms control priorities to the primary driver of national U.S. policy would simultaneously elevate the arms control partner (i.e., the adversary) to the deciding factor in U.S. strategic posture outcomes.

Instead, the Commission recommends U.S. officials develop a nuclear strategy and associated deterrence

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<sup>7</sup> Hans Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, and Mackenzie Knight, “Strategic Posture Commission Report Calls For Broad Nuclear Buildup,” *FAS.org*, October 12, 2023, available at <https://fas.org/publication/strategic-posture-commission-report-calls-for-broad-nuclear-buildup/>.

<sup>8</sup> Tara Drozdenko, “Why the Congressional Strategic Posture Report is not about Nuclear Deterrence, but Warfighting,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, November 8, 2023, available at <https://thebulletin.org/2023/11/why-the-congressional-strategic-posture-report-is-not-about-nuclear-deterrence-but-warfighting/>.

requirements first, both because it is necessary for long-range procurement decisions, and also because it sets sufficiency criteria for arms control negotiators to judge proposals and their effects on U.S. national interests. Summarized differently, the United States must know in advance the capabilities it *needs* for deterrence before it can evaluate arms control offers that can shape the security conditions it *wants*. This prioritization is all the more critical because the United States is in the early stages of modernizing each leg of its nuclear triad of submarines, bombers, and intercontinental ballistic missiles. The capabilities and numbers of the nuclear arsenal that U.S. officials settle on for deterrence requirements (acknowledging the adversary is the ultimate determinant of sufficiency) will influence adversary threat perceptions and potentially their desire to enter into arms control negotiations.

### Keeping Options Open

The Strategic Posture Commission focused on the 2027-2035 timeframe for its analysis, thus many of its recommendations are oriented toward policy and infrastructure changes meant to place the United States in a better position to achieve its policy goals in the future. As stated by the Chair and Vice Chair in their preface, “We believe that prompt actions are needed to provide future decision-makers *viable options* to credibly deter conflict. Being unprepared for the reality of two nuclear peers, who are dedicated to and focused on undermining the post-Cold War international order that has served the United States and its Allies and partners so well, is, in our view, not an option.”<sup>9</sup> Preparing for a future with or without arms control, in the Commission’s view, therefore requires an

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<sup>9</sup> Emphasis added. Creedon and Kyl, *America’s Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. v.



improved and expanded defense infrastructure that allows the Department of Defense and Department of Energy to adapt U.S. force capabilities to dynamic security conditions.

The Commission recommends “urgently” expanding U.S. defense infrastructure to fulfill three particular purposes: meeting deterrence requirements in a two-nuclear-peer threat environment, hedging against four forms of risk (technical failure, programmatic delays, operational loss, and worsened geopolitical environment), and signaling U.S. resolve to adversaries.<sup>10</sup> Each of these purposes increases in importance in a world without arms control agreements. As discussed above, meeting U.S. deterrence requirements is a prerequisite before offering arms control proposals, and hedging against risk only becomes more prudent in the more dynamic two-nuclear-peer threat environment. Similarly, a strengthened defense infrastructure will likely add credibility to U.S. deterrence threats because it is a visible manifestation of U.S. political will—both in meeting the large investment of time and money required. As the scholar Colin Gray stated succinctly, “The United States requires nuclear forces capable of providing a convincing expression for its strategy.”<sup>11</sup>

An important secondary benefit to an updated and expanded U.S. defense infrastructure might be an improved ability to deter or respond to an adversary’s violation of arms control agreements. Although not mentioned as an explicit benefit of a highly adaptable defense infrastructure, the Commission would likely recognize that the ability to produce or modify weapons relatively quickly would have important benefits for arms control purposes. As illustrated by Fred Iklé’s famous 1961 essay, “After Detection—

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> Colin S. Gray, “The Strategic Implications of the Nuclear Balance and Arms Control,” chapter in, Richard F. Staar, ed., *Arms Control: Myth Versus Reality* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1984), p. 24.

What?," one of the classic problems in arms control is deterring and responding to arms control violations.<sup>12</sup> If an adversary believes that it can potentially escape detection and/or a timely and costly response, as may have been the case with Russia's violation of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, then there is little to deter an arms control violation.<sup>13</sup> However, a more responsive U.S. defense infrastructure may influence the adversary's decision process such that the perceived risk of detection and a U.S. response outweighs the potential benefits of the violation itself.

### **Procuring the Necessary Forces**

Finally, the Strategic Posture Commission recommended a third way to prepare for a future with or without nuclear arms control: planning to deploy additional nuclear delivery systems for intercontinental forces as well as developing and deploying additional theater nuclear capabilities. These modifications to the U.S. strategic posture, according to the Commission, are meant to support a U.S. strategy of deterring simultaneous conflict with Russia and China while retaining the ability to achieve objectives should deterrence fail.<sup>14</sup> As stated before, the United States cannot seriously consider acting on arms control proposals until it has determined what capabilities are necessary for its security in an environment where its adversaries' compliance with, or even the existence of, arms control treaties cannot be assumed. Yet, even in a world

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<sup>12</sup> Fred Charles Iklé, "After Detection - What?," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (1961).

<sup>13</sup> "Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats on Russia's INF Treaty Violation," *DNI.gov*, 2018, available at <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/speeches-interviews/speeches-interviews-2018/3270-director-of-national-intelligence-daniel-coats-on-russia-s-inf-treaty-violation>.

<sup>14</sup> Creedon and Kyl, *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. 47.

without arms control, the recommended nuclear posture changes do not preclude a future return to arms control negotiations, should conditions change and the pursuit of arms control at that time be considered in the U.S. national interest. Indeed, the recommended posture changes may even increase the likelihood that Russia or China would consider negotiating an arms control agreement with the United States.

Increasing U.S. nuclear capabilities to strengthen deterrence can also result in an improved negotiating position for arms control, as the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) recognized. After describing the deterrence and extended deterrence benefits of pursuing a nuclear-armed, sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) as a supplement to the U.S. nuclear force, the 2018 NPR stated, “Indeed, U.S. pursuit of a SLCM may provide the necessary incentive for Russia to negotiate seriously a reduction of its non-strategic nuclear weapons, just as the prior Western deployment of intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe led to the 1987 INF Treaty.”<sup>15</sup> In much the same way, the Commission’s recommended U.S. nuclear force posture modifications are consistent with the need to prepare for a world without arms control while also not precluding – and even, perhaps, improving – the chances that Russia or China may seek arms control negotiations with the United States.

Moreover, the Commission also provides an example of what can happen if the United States does not procure the necessary forces, or deterrence requirements increase rapidly beyond the capacity of the defense infrastructure. In such a situation the only course of action may be modifying existing forces. In a little noticed passage, the Commission highlighted a relatively unexamined consequence of arms

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<sup>15</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2018), p. 55, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>.

control: the potential need to undo changes to U.S. military capabilities that were made to comply with arms control agreements. In the Commission's words, "The Commission recommends [a] set of urgent actions [to] include, at a minimum: exercise upload of ICBM and SLBM warheads on existing deployed systems; [and] develop plans and procedures to 're-convert' SLBM launchers and B-52 bombers that were rendered incapable of launching a nuclear weapon under New START..."<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, U.S. officials should, in keeping with the Commission's findings and recommendations, develop its nuclear force requirements with special emphases on building a diverse range of delivery systems and incorporating adaptability within those systems. As the history of arms control demonstrates, both in the nuclear and pre-nuclear eras, agreements generally divert arms competitions from one area to another (unrestricted) area.<sup>17</sup> By building a diverse range of delivery systems for deterrence, the United States can potentially increase its chances of negotiating a favorable arms control agreement should it be in the national interest. Similarly, the U.S. ability to upload additional warheads to its ICBMs and "re-convert" bombers and submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) tubes to nuclear-capable status demonstrates the value of adaptability in existing forces for meeting dynamic deterrence requirements. Thus, a diverse range of nuclear delivery systems, and adaptability within those systems, will be valuable capabilities in U.S. nuclear forces amidst an uncertain future arms control environment.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> For classic texts on this point focused on the nuclear and pre-nuclear era, respectively, see, Colin S. Gray, "Arms Control Does Not Control Arms," *Orbis*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Summer 1993), pp. 333-348; and, Robert Kaufman, *Arms Control during the Pre-Nuclear Era: The United States and Naval Limitations between the Two World Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

## Conclusion

The 2023 Strategic Posture Commission provided perhaps the clearest, most authoritative call yet to the U.S. government on the need to prepare for a future with or without nuclear arms control agreements—a possibility the United States has not faced in over 50 years. Given the Commission’s future-oriented focus, its findings and recommendations are meant to guide U.S. officials to make the right decisions in the near term so the United States can meet its deterrence requirements long term. First, the Commission recommends U.S. officials develop deterrence requirements for the U.S. strategic posture first, before offering or acting on arms control proposals. Developing these deterrence requirements first will provide U.S. officials with a standard by which to judge the desirability and feasibility of future arms control proposals. Second, the Commission recommends building up the necessary defense infrastructure to allow the United States the maximum flexibility and capacity to meet rapidly shifting deterrence requirements. Third and finally, the Commission recommends procuring additional strategic and theater nuclear systems to meet those deterrence requirements—an action that will likely improve the U.S. negotiating position should arms control become a realistic possibility in the future. The increasingly likely prospect of a world without arms control agreements will indeed be unknown territory for this generation of U.S. government officials; but the Strategic Posture Commission provides a prudent guide for how to prepare for this future: securing the capabilities needed to meet deterrence requirements, and posturing those forces to support vital U.S. interests in the uncertain future for arms control.

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# Strategic Posture Commission Reports and U.S. Allies: Challenges and Opportunities

Michaela Dodge

Many things can change over 14 years, as reflected by differences between the 2009 and 2023 Strategic Posture Commission (SPC) reports.<sup>1</sup> The following contribution focuses on comparing them from a perspective of alliance politics. The analysis highlights points of departure and commonality between the two reports. It notes a significant degree of consistency in their emphasis on the importance of allies and partners as contributors to U.S. security. Given the reports' bipartisan nature, this continuous agreement is good news for those concerned about domestic levels of U.S. polarization and its impact on U.S. willingness to engage internationally.

## Deteriorating Global Security and Its Impact on U.S. Allies and Partners

Despite significant areas of agreements, the respective assessments of the threat environment mark a significant point of divergence between the two reports and drive a discussion of alliance issues the Commissions consider important. The 2023 report explicitly emphasized that alliance relations are central in a deteriorating security environment in which the United States may be required to deter two (or more) nuclear-armed adversaries simultaneously.<sup>2</sup> Regional developments, including

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<sup>1</sup> William Perry and James Schlesinger, et al., *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2009); and, Madelyn Creedon and Jon Kyl, et al., *America's Strategic Posture* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Creedon and Kyl, et al., *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. x.

Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, China's massive nuclear and conventional buildup, and North Korea's belligerent continuation of its nuclear weapons program accompanied by improvements in missile technologies, increase the risk of regional conflicts.<sup>3</sup>

These developments generate an additional demand for U.S. (and allied) assets relative to the 2009 SPC assessment. Should the United States and allies fail to field the required conventional forces, the U.S. reliance on nuclear forces could increase for the first time since the end of the Cold War. In the words of the 2023 Commission, "If the United States and its Allies and partners do not field sufficient conventional forces to achieve this objective, U.S. strategy would need to be altered to increase reliance on nuclear weapons to deter or counter opportunistic or collaborative aggression in the other theater."<sup>4</sup>

Over recent decades, allied assurance requirements have consistently played an important role in developing the U.S. nuclear force posture. The 2009 report argued that new challenges to extended deterrence associated with Russia, China, and proliferation existed.<sup>5</sup> It noted the differing perceptions among allies with respect to their understanding of assurance and extended deterrence and that these perceptions might generate requirements for U.S. nuclear forces that would be different had the United States worried only about its own security.<sup>6</sup> The 2009 report stated that it was an imperative for the United States to understand and address allied concerns and assurance requirements in an evolving national security environment.<sup>7</sup> The 2023 Commission echoed these themes, although the

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. vii, 80.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. viii.

<sup>5</sup> Perry and Schlesinger, et al., *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

deterioration of the security environment made them somewhat more urgent because it has made allies potentially more vulnerable to regional aggression.<sup>8</sup>

Adversaries' modernization programs "pose threats to the U.S. ability to project power in support" of its allies, thereby making it potentially more difficult (militarily and politically) for the United States to intervene on their behalf.<sup>9</sup> The 2023 Commission explicitly stated that "it is in the U.S. national interest to maintain, strengthen, and when appropriate, expand its network of alliances and partnerships" and that withdrawing "from U.S. alliances and partnerships would directly benefit adversaries, invite aggression that the United States might later have to reverse, and ultimately decrease American, allied, and partner security and economic prosperity."<sup>10</sup> In fact, the topic of allies and partners warranted an entire chapter in the 2023 Commission report, unlike relatively brief mentions in the 2009 report.<sup>11</sup>

While the importance of allies and partners is highlighted throughout the 2009 report, the issue did not receive the kind of focused attention it did in 2023. The explicit endorsement of the importance of U.S. allies and a more detailed enunciation of the contribution they make to U.S. national security (and its economy) was likely prompted by alliance challenges during the intervening years between the 2009 and 2023 SPC reports. These challenges begin with an increasingly isolationist strand in U.S. domestic politics.

According to a 2022 Chicago Council on Global Affairs poll, the desire for the United States to remain globally

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<sup>8</sup> Creedon and Kyl, et al., *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. x.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., op. cit., pp. 75-80.



engaged among those surveyed was the lowest since 2014.<sup>12</sup> More than half (55 percent) of Americans surveyed in a Pew Research Center poll said “that the U.S. should pay less attention to problems overseas and concentrate on problems at home.”<sup>13</sup> President Donald Trump reportedly wanted to withdraw the United States from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).<sup>14</sup> He also reportedly considered a withdrawal of all U.S. forces from the Republic of Korea.<sup>15</sup> Had these policies materialized, they would have severely undermined U.S. standing among its allies, let alone being welcomed by its adversaries. As of this writing, U.S. help to Ukraine has stopped after becoming embroiled in a fight over a domestic political issue.<sup>16</sup> It appears that U.S. international engagements could become a hostage to increasing polarization within the U.S. political system, which makes the bipartisan 2023 Commission’s

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<sup>12</sup> Dina Smeltz, Ivo Daalder, Karl Friedhoff, Craig Kafura, and Emily Sullivan, “Pivot to Europe: US Public Opinion in a Time of War,” *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, October 20, 2022, pp. 5-6, available at [https://globalaffairs.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/2022%20Chicago%20Council%20Survey%20Report%20PDF\\_0.pdf](https://globalaffairs.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/2022%20Chicago%20Council%20Survey%20Report%20PDF_0.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Jacob Poushter, Moira Fagan, Sneha Gubbala and Jordan Lippert, “Americans Hold Positive Feelings Toward NATO and Ukraine, See Russia as an Enemy,” *Pew Research Center*, May 10, 2023, available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/05/10/americans-hold-positive-feelings-toward-nato-and-ukraine-see-russia-as-an-enemy/>.

<sup>14</sup> Julian Barnes and Helene Cooper, “Trump Discussed Pulling U.S. From NATO, Aides Say Amid New Concerns Over Russia,” *The New York Times*, January 14, 2019, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/14/us/politics/nato-president-trump.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Byun Duk-kun, “Trump proposed complete withdrawal of U.S. Forces Korea: Esper,” *Yonhap News Agency*, May 11, 2022, available at <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220511000300325>.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Collinson, “Ukraine’s US lifeline is hanging by a thinning thread,” *CNN*, December 5, 2023, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/05/politics/us-ukraine-aid-congress-analysis/index.html>.

endorsement of and focus on alliances that much more important.

Alliances and partnerships have been valuable for the United States. Aside from economic benefits of trade hinging on keeping sea lanes of commerce open, allies have contributed materially by providing troops and “host nation support for U.S. logistics hubs or forward-basing,” and diplomatically.<sup>17</sup> They also contribute to joint development programs, lessen burden on U.S. forces, and facilitate information sharing.<sup>18</sup> These benefits make adversaries want to disrupt them.

In the 14 years since the publication of the 2009 report, the problem of sustaining extended deterrence and allied assurance has grown more urgent and complicated. In order to account for the new strategic environment, the United States has to move from the still necessary, but not sufficient, consultations with allies to nuclear and conventional force posture adjustments beyond the current program of record – as recommended in the 2023 report.

With respect to sustaining extended deterrence and allied assurance, the 2023 Commission stated that “[a]dditional U.S. theater nuclear capabilities will be necessary in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific regions to deter adversary nuclear use and offset local conventional superiority. These additional theater capabilities will need to be deployable, survivable, and variable in their available yield options.”<sup>19</sup> So far, the U.S. nuclear infrastructure is not positioned to respond to these new demands in a reasonable timeframe. Allied conventional defense industrial bases

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<sup>17</sup> Creedon and Kyl, et al., *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., pp. 76.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

also suffer from fragmentation, lack of agility, and insufficient capacity.<sup>20</sup>

### **Arms Control Developments and the Deemphasis on International Terrorism**

The more benign view of the threat environment allowed the 2009 Commission to be more optimistic regarding arms control prospects between the United States and the Russian Federation, potentially to include the People's Republic of China. The 2009 Commission specifically argued that the moment was ripe "for a renewal of arms control with Russia" and that the "United States should pursue a much broader and more ambitious set of strategic dialogues with not just Russia but also China and U.S. allies in both Europe and Asia."<sup>21</sup> The 2009 Commission argued that allies play an important supporting role in U.S. arms control and nonproliferation activities and have to be taken into consideration in the pursuit of nuclear weapon policies, so that these policies are not perceived to weaken extended deterrence.<sup>22</sup> The 2009 Commission also noted the importance of friends and allies with regard to influencing North Korea's and Iran's decision-making calculus away from advancing their nuclear programs.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast, the 2023 Report pointed out that "for the first time in decades there will likely soon exist an international environment without any nuclear arms control agreements constraining the nuclear arsenal of any

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<sup>20</sup> Paula Alvarez-Couceiro, "Europe at a Strategic Disadvantage: A Fragmented Defense Industry," *War On the Rocks*, April 18, 2023, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2023/04/europe-at-a-strategic-disadvantage-a-fragmented-defense-industry/>.

<sup>21</sup> Perry and Schlesinger, et al., *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, op. cit., pp. xviii-xix.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

nuclear power. This situation further exacerbates the challenges facing the United States and its Allies and partners.”<sup>24</sup> Opportunities for arms control treaties are judged to be rather bleak between the United States and the Russian Federation or the PRC.<sup>25</sup> The 2023 SPC also noted that “any future nuclear arms control treaty must, as the U.S. Senate stated in its resolution of ratification to New START, address all Russian nuclear weapons.”<sup>26</sup> As Russia is continuing to increase the reliance on its battlefield nuclear weapons,<sup>27</sup> and U.S. politics remain stuck in a somewhat lackadaisical approach to the nuclear infrastructure and systems modernization, obtaining such a treaty in the near future seems highly unlikely.

Even under earlier and much better security conditions, the 2009 SPC noted with concern Central European allies’ perceptions of the disparity between U.S. and Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons.<sup>28</sup> The 2009 Commission called the need to address the imbalance “urgent,”<sup>29</sup> emphasizing that the United States ought to refrain from making significant changes to its nuclear posture without

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<sup>24</sup> Creedon and Kyl, et al., *America’s Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>27</sup> William Alberque, *Russian Military Thought and Doctrine Related to Non-strategic Nuclear Weapons: Change and Continuity*, Research Paper (London, United Kingdom: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, January 2024), available at

[https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2024/01/iiss\\_russian-military-thought-and-doctrine-related-to-non-strategic-nuclear-weapons\\_012024.pdf](https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2024/01/iiss_russian-military-thought-and-doctrine-related-to-non-strategic-nuclear-weapons_012024.pdf); and, Amanda Macias, “U.S. intel chiefs warn Putin is expanding his nuclear weapons arsenal as the war in Ukraine drags on,” *CNBC*, March 8, 2023, available at <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/03/08/us-intel-chiefs-warn-putin-is-becoming-more-reliant-on-nuclear-weapons.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Perry and Schlesinger, et al., *America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, op. cit., p. 98.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

consulting its allies.<sup>30</sup> In fact, making consultations with allies more robust was, in the 2009 Commission's opinion, key to sustaining the credibility of extended deterrence and assurance.<sup>31</sup> This necessity has not diminished between now and then, and the 2023 SPC endorses ongoing allied consultations.<sup>32</sup>

The 2009 Commission recommended the sustainment of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty,<sup>33</sup> calling its preservation the first arms control priority.<sup>34</sup> In 2014, the U.S. Government found Russia in violation of its arms control obligations under the INF Treaty.<sup>35</sup> For another 5 years the United States attempted to bring Russia back into compliance with terms of the Treaty; however, the scale of Russia's violation kept increasing. In 2019, the United States withdrew from the INF Treaty in response to Russia's continued violations.<sup>36</sup> The decision was implemented with the full support of its NATO allies.<sup>37</sup> All in all, prospects for

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>32</sup> Creedon and Kyl, et al., *America's Strategic Posture*, p. 76, op. cit.

<sup>33</sup> Perry and Schlesinger, et al., *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, op. cit., p. 106.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments Report*, July 31, 2014, available at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/rls/rpt/2014/230047.htm#inf2>.

<sup>36</sup> C. Todd Lopez, "U.S. Withdraws From Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty," U.S. Department of Defense, August 2, 2019, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1924779/us-withdraws-from-intermediate-range-nuclear-forces-treaty/>.

<sup>37</sup> *NATO and the INF Treaty*, August 2, 2019, available at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_166100.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_166100.htm).

arms control with Russia are bleak under current conditions and for the foreseeable future.<sup>38</sup>

The 2009 Commission was more concerned about a terrorist actor rather than a state using a nuclear weapon against the United States or its allies.<sup>39</sup> The 2009 Commission specifically highlighted the impact that proliferation of knowledge and technologies could have on U.S. allies and argued that the United States must play a leading role in countering these negative trends.<sup>40</sup> Given the security developments since, the 2023 Commission placed emphasis on the danger of a regional confrontation that could drive an adversary's perception of U.S. weakness in another region.<sup>41</sup>

The 2009 Commission noted that it "has also received evidence that some allies interpret the apparent lack of test readiness as a symptom of reduced U.S. commitment to extended deterrence."<sup>42</sup> Unlike the 2009 SPC, the 2023 Report did not discuss nuclear weapons testing or nuclear testing readiness in the context of allied assurance and extended deterrence. Perhaps the issue did not come up in the 2023 Commission's discussions with allies, or the Commission chose to not discuss it.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Michaela Dodge, *What Do Russia's Nuclear Threats Tell Us About Arms Control Prospects?*, *Occasional Paper* Vol. 4, No. 1 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 2024), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Vol.-4-No.-1.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> Perry and Schlesinger, et al., *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, p. 8, op. cit.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>41</sup> Creedon and Kyl, et al., *America's Strategic Posture*, p. 8, op. cit.

<sup>42</sup> Perry and Schlesinger, et al., *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, p. 51, op. cit.

<sup>43</sup> The 2023 Report's discussion of nuclear warhead testing is very limited. It was the only issue on which the 2009 SPC ended up being divided.

## U.S. Declaratory Policy and Missile Defense

The 2009 Commission noted that U.S. declaratory policy is an important component of its nuclear posture.<sup>44</sup> The Commission spoke in favor of “calculated ambiguity” and argued against U.S. adoption of the “no first use” policy, citing allied concerns such a change would bring.<sup>45</sup> The 2023 Commission similarly argued that calculated ambiguity “contributes to deterrence by creating uncertainty in the mind of potential adversaries and by assuring U.S. Allies that the United States reserves the right to employ nuclear weapons first in their defense if necessary.”<sup>46</sup> The bipartisan agreement to refrain from the United States pursuing a “no first use” or “sole purpose” nuclear weapons policy continues for good reasons, including repeatedly expressed allied opposition to such a change.<sup>47</sup>

The 2009 Commission believed that missile defenses could contribute to allied assurance “by increasing their protection and also reducing the risks that the United States would face in protecting them against a regional

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<sup>44</sup> Perry and Schlesinger, et al., *America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>46</sup> Creedon and Kyl, et al., *America’s Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>47</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of these reasons, see the discussion in, Matthew Costlow, *A Net Assessment of “No First Use” and “Sole Purpose” Nuclear Policies*, *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 1, No. 7 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 2021), available at <https://nipp.org/papers/a-net-assessment-of-no-first-use-and-sole-purpose-nuclear-policies/>. For a discussion of the issue specifically in the context of alliance politics, see Keith Payne and Michaela Dodge, “How to Unsettle an Alliance: Subordinate Extended Deterrence to Antiquated Arms Control Initiatives,” *Information Series No. 561* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 14, 2023), available at [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/keith-b-payne-and-michaela-dodge-how-to-unsettle-an-alliance-subordinate-extended-deterrence-to-antiquated-arms-control-initiatives-no-561-august-14-2023/#\\_ednref22](https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-and-michaela-dodge-how-to-unsettle-an-alliance-subordinate-extended-deterrence-to-antiquated-arms-control-initiatives-no-561-august-14-2023/#_ednref22).

aggressor.”<sup>48</sup> This was particularly the case regarding short- and medium-range missiles. To that end, the 2009 Commission recommended strengthening international cooperation on missile defense with friends and allies.<sup>49</sup> The 2023 Report highlighted the threat of adversaries’ coercive attacks potentially designed to “dissuade and deter the United States from defending or supporting its Allies and partners in a regional conflict; keep the United States from participating in any confrontation; and divide U.S. alliances.”<sup>50</sup> These would utilize precision long-strike capabilities, in addition to ballistic missiles.<sup>51</sup> The 2023 Commission pointed out that these types of attacks might require missile defense capabilities beyond the program of record.<sup>52</sup> So far, the U.S. Government has refrained from significant changes in its missile defense policy with an emphasis on the improvement of regional missile defense capabilities while maintaining limited U.S. homeland missile defense capabilities.

## Conclusion

The appreciation for the importance of U.S. nuclear weapons for allied assurance and extended deterrence runs deep in both the 2009 and 2023 SPC reports. Just as apparent is the continued importance of allies and partners for U.S. national security. The main difference between the 2009 and 2023 SPC reports is the consequence of the deterioration of the national security environment in the intervening years, leading the latter to highlight the significance of allies and partners relatively more than the former. These

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<sup>48</sup> Perry and Schlesinger, et al., *America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>50</sup> Creedon and Kyl, et al., *America’s Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. 63.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.



developments put U.S. allies and partners at risk, which necessitates adjustments in the U.S. nuclear and conventional postures beyond the program of record. U.S. leadership would be wise to follow the 2023 SPC's recommendations. The continued viability of the U.S. alliance structure might depend on it.

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# **Strategic Posture Commission Report: Landmark Process and Substance**

**Susan Koch**

## **Overview Comments**

The *Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* is an extraordinary achievement, a tribute to the Chair Madelyn Creedon, the Vice-Chair Senator Jon Kyl, the other Commissioners, their supporting staff and briefers.

When the Commissioners were named, I was quite confident that such a politically disparate group could never reach consensus. In the unlikely event that they could reach consensus, I was quite certain that it would yield only a least common denominator report—of little use to any reader, official or unofficial.

When the Commission report was published in October 2023, I was pleased to learn that I was completely wrong on both counts. Not only did the Commissioners reach consensus, their report is far from a least common denominator. It departs from long-held conventional wisdom, charting a new path for U.S. strategy and strategic posture to allow the United States, allies, and partners to survive and prosper in a unique emerging threat environment. For the first time in history, the United States, our allies, and partners must be able to deter, and if necessary defeat, two nuclear peer adversaries. Most officials and observers, including the Biden Administration, recognize those two threats, but continue to claim that our forces do not need to counter both at the same time. In perhaps the most important of its findings, the Strategic Posture Commission made clear that we must be prepared to deter and defeat Russia and China acting simultaneously or sequentially, separately or together.

I have no insight into the Commission's deliberations, but suspect that its members were able to reach consensus because of the seriousness of the threats we will face over roughly the next decade<sup>1</sup>—from nuclear peers Russia and China, North Korea and potentially Iran. Some Commissioners who may have previously questioned the need for the current strategic modernization Program of Record (POR) now agree that the POR devised in the comparatively benign strategic environment of 2010 is woefully inadequate to achieve U.S., allies' and partners' objectives in the far more complex and dangerous world we face now and will face in the near future.

Because this article must be short, it will address only three important issues in the Commission's report: alliances and extended deterrence; risk reduction; and, public and political support.

### **Alliances and Extended Deterrence**

Again, I have no insight into the Commissioners' deliberations, but a widely circulating rumor is that one subject on which they could not agree was whether to endorse development and deployment of a new nuclear-armed Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM-N). Whether or not that rumor has any foundation, it is probably more important that the Commission made very clear the characteristics of urgently required theater nuclear delivery systems:

- Forward-deployed or deployable in the European and Asia-Pacific theaters;
- Survivable against preemptive attack without force generation day-to-day;

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<sup>1</sup> The Commission focused on the strategic requirements facing the United States, our allies, and partners from 2027 to 2035.

- A range of explosive yield options, including low yield;
- Capable of penetrating advanced IAMD (integrated air and missile defense) with high confidence; and,
- Operationally relevant weapon delivery timeline (promptness).<sup>2</sup>

Many observers believe that the above points provide an excellent description of the contributions that nuclear SLCMs would make to U.S. nuclear forces. Others say it would be preferable to deploy more nuclear-capable F-35s than now planned, because those would have most of the above characteristics (the one exception might be day-to-day survivability), and be more quickly available than SLCMs. In any case, Congress added \$260 million (\$190 million for the missile and \$70 million for the warhead) to the FY2024 National Defense Authorization Act for nuclear SLCMs.

The best approach would be to pursue both continued nuclear F-35 production and deployment and SLCM-N. The combination would be most suited to meet extended deterrence and reassurance needs. Nuclear F-35 has the advantage of relatively early availability. Nuclear SLCM would be more survivable, and in turn increase adversary uncertainty. The system is usually considered to be important for deployment in the Indo-Pacific. While that would probably be its primary role, it could just as readily join dual-capable aircraft (DCA) in helping to deter, or if necessary defeat, threats to our European allies.

The Strategic Posture Commission Report emphasizes the importance of NATO and our Australasian alliances to

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<sup>2</sup> *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (October 2023), p. 100.

U.S. national security broadly defined, which in turn requires the United States to support our allies' territorial integrity and freedom:

It is in the U.S. national interest to maintain, strengthen, and when appropriate expand its network of alliances and partnerships. These relationships strengthen American security by deterring aggression regionally before it can reach the U.S. homeland, while also enabling U.S. economic prosperity through access to international markets. Withdrawing from U.S. alliances and partnerships would directly benefit U.S. adversaries, invite aggression that the United States might later have to reverse, and ultimately decrease American security and prosperity...

The United States uses its strategic posture to support Allies by extending to them deterrence, including nuclear deterrence, against adversaries. The U.S. strategic posture also serves to assure Allies that the United States is a credible security partner. As a result, many Allies perceive no need to develop their own nuclear weapon capabilities, which is in the U.S. national interest... a strong and credible U.S. nuclear arsenal is one of the greatest nonproliferation tools the United States possesses for assuring Allies they do not need to pursue nuclear weapons of their own.<sup>3</sup>

Over the last several decades, many, or even, most U.S. officials and commentators claimed that the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) is founded on three pillars: the commitment of Non-Nuclear-Weapon States (NNWS) not to acquire nuclear weapons; NNWS access to the benefits of peaceful nuclear energy; and, the commitment of

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

the five acknowledged Nuclear Weapons States (NWS) to work toward elimination of nuclear weapons.

There is considerable reason to argue that this description of the NPT's foundation overstates the NWS requirement to pursue an end to nuclear weapons. This paper, however, focuses on whether there were just three pillars undergirding the NPT. When the Treaty was signed in 1968, a fourth pillar was of paramount importance. Many U.S. allies, including West Germany, Italy and Japan, refused to give up their right to nuclear weapons until they were fully convinced of the U.S. extended deterrence capability and commitment.<sup>4</sup>

Over the years, the importance of extended deterrence as a pillar of the NPT became forgotten. That started to change in the last administration. Many allies reacted with alarm to statements by the President and Secretary of State about the European Union, NATO, and our alliances with South Korea and Japan. These fueled allied worries about the reliability of the U.S. extended deterrence commitments.

Those worries continue. A majority of South Korean citizens support an independent national nuclear force. The numbers in Japan and Australia who hold similar positions are still very small, but growing. The same is true of supporters in Europe for a European deterrent. It is difficult to think of anything more regionally destabilizing than nuclear proliferation among our European, and especially Asian, allies. Thus, the statement—and warning—in the Strategic Posture Commission Report about the importance of U.S. extended deterrence for nonproliferation deserve close attention.

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<sup>4</sup> See Susan J. Koch, "Extended Deterrence and the Future of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 39, No. 3, April 2020.

## **Risk Reduction**

The Strategic Posture Commission Report strongly supports U.S. efforts to reduce strategic risk, “including in nonproliferation and arms control, as well as the maintenance of strong, viable, and resilient military forces.”<sup>5</sup> Few advocates of risk reduction since the end of the Cold War have put similar emphasis—or even recognized—the vital link between risk reduction and effective military forces. In keeping with that essential point, the Commission stressed that arms control is not an end in itself. Thus, it finds that “the United States cannot set its arms control limits without first determining the requirements for its overall strategic posture and the strategy that those requirements will support.”<sup>6</sup>

The Commission holds that “Effectively verifiable arms control measures with parties who comply with their obligations can improve international security and stability.” But it makes clear that such measures are not possible as long as Russia cannot be trusted to honor its commitments and China refuses to participate in any substantive discussion of nuclear, including risk reduction, issues.<sup>7</sup> On January 18, 2024, a few months after the Commission issued its report, Russian Foreign Minister Serghei Lavrov announced publicly that Russia had refused any arms control discussions with the United States as long as it continued to support Ukraine. It is unclear whether that refusal covered all risk-reduction steps, including confidence-building measures, or just arms reduction negotiations. That does not really matter, because the chances are low for the foreseeable future of nuclear-related negotiations of any sort with Russia and/or China.

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<sup>5</sup> *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. 109.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Given that, the Commission recommended that the United States research and develop verification technologies that would allow future arms control negotiations that would verifiably reduce all nuclear weapons, including short-range.<sup>8</sup> As the Senate made clear in its resolution of advice and consent to ratification of the New START Treaty, such coverage would be necessary if any future arms reduction agreement with Russia was to serve the U.S. national interest. The same can probably now be said about China.

The Commission also recommended continued pursuit of confidence-building measures with Russia and China. Such agreements with either Russia or China appear *more* feasible than arms reduction treaties, but that does not mean they are *actually* feasible.

### **Public and Political Support**

The Commission's report recognizes that its recommendations for additions and improvements to U.S. nuclear forces will be costly, and thus difficult at a time of budgetary constraints. To counter arguments that the United States cannot afford to implement the Report's recommendations, the Commission wisely points out that a major war with nuclear peer adversaries would be far more expensive, in money and lives.<sup>9</sup>

Further, the Commission emphasizes that U.S. leaders would need to work vigorously to build broad bipartisan and public support for the needed modifications to nuclear and conventional force postures.<sup>10</sup> That would require reviving public diplomacy and public affairs practices that the United States Government has not used for decades. The

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, *Ibid.*, p. 89.



last Presidential prime-time television address on nuclear issues was on September 27, 1991, when President George H.W. Bush announced the sweeping reductions of the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives.

The Commission's emphasis on the need for public and political support for our needed changes to strategic posture and forces is reminiscent of the same argument made by General George C. Marshall in his 1947 speech announcing the Marshall Plan—another historic challenge to the American leadership and population:

An essential part of any successful action on the part of the United States is an understanding on the part of the people of America of the character of the problem and the remedies to be applied. Political passion and prejudice should have no part. With foresight, and a willingness on the part of our people to face up to the vast responsibility which history has clearly placed upon our country, the difficulties I have outlined [regarding the dire needs of European economic recovery after World War II] can and will be overcome.<sup>11</sup>

This subject area provides a good example of the depth as well as the breadth of the Commission's consideration of all issues involved in forging a more effective strategic posture in the face of current and emerging threats. One of the Commission's recommendations calls for placing all Department of Energy (DOE)/National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) national security budget items under the Defense Subcommittees of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees (HAC-D and SAC-D). Currently, NNSA programs, like DOD's, are authorized in

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<sup>11</sup> "The 'Marshall Plan' Speech at Harvard University, 5 June 1947," available at <https://www.oecd.org/general/themarshallplanspeechatharvarduniversity5june1947.htm>.

the annual National Defense Authorization Acts prepared by the House and Senate Armed Services Committees. Appropriations for the authorized DOD programs are considered in the HAC-D and SAC-D, but the NNSA appropriations come under the Energy and Water Sub-Committees.

Unlike their Defense counterparts, the Energy and Water Sub-Committees are responsible for several programs outside the national security area. Many of those are of significant direct importance to domestic constituencies. As a result, the Energy and Water Sub-Committees sometimes do not place the necessary priority on appropriations for national security programs, with consequent budget shortfalls for NNSA. The Strategic Posture Commission recommendation to put NNSA programs in the SAC-D and HAC-D portfolios may seem like a minor one, but in fact calls for an important change that would significantly improve the chances of the Nuclear Security Enterprise receiving much-needed modernization funds.

U.S. leaders and opinion-makers must restore nuclear deterrence issues to, or at least near to, the public attention that they had during the Cold War. Although the threats we face now are grave, the roll-out of the Commission Report does not give any grounds for optimism about future U.S. political or public support. Neither the *Washington Post* nor the *New York Times* covered the roll-out or the subsequent Senate and House hearings, and it does not appear that either paper has run even one article on the Commission report. Most public statements about the report have been from pro-arms control think tanks that strongly oppose its findings and recommendations. The absence of any focused, objective media coverage of the report provides a disturbing lesson in the difficulty of building political and public support for acting now to meet the threats of the near

future. The alternative—to wait until it may be too late—is as unacceptable as it may be inevitable.

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# Strategic Posture Commission Report— Echoes of the Past

David J. Lonsdale

## Introduction

When reading the Strategic Posture Commission Report, it is noticeable that there are distinct echoes of the past. One is especially struck by comparisons to the 1930s and 40s. The report, itself, does not discuss or identify such comparisons, but in the field of strategic studies historical reflection can have important benefits for those contemplating contemporary challenges. As Colin S. Gray noted, “we should allow ourselves to seek education from historical experience.”<sup>1</sup>

To that end, this paper will discuss the following similarities between the current situation and that of the 1930s/40s: geopolitics, technological innovation, and the importance of alliances. In each section of the paper, having outlined insights from the 1930s/40s, the work will assess whether the report’s analysis and recommendations are appropriate, given the lessons of history. As an aside, it is important to note that each period in history is unique, and therefore this paper is not attempting to directly map a 1930s/40s template onto the current situation. That being said, because strategy is universal across time and space, comparisons amongst different periods and situations can be legitimately drawn.

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<sup>1</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Strategy and History: Essays on Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 6.

## Geopolitics

Perhaps the most striking similarity between the contemporary security environment and that of the 1930s/40s is the geopolitical situation. Specifically, in both periods the West faces(d) bellicose powers simultaneously in Europe and Asia. This is starkly opposed to the extant 'one major war' sizing construct critiqued in the Commission Report.<sup>2</sup> In the 1930s/40s it was Germany and Japan, now it is Russia and China, that represent challenges to the international order. Moreover, in both periods the respective powers were/are expanding and modernising their military capabilities. The similarities go even further. Like Russia, Germany was predominantly a land power. Whereas in Asia, China and Japan represent(ed) growing maritime threats in the Pacific.<sup>3</sup> There is one important difference, however, between the periods. In the 1930s/40s, Germany was considered the more acute threat to the established international system. This was reflected in the 'Germany First' policy of the Roosevelt Administration. Today, although Russia is identified as the more immediate threat, especially following its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, China is considered the more potent longer-term threat to the established international order.<sup>4</sup>

Reflecting on the 1930s/40s, it is reasonably well understood that both the United States and United Kingdom responded too timidly to the growing threats from Germany and Japan. In the United States, President Roosevelt's freedom of action was restrained by an

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<sup>2</sup> *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, 2023, available at <https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/Strategic-Posture-Committee-Report-Final.pdf>, p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. 15. As noted in the Commission Report, the PRC now has the largest navy in the world.

<sup>4</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, 2022), p. 8.

isolationist-leaning Congress. Outcomes of this position included rejection of U.S. membership in the League of Nations, the Stimson Doctrine, and the Neutrality Acts of 1935, 1937, and 1939. In the United Kingdom, more strident voices, such as Churchill, struggled against a general reluctance to contemplate another major war in Europe. Additionally, Britain was struggling to balance the books in the 1930s. Accordingly, defence policy had to make some difficult choices. Following the 1937 Inskip Report, priority was given to air and sea power, leaving Britain little opportunity to make a significant contribution to events on the continent.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, neither the United States nor the United Kingdom had an effective deterrence posture, nor were they well prepared for war when it came. In the Pacific, in the summer of 1941, Allied forces amounted to little more than a 'holding force,' with the Philippines defended primarily by just one U.S. division and 250 aircraft.<sup>6</sup> This explains, at least in part, how Germany and Japan were able to make significant early gains in their respective offensives. That being said, certain measures were taken in an attempt to manage and contain the growing threats. Roosevelt secured financial and material support for the European allies and China, culminating in the first Lend-Lease Act of 1941. Additionally, the United States and the United Kingdom leveraged economic instruments against Japan, including freezing assets and the 1940 embargoes against iron, steel,

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<sup>5</sup> George Peden, "Problems of Setting Strategic Priorities: The Inskip Defence Review of 1937-38," *RUSI*, August 19, 2010, available at <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/problems-setting-strategic-priorities-inskip-defence-review-1937-38>.

<sup>6</sup> Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, *A War to be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001), p. 166.

and oil.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, although restricted by domestic considerations, the Roosevelt Administration did initiate armament programmes to build up its air and naval forces, and the appointment of General George Marshall as Chief of Staff ensured that the Army would eventually grow to eight million men under arms.<sup>8</sup> In the United Kingdom, although land power had been neglected, air defence received investment, which made a significant difference to the outcome of the Battle of Britain in 1940.<sup>9</sup>

In summary, both the United States and United Kingdom had to navigate stormy geopolitical waters in the 1930s/40s, whilst being hamstrung by domestic considerations. Although some actions were taken to deal with the growing threats, it is clear that economic measures, arms control (Washington treaties), and diplomatic efforts were insufficient in the absence of credible military power.<sup>10</sup> The weakened state of allied military forces proved an insufficient deterrent to the Axis powers. Thankfully, just enough preparation was undertaken to ensure that the Allies could hang on in the early stages of the war, and eventually turn the tables on the Axis powers.<sup>11</sup>

In light of the above, the Commission Report should be commended for outlining, in quite stark terms, the nature of the threat facing the West. The Report is clearly opposed to an isolationist stance, noting that although the Report's recommended strategic posture would be costly, and would

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<sup>7</sup> See Takuma Melber, *Pearl Harbor* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021) and, Antony Beevor, *The Second World War*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2014), p. 219.

<sup>8</sup> Beevor, op. cit., p. 179.

<sup>9</sup> John Terraine, *The Right of the Line: The Royal Air Force in the European War 1939-1945* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), pp. 21-3.

<sup>10</sup> Eliot A. Cohen, *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion on the impact of resources on the war, see John Ellis, *Brute Force: Allied Strategy and Tactics in the Second World War* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1990).

need selling to the U.S. public, the costs of inaction would be far greater.<sup>12</sup> Importantly, the Report also identifies the scale and variety of the geostrategic challenge. It rejects the “one major war” sizing construct, clearly stating that the United States may be required to deter, and possibly defeat, two peer competitors simultaneously.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it recognises that the two theatres represent very different strategic challenges. Specifically, the Report notes that the threat from Russia sits within NATO’s traditional land power focused approach. Whereas, the Indo-Pacific region is more maritime and aircentric.<sup>14</sup> In contrast with the interwar period, the Report calls for early preparations, including the forward deployment of U.S. forces and the capability for global mobility and rapid reinforcement.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, these recommendations will require a build-up and modernisation of conventional and nuclear forces. The report also calls for an integrated “whole of government” approach, which includes defined strategies for economic measures and a pragmatic approach to arms control.<sup>16</sup> As noted, in the interwar period economic measures and arms control proved insufficient to contain German and Japanese ambitions. It is, therefore, eminently sensible that the Report takes a more robust grand strategic approach, underpinned by advanced military power, providing a resolute deterrence posture.<sup>17</sup>

## Technological Innovation

It is axiomatic to claim that we live in an age of rapid technological change. Whilst still seeking to understand the

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<sup>12</sup> *America’s Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. 89.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. vii, 28.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 69.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. x, 64.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 94.



implications of the internet, humanity is grappling with the challenge of artificial intelligence (AI), hypersonic flight, and looking to a future of quantum computing, genetic engineering, and nanotechnology. Such a plethora of seemingly radical changes threatens to overwhelm us in the social, political, security, and moral landscapes. Yet, humanity has been in similar circumstances before. During the 1930s/40s, those tasked with political and strategic leadership had to contend with a range of new or developing technologies. These included airplanes, armoured forces, submarines, wireless communications, radar, developments in amphibiousness, and atomic weapons.

One of the insights we can draw from the 1930s/40s is that new technology is only the first step in gaining military and strategic advantage. New developments must be harnessed intellectually and organisationally, and resourced effectively. A positive example of this is the Royal Air Force's (RAF) adoption of radar in the late-1930s,<sup>18</sup> whereas the French squandered a relative advantage in armoured forces through the adoption of inappropriate doctrine.<sup>19</sup> This suggests that a materialistic approach is not enough. Correct intellectual engagement requires a military culture that is permissive to debate and study, and an iterative process of innovation. For example, although some important intellectual and operational steps were taken by the British in armoured warfare, generally speaking the officer corps was not conducive to an honest and open study of the lessons of the First World War. In contrast, the German High Command established 57 committees to study the previous war and encouraged decentralisation of

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen Peter Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Williamson Murray, "Armoured Warfare: The British, French, and German Experiences," in Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millet, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 18.

thought and command. This produced an approach far more effectively rooted in combined arms than either the British or the French.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, successful innovation does not occur without adequate resources and organisational leadership. Those responsible for innovation must be conscious of resource issues, and at times must make bold decisions. U.K. developments in armour were negatively affected by the aforementioned budgetary constraints of the interwar years.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, U.S. innovations in Close Air Support were limited by a scarcity of aircrew and inadequate aircraft designs.<sup>22</sup> In reference to leadership, David Ingalls (Assistant Secretary for Naval Aeronautics), and Admiral William A. Moffett (Chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics) were said to have been crucial in ensuring that carrier aviation was pursued effectively in the United States. Indeed, Admiral Moffett is said to have “tackled the subject with almost fanatical zeal.”<sup>23</sup> At an organisational level, U.S. amphibious developments benefitted enormously from the leadership of the United States Marine Corps (USMC), a service dedicated to operating land power in the maritime environment.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11, and, Jonathan M. House, *Toward Combined Arms Warfare: A Survey of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Tactics, Doctrine, and Organisation* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, 1984), available at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/combat-studies-institute/csi-books/house.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> Richard R. Muller, “Close Air Support: The German, British, and American Experiences, 1918-1941,” in Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 188.

<sup>23</sup> Geoffrey Till, “Adopting the Aircraft Carrier: The British, American, and Japanese Case Studies,” in Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 210.

<sup>24</sup> Allan R. Millett, “Assault from the Sea: The Development of Amphibious Warfare Between the Wars – The American, British, and

The challenge of innovation is exemplified by the development of strategic bombing in the 1930s/40s. This new capability illustrates some of the pitfalls of innovation, but also reveals how, through an iterative process, strident leadership, and increasing resources, innovation can produce important results. During the interwar period, strategic bombing benefitted from the work of some devout advocates, including Billy Mitchell and Sir Hugh Trenchard. Such men provided the intellectual drive and forced strategic bombing firmly onto the defence agenda. At the same time, the early period of strategic bombing suffered from wishful thinking, a lack of practical operational experience, and an underestimation of defensive potency.<sup>25</sup> In the final analysis, strategic bombing was only able to make a significant contribution to the war via a steep and costly learning curve, an ongoing process of technological and operational innovation, and the commitment of massive resources that eventually overwhelmed enemy defensive efforts.

In the area of technological innovation, the Commission Report is again quite prescient. In the first instance, it acknowledges that U.S. conventional advantage is decreasing, that the envisaged modernised nuclear force structure will be insufficient against two peer competitors, and that the homeland faces new and evolving threats.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the Report calls for significant increases in funding across the board. This includes investments in long-range precision strike, enhanced integrated air and missile defence (IAMD), a significant upgrade to the nuclear

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Japanese Experiences," in Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millet, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 94-95.

<sup>25</sup> For an insight into the development of strategic bombing, see Sir Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany 1939-45* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1961).

<sup>26</sup> *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., pp. 13-14, 23, 90, 97.

modernisation programme, and development of global mobility capabilities.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, and reflecting the lessons of the 1930s and 40s, the Report also identifies the need for new procurement practices, more funding for the expansion of the defence industrial base, investment in technical talent and research and development, and focused leadership. It also acknowledges potential obstacles to innovation, calling for a bureaucratic and cultural shift.<sup>28</sup>

### **The Importance of Alliances**

Alliances were crucial to geopolitical balance in the 1930s/40s, and ultimately to the course and outcome of the Second World War. This period also reveals the complexities of establishing, maintaining, and operating effective alliances. In reference to the Axis powers, initially the Italians appeared to serve a positive purpose for Germany in the Mediterranean, attacking British interests, complicating the strategic landscape for London, and stretching Britain's limited resources. These benefits were echoed by Japan's seizure of European colonies in Asia. The effect was magnified still further by the attack on the United States, with Japan seemingly taking care of U.S. maritime power.<sup>29</sup>

Unfortunately for Germany, almost all the above began to unravel or failed to materialise fully. Certainly, Britain had to devote resources to the Mediterranean, but increasingly so did Germany. Indecisive and ineffective Italian adventurism produced failures in Greece and North Africa. In each case, Germany had to commit resources to help stabilise the southern flank of occupied Europe. Indeed, the Allies, and Churchill in particular, saw the

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. ix, 62, 64, 104.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. v, 59, 105-106.

<sup>29</sup> Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 251.

Mediterranean as a means to attrit and divert German resources. From 1943, following the Allied invasion of Sicily, the situation worsened for Germany. Increasing numbers of German divisions had to be deployed to the theatre, and eventually Germany had to occupy its former ally when Mussolini's government was overthrown. Indeed, the Mediterranean reveals another complicating factor of working in alliances, personal relationships and antagonisms. Hitler and Mussolini had poor impressions of each other, and never really coordinated their ambitions and strategies. Similarly, personal antagonisms also affected Hitler's attempt to bring fascist Spain into the Axis alliance.<sup>30</sup>

In the 1942 campaign on the Eastern Front, due to declining force levels, Germany relied on allies to provide support for Army Groups A and B as they advanced through the Ukraine and towards Stalingrad and the Caucasus. As was common for Germany's allies, they were treated as second class citizens, not given the resources they were promised. Consequently, when the Soviet Union counterattacked around Stalingrad, Germany's allies collapsed rapidly, leaving the advanced German army groups exposed.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, we must discuss Japan. Although in theory a major ally of Nazi Germany, there was little to no joint strategic planning between the two. Although the two countries engaged in dialogue on the general course of the war, in essence, Germany and Japan fought entirely separate wars. Indeed, one of the overriding themes of the Axis is that it never truly formulated a coordinated and cohesive approach to fighting the Second World War.

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<sup>30</sup> Douglas Porch, *The Path to Victory: The Mediterranean Theater in World War II* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), pp. 59-60.

<sup>31</sup> Robert M. Citino, *Death of the Wehrmacht: The German Campaigns of 1942* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2007), pp. 289-298.

The Allies certainly performed better, but it would be a mistake to assume that the Allies ran a cohesive and smooth allied war effort. Undoubtedly one of the most difficult aspects was relationships with the Soviet Union. Although at times congenial, Churchill and Stalin had an inherent distrust of one another, driven primarily by the vast ideological gulf between them and Stalin's paranoid megalomania. And, even though Churchill and Roosevelt had a good personal relationship, U.S.-U.K. cooperation was limited by U.S. domestic considerations in the early stages of the war, somewhat divergent foreign policy goals (especially regarding the future and fate of the British Empire), and post-war considerations as the war came to a close.<sup>32</sup>

As such, the Allied war effort displayed elements of close cooperation, as well as several challenging moments. The general strategic trajectory of the war was subject to intense discussions, but ultimately remained on course. The British and Americans eventually established a system of successful joint planning and operations, enabled by the creation of the Combined Chiefs of Staff. Indeed, as evidenced by the design and manufacture of the M3 Lee/Grant tank, cooperation between the United States and United Kingdom often concerned considerable levels of detail.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, tensions and debates were commonplace amongst the Allies. Until 1944, Stalin's constant refrain was for the opening of a second front in the West. When and how that would occur was a constant source of tension between the United States and Britain. Especially detrimental to Allied relations was the suspicion by some in Washington, including General Marshall, that Britain's focus on the Mediterranean was motivated in part

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<sup>32</sup> Niall Barr, *Eisenhower's Armies: The American-British Alliance During World War II* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2017), p. 459.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94-102.

by a desire to protect its imperial interests.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, there were reciprocal fears in the western allies and Soviet Union that the other(s) would make a separate peace with Germany. As the war in Europe drew to a close, decision making in each of the Allied capitals began to be increasingly influenced by national interests for the post-war environment.

All told, the Allied war effort in the Second World War teaches some important lessons. Some of the positives of alliance warfare are obvious. For example, by pooling their resources against a common foe, the Allies in Europe were able to stretch the limited resources of Germany, and eventually overwhelm them. Nonetheless, even when facing an acute common enemy, alliances must be nurtured and developed over time. Joint planning is complex, often includes compromises, and is heavily influenced by the respective capabilities of the allies and personalities of the leaders. For example, the 1942 landings in North Africa, Operation Torch, and the Allied campaign in Sicily, highlighted shortcomings and tensions in the Allied war effort. At the same time, these operations laid the groundwork for the successful Normandy campaign.

Echoing the geostrategic realities of the 1930s/40s, the Commission Report is definitive on the centrality of alliances for U.S. foreign and security policy. This is premised on the Report's conclusion that, as in the interwar period, the United States and its allies face considerable common dangers.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, an allied response is required and provides important benefits. Specifically, these include allied force contributions and forward-basing for U.S. capabilities.<sup>36</sup> The Report also acknowledges the value of allied planning and operational processes, such as

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<sup>34</sup> Porch, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

<sup>35</sup> *America's Strategic Posture*, *op. cit.*, pp. vi, 5.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

NATO's revitalization of the Nuclear Planning Group.<sup>37</sup> However, there is more to alliances than mere military pragmatism. The Report regards U.S. alliances as acts of friendship and a bullwork against authoritarianism.<sup>38</sup> In support of this, the Report recognises that alliances need nurturing,<sup>39</sup> that allies need reassurance. In this respect, the Report is clear about the requirement to maintain the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence. Put simply, if regional allies are to remain resolute against growing threats, they must be confident that the United States can, and will, come to their aid when required.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

Whether consciously or not, the Commission Report appears to have learned much from the 1930s/40s. It presents a clear analysis of the geopolitical threat environment, identifying the requirement for simultaneous action on deterrence, force deployments, and possibly conflict. The Report also discusses the force implications for operating in distinct theatres of operations. In relation to the challenge of technological innovation, the Report is forthright about the need for increased U.S. action, but is also cognizant of potential obstacles and remedies. Finally, although U.S. leadership is emphasised when facing the challenges ahead, the Report is equally adamant that allies and partners are central to the wellbeing and security of the United States. Moreover, the Report is correct in its assessment that alliances need careful nurturing and a cooperative approach by all concerned.

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.





# The Congressional Strategic Posture Commission's Report: What the Biden Administration's *Nuclear Posture Review* Should Have Been

Keith B. Payne

## Introduction

On October 22, 2022, eight months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Defense Department released the Biden Administration's *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR).<sup>1</sup> Just a few days short of one year later, the Strategic Posture Commission (SPC), with its bipartisan membership appointed by Congress, released its 2023 report, *America's Strategic Posture*.<sup>2</sup> These reports, commendably, share some important themes that advance U.S. deterrence policy – most notably including continued support for the strategic nuclear Triad of forces, extending deterrence for allied protection, and tailoring U.S. deterrence strategies to specific opponents and occasions. Indeed, many in the nuclear disarmament community expressed disappointment that the Biden Administration's NPR

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2022), p. 8, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

<sup>2</sup> Madelyn Creedon and Jon Kyl, et al., *America's Strategic Posture* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2023), available at <https://www.ida.org/research-and-publications/publications/all/a/am/americas-strategic-posture>.

essentially embraced the existing U.S. nuclear modernization programs rather than significant force reductions.<sup>3</sup>

There are, however, also fundamental differences separating these two contemporaneous reports; in fact, they often seem to come from two different worlds. Correspondingly, they recommend different strategies and force postures for meeting international threats. Despite being separated by only a single year in their respective publication dates, the NPR and SPC report appear to start from vastly different understandings of the threats facing the United States and allies. Which of these competing documents more influences the direction of U.S. nuclear policy and forces will shape the American capacity to deter war; the subject matter could hardly be more significant.

### Urgency and Needed Measures

Perhaps the single most telling difference in these two documents is reflected in their respective use of the words “urgent” and “urgency.” The need for urgency, and the focus of that need as presented in in these two reports could not be more different.

The SPC report uses these striking words *40 times*, eight times in its Executive Summary alone. The SPC’s use of these terms always involves Washington’s need to move *now* to meet a dramatically increasing threat environment. It repeatedly concludes that the United States “is ill-prepared for the potentially existential challenges of 2027-2035 and beyond ... the United States must change course urgently and resolutely.”<sup>4</sup> Given this starting point, the SPC

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<sup>3</sup> See for example, Joe Cirincione, “A Failure to Review America’s Nuclear Posture,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, October 28, 2022, available at <https://thebulletin.org/2022/10/a-failure-to-review-americas-nuclear-posture/>.

<sup>4</sup> *America’s Strategic Posture*, p. 87.

report recommends numerous advances in U.S. strategy and the strengthening of U.S. forces – strategic and theater, nuclear and conventional.

In contrast, “urgent” and “urgency” appear a total of three times in the 2022 NPR, two of which refer *not* to the need to adjust U.S. strategy and increase U.S. deterrence capabilities, but to the goal of creating the conditions needed for the elimination of nuclear forces or reducing the role and “salience” of nuclear weapons.<sup>5</sup> While the SPC emphasizes that adversarial nuclear threats loom large and decisions to advance U.S. strategies and forces must be made now, the NPR appears much more reserved and seems to place concerning threat developments into the next decade: “By the 2030s the United States will, for the first time in history, face two major nuclear powers as strategic competitors and potential adversaries.”<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the 2022 NPR appears to be grounded in the U.S. nuclear policy goals and sentiments inherited from the initial years of the Obama Administration and expressed by candidate Biden during his 2020 presidential campaign – which, in turn, reflected Washington’s optimistic expectations and nuclear policy positions during the relatively benign immediate post-Cold War era.

At that time, many Republican and Democratic leaders assumed that the great powers would enjoy peace and amity in the ensuing years. Nuclear weapons and deterrence were deemed to be of declining relevance in the emerging “new world order” in which, according to George H. W. Bush, “A new partnership of nations has begun ... An era in which the nations of the world, east and west, north and south, can prosper and live in harmony. ... A world quite different from the one we’ve known. A world where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle. A world in

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<sup>5</sup> 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, pp. 2, 25.

<sup>6</sup> 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, p. 4.

which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice. A world where the strong respect the rights of the weak.”<sup>7</sup>

The nuclear policy legacy of this immediate post-Cold War orientation, with its now-familiar focus on reducing the role of nuclear weapons, seems to contribute heavily to the 2022 NPR’s overarching “business as usual” approach to U.S. nuclear policy. As two U.S. Senators observed recently, “The [Biden] administration remains stubbornly unwilling to prepare for a world in which we face not one but two peer nuclear adversaries.”<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, as noted, the SPC report emphasizes the need to make significant force posture advances *now* to strengthen the U.S. strategic and theater positions in response to the rapidly rising dangers and risks of the contemporary international threat environment. Given Beijing’s and Moscow’s aggressive goal of re-ordering the international system, their emerging entente and unprecedented nuclear threats—developments that have been obvious for several years<sup>9</sup>—the bipartisan SPC report is what the 2022 NPR should have been.

Differences separating the SPC report from the NPR largely correspond to these two competing understandings

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<sup>7</sup> George H. W. Bush, address to a joint session of Congress, reprinted in, “Bush ‘Out of These Troubled Times...A New World Order,” *The Washington Post*, September 12, 1990, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/09/12/bush-out-of-these-troubled-times-a-new-world-order/b93b5cf1-e389-4e6a-84b0-85f71bf4c946/>.

<sup>8</sup> Sen. Roger Wicker and Sen. Deb Fischer, “America’s Nuclear Weapons Are Dangerously Out of Date Our safety depends on funding and timely deployment of the Sentinel ICBM,” *Wall Street Journal Online*, January 19, 2024, available at <https://www.wicker.senate.gov/2024/1/america-s-nuclear-weapons-are-dangerously-out-of-date>.

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Keith B. Payne, *Redefining “Stability” for the New Post-Cold War Era*, Occasional Paper (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 2021).

of the international context. For example, the SPC report emphasizes that Russia and China increasingly appear to be *working together* to replace the liberal, rules-based international order with a new order under their authoritarian rule. While it appears that this Sino-Russian engagement is not yet a formal politico-military alliance, the level of their cooperation to advance this goal appears to be a multifaceted and deepening entente.<sup>10</sup> The degree to which these two autocratic great nuclear powers move in concert politically and militarily has enormous implications for U.S. deterrence strategies and forces.

The SPC report fully recognizes this ominous development, and many of its recommendations appear to be shaped by the need to pursue plans and capabilities that hedge against joint or coordinated Chinese and Russian actions. The SPC report repeatedly emphasizes that the United States must be capable of deterring and defeating Russia and China *simultaneously*: “The United States and its Allies and partners must be ready to deter and defeat both adversaries simultaneously.”<sup>11</sup> This requirement leads to two of the most consequential SPC recommendations—Washington’s need to strengthen existing U.S. nuclear capabilities, and the re-adoption of a “two war” standard of adequacy, a standard the United States effectively abandoned more than a decade ago.<sup>12</sup>

In particular, the SPC report clearly identifies the type of deterrence threats the United States must be capable of

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<sup>10</sup> See for example, Seong Hyeon Choi, “Military Officials Vow To Boost ‘Strategic Coordination,’” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), December 22, 2023 p. A9, available at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3245888/chinese-and-russian-military-officials-vow-boost-strategic-coordination>.

<sup>11</sup> *America’s Strategic Posture*, p. vii.

<sup>12</sup> See the discussion in, Hal Brands and Evan Braden Montgomery, “One War Is Not Enough: Strategy and Force Planning for Great-Power Competition,” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 3, Issue 2 (Spring 2020), pp. 80-92.

wielding simultaneously given two authoritarian, hostile, great power adversaries: “As a general rule, the most effective deterrent is to hold at risk what adversaries value most....this means holding at risk key elements of their leadership, the security structure maintaining the leadership in power, their nuclear and conventional forces, and their war supporting industry.”<sup>13</sup> This approach to deterrence – threatening what adversaries value most – has been central to U.S. policy for decades.<sup>14</sup> The unavoidable reality is that the number of such adversary targets is growing rapidly; this understandably led the SPC to recommend *strengthening* U.S. nuclear capabilities to sustain the U.S. deterrence threat: “...the two-nuclear peer threat will require a U.S. nuclear force that is larger in size, different in composition, postured differently, or all three, decisions must be made now to meet deterrence requirements in the mid-2030s. ... The current multi-program, multi-decade U.S. nuclear modernizations program is necessary, but not sufficient.”<sup>15</sup>

The NPR seems to concur with the U.S. need for this type of threat for deterrence.<sup>16</sup> Yet, despite the emergence of two, adversarial, great nuclear powers working together and expanding their nuclear capabilities, the NPR pointedly does *not* recommend adding to the existing, 14 years-old plans to modernize U.S. deterrent capabilities. It limits support to the U.S. nuclear force program set in motion in a much more benign threat context – apparently concluding that this program will remain adequate in a much more severe threat environment than existed when it was established. Indeed, the NPR appears to largely ignore the

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<sup>13</sup> *America's Strategic Posture*, p. 30

<sup>14</sup> See the lengthy discussion in Keith B. Payne, *The Rejection of Intentional Population Targeting for "Tripolar" Deterrence*, Occasional Paper (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 2023).

<sup>15</sup> *America's Strategic Posture*, pp. 29, 34.

<sup>16</sup> *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, p. 11.

potential threat of Beijing and Moscow colluding on goals, strategies and military actions, and the implications of that reality for U.S. deterrence requirements. It recognizes “that a near-simultaneous conflict with two nuclear-armed conflict states would constitute an extreme circumstance,”<sup>17</sup> but provides no subsequent guidance as to what that “extreme circumstance” means for Western strategies and capabilities.

That potential “extreme circumstance” acknowledged by the NPR literally demands that Washington hedge against the looming threat. The SPC report repeatedly emphasizes the need for and importance of this hedging.<sup>18</sup> Yet, the NPR inexplicably *eliminates* hedging as a requirement for U.S. deterrence capabilities and goals, rejects an existing nuclear program, the nuclear-sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N), cited as necessary by senior military leaders, and eliminates an existing unique nuclear capability, the B83-1 gravity bomb.<sup>19</sup> Immediately following the end of the Cold War, when many in Washington naively expected a cooperative “new world order,” such a relatively relaxed view of the threat context was imprudent, but at least understandable. Today, it is not, nor is the NPR’s related rejection of the requirement to hedge against an “extreme circumstance.” Such a perspective and direction can only be described as suited for a world order that does not exist and shows no sign of emerging.

In contrast to the NPR, the SPC report repeatedly recommends immediate decisions to strengthen U.S. strategic and theater forces in ways that move beyond existing plans, including the unprecedented fielding of Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD) forces capable

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<sup>17</sup> 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> *America’s Strategic Posture*, pp. vii, 27, 31, 60.

<sup>19</sup> 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, p. 3.



of deterring and defeating Russian and Chinese limited, coercive nuclear threats, and the U.S. deployment of the (all-but-explicitly-named) SLCM-N.<sup>20</sup> The NPR rejects both of these initiatives, by commission or omission. These contrasting positions reflect very different understandings of U.S. deterrence requirements related to the threat.

### Arms Control

Another significant distinction in these reports—again reflecting different understandings of looming international realities—involves the role of, and potential for arms control negotiations. The SPC is clear on several points in this regard. First, the role of arms control is supportive of, not superior to nor autonomous of, U.S. efforts to sustain a force posture and position sufficient to deter and defeat simultaneous Sino-Russian aggression. Consequently, as the SPC report repeatedly states, *prior to* any pursuit of arms control, Washington must *first* define its strategy and force requirements for dangerous times, and then determine if and how arms control might serve to help meet those requirements.<sup>21</sup> In short, arms control is subservient to strategy and force requirements.

In addition, the SPC report appears largely skeptical of the potential role for negotiated arms control altogether given Moscow's history, past and present, of violating virtually every nuclear arms agreement to which it has committed, and Beijing's long-standing unwillingness to engage.<sup>22</sup> The SPC report does not reject arms control, to be sure, but it subordinates arms control to the requirements of deterrence strategy, and is quite measured in expectations for negotiations.

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<sup>20</sup> *America's Strategic Posture*, pp. x, 31, 35, 48, 72.

<sup>21</sup> *America's Strategic Posture*, pp. xi, 81, 86.

<sup>22</sup> *America's Strategic Posture*, p. 81.

In contrast, repeating a point of the 2010 NPR, the 2022 NPR *subordinates* deterrence preparations to arms control efforts. Policy words are nothing if they do not have meaning, and the words of the 2022 NPR in this regard are that, “Mutual, verifiable nuclear arms control offers the most effective, durable and responsible path to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our strategy and prevent their use.”<sup>23</sup> If arms control is “the most effective, durable and responsible path... to prevent nuclear use,” then, logically, it *must be the priority* over deterrence strategies and forces when trade-offs have to be made, i.e., the latter must be subordinate to the former. The 2010 NPR announced the same prioritization;<sup>24</sup> it is a little-noticed but profound point repeated in the 2022 NPR and is in sharp contrast to the prioritization of strategy over arms control in the SPC report.

Consistent with this prioritization, even after acknowledging that Russia and China “have demonstrated little interest in reducing their reliance on nuclear weapons,”<sup>25</sup> the NPR continues to highlight arms control to prevent nuclear use and reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. strategy. Similarly, the NPR is committed “to working to achieve [the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, CTBT] entry into force...CTBT would ban nuclear explosive tests of any yield,” despite the fact that Russia has been in violation of that treaty as described.<sup>26</sup> The SPC report contains no such commitments.

More fundamentally, the NPR states that a U.S. “priority” is, “...pursuing initiatives that limit destabilizing

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<sup>23</sup> 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, pp. iv, vi, 2, 6, available at [https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010\\_Nuclear\\_Posture\\_Review\\_Report.pdf](https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, p. 17

systems or postures...”<sup>27</sup> Such language may sound benign and compatible with the SPC report. However, the IAMD and counterforce offensive capabilities the SPC report recommends have long been deemed the poster children for the “destabilizing” systems vilified by the NPR. The SPC report clearly is of the opinion that counterforce capabilities and expanded IAMD to address Russian and Chinese coercive nuclear threats are critical for sustaining deterrence – *not* “destabilizing.” In the emerging threat context, denying Beijing and Moscow the coercive power of limited nuclear threats – if a practicable defensive option – is particularly critical for U.S. deterrence goals.<sup>28</sup>

These harsh realities regarding arms control are recognized by the SPC report, but seemingly not by the NPR. Indeed, on June 2, 2023, Biden Administration National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, presented a sweeping arms control agenda that can only be described as heroically optimistic under prevailing circumstances;<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> See the discussion in Keith B. Payne and David Trachtenberg, *Deterrence in the Emerging Threat Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters*, Occasional Paper (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2022). See also, Matthew R. Costlow, *Vulnerability is No Virtue and Defense is No Vice: The Strategic Benefits of Expanded U.S. Homeland Missile Defense*, Occasional Paper (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 2022).

<sup>29</sup> Jake Sullivan, *Remarks by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan for the Arms Control Association (ACA) Annual Forum*, National Press Club, June 2, 2023, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/06/02/remarks-by-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-for-the-arms-control-association-aca-annual-forum/>.

even arms control advocates have since deemed that agenda to be “a failure.”<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the 2023 SPC report and the 2022 NPR share some important points. However, there also are fundamental differences. The SPC report is what the NPR should have, and could have, been.

The 2023 SPC report looks at the mounting and unprecedented threats posed by a hostile Sino-Russian entente, with Beijing’s and Moscow’s respective expansionist goals and the related coercive role of their nuclear weapons. It explains that Washington is “ill-prepared” to meet these threats and elaborates in some detail how and why Washington must act *urgently* if it is to deter them, or defeat them if necessary. This involves significant adjustments to U.S. forces and policy, notably including strengthening offensive and defensive capabilities, conventional and nuclear. While acknowledging a role for arms control, in principle, the SPC report places arms control in the service of U.S. deterrence and strategy requirements and foresees little hope for negotiated agreements given Russia’s constant noncompliance and China’s blatant lack of interest. The SPC report calls on U.S. national leaders to convey to the American people the harsh realities of the looming Sino-Russian threats and the significant requirements needed to deter and defeat them.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Daniel Schoolenberg, “Biden Struggling on Nuclear Arms Control,” Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, January 29, 2024, available at <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/biden-arms-control-russia-china/#:~:text=The%20Biden%20administration%20has%20spent,on%20the%20National%20Security%20Council.>

<sup>31</sup> *America’s Strategic Posture*, p. 6.

In contrast, while acknowledging that threat conditions are changing, much of the NPR appears frozen in the naively-optimistic post-Cold War years; it suggests no urgency with regard to U.S. responses to mounting threats. Instead, the NPR's urgency references arms control themes of the post-Cold War years—nuclear disarmament and reducing the role of nuclear weapons—this at a time when, by word and actions, great power adversaries are moving in precisely the opposite directions. In this context, the NPR very much presents an inexplicable “business as usual” orientation with regard to planned U.S. forces and policy, including the rejection of the long-standing requirement for hedging, the existing SLCM-N program, and the existing, unique capabilities of the B83-1 gravity bomb. Reminiscent of the 2010 NPR, the 2022 NPR also subordinates deterrence to arms control measures for the prevention of nuclear war. This subordination demonstrates no recognition of the contemporary threat context or Russian and Chinese arms control-related behavior.

Only time will tell whether the SPC report holds up well as a commentary on and guide for U.S. and allied security. Perhaps Moscow and Beijing will retreat from their nuclear threats and buildups, and moderate their aggressive, expansionist appetites and goals. Unfortunately, there is zero indication that such a happy transformation is forthcoming—quite the opposite. What is clear now, however, is that the Biden Administration's 2022 NPR, only 16 months since publication, holds up very poorly. Its “business as usual” orientation simply does not convey contemporary threats and needs—as is called for by the SPC.

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# The Strategic Posture Commission Report and Extended Deterrence for Europe

Michael Rühle

When the Strategic Posture Commission Report<sup>1</sup> was released, it predictably gained considerable attention within the U.S. defense establishment and the strategic community. Equally predictably, it was barely noticed in Europe. In part, this was due to other events occupying the headlines. With a war in Ukraine raging next door, another war having just erupted between Israel and Hamas, and with numerous fiscal and economic woes in need of addressing, a 160-page report on the U.S. military posture that contained 131 findings and 81 recommendations was not going to figure high on the reading list of the European strategic community.

Moreover, it is often difficult for Europeans to assess the importance of such reports. After all, successive U.S. administrations have churned out literally dozens of posture reviews, national security strategies, and other documents, often intended to make their mark by showing that their approach is different from that of their predecessors. It takes an experienced Washington insider to judge whether a given report is truly significant or just short-term political manoeuvring. This is all the more important for reports that claim to be bipartisan: Will they really influence the policy of any given administration, when half of their drafters come from the opposite political camp?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, October 2023 (<https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/a/am/americas-strategic-posture/strategic-posture-commission-report.ashx>; hereafter referred to as: *Posture Report*).

<sup>2</sup> For example, the 2009 bi-partisan Congressional Strategic Posture Commission, led by former Defense Secretaries William Perry and James Schlesinger, emphasized that the “conditions that might make possible the global elimination of nuclear weapons are not present today and

Yet even if such caveats are taken into account, the Strategic Posture Commission Report is quite remarkable. In dramatic language, it brings home that the strategic environment has changed significantly from the one described in the previous Report of 2009.<sup>3</sup> The United States is now entering a new era: with Russia and China it now has to face two peer competitors bent on challenging the United States by seeking to change the global order that was largely shaped by Washington. Alerting the United States and its allies to this new reality and taking the necessary steps to prepare for it is perhaps the central message of the Report (the terms “urgent,” “urgently” and “urgency” appear 49 [!] times). Against this backdrop, the statement by a bipartisan panel that “the Commission has not seen the U.S. government demonstrate the urgency and creativity required to meet the challenge”<sup>4</sup> only testifies to the nervousness of the U.S. strategic community with regard to this new security environment.

To effectively respond to this new security environment, the Commission recommends a comprehensive strategy, including an improved nuclear and conventional force posture, an expanded Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of Energy/National Nuclear Security Administration (DOE/NNSA) strategic infrastructure, improved procedures to leverage innovation for defense, and a “whole of government” approach. In taking such a broad-brush approach, the Commission brings home that

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their creation would require a fundamental transformation of the world political order.” This statement contradicted Perry’s public advocacy for nuclear abolition, leading him to qualify his support in his Congressional Testimony; see, *The Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, Hearing before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, 111th Congress, 1st Session, May 7, 2009, available at [https://irp.fas.org/congress/2009\\_hr/posture.pdf](https://irp.fas.org/congress/2009_hr/posture.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> *America’s Strategic Posture: Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, 2009, available at [https://www.usip.org/files/America's\\_Strategic\\_Posture\\_Auth\\_Ed.pdf](https://www.usip.org/files/America's_Strategic_Posture_Auth_Ed.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> *Posture Report*, op. cit., p. xi.

U.S. strategic power consists of much more than guns and missiles.

At the same time, however, some shortcomings may diminish the Report's impact. One is the lack of budget figures. The Commission members were keenly aware that their recommendations could be quite expensive, yet the fact that there is no price tag attached to them leaves some of the Report's findings in a political and budgetary vacuum. Another problem is the choice of conflict scenarios. The notion that the United States should be able to fight two wars simultaneously in Europe and Asia is in line with the challenge of having to face two potentially hostile peers. However, the related argument, namely that the United States should be as strong as its two peer competitors combined, predictably was chastised by critics as a recipe for a new arms race.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the Report itself alludes to a difference of opinion among the Commission's members regarding the need to increase the U.S. nuclear arsenal, which makes some of its findings appear less "bipartisan" than originally intended.<sup>6</sup> The same goes for the Report's emphasis on conventional vs. nuclear forces, on which

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<sup>5</sup> See, inter alia, Federation of American Scientists, *Strategic Posture Commission Report Calls for Broad Nuclear Buildup*, October 10, 2023, available at <https://fas.org/publication/strategic-posture-commission-report-calls-for-broad-nuclear-buildup/>; Al Mauroni, "The Strategic Posture Commission's Amazing Trip Back to the Future," *War on the Rocks*, December 13, 2023, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2023/12/the-strategic-posture-commissions-amazing-trip-back-to-the-future/>. In particular, the scenario of a concerted nuclear attack by China and Russia against the U.S. homeland appears problematic. If China and Russia were indeed that risk-prone, even the most herculean U.S. rearmament effort would fail to keep them at bay. A State Department study that may have been intended as a counterweight to the Commission's Report explicitly rejected the notion of "opportunistic aggression and collusion"; see, Department of State International Security Advisory Board, *Report on Deterrence in a World of Nuclear Multipolarity*, October 2023, pp. 4-5, available at <https://www.state.gov/international-security-advisory-board/>.

<sup>6</sup> See *Posture Report*, op. cit., p. vi.



Commission members seem to have disagreed.<sup>7</sup> As with most reports that try to galvanize the U.S. political and military leadership into action, the Strategic Posture Commission Report walks a fine line between sounding the alarm and being alarmist.

### **The European Dimension**

While some of the Report's most daring assumptions will continue to be debated, its treatment of European allies and extended deterrence should generally be welcomed by Europeans. The Report pushes all the right buttons, even if a few of its recommendations, as will be discussed below, may not be as self-evident to Europeans as to the Commission's members.

First, the Report confirms the basic tenets of U.S. security policy, such as assured second strike, extended deterrence and assurance, and calculated ambiguity in declaratory policy. It thus refrains from introducing new concepts that often are of limited use yet take a huge effort to explain. It also highlights the non-proliferation value of the U.S. "nuclear umbrella." For Europe, where fears about a return of a second Trump (or similar) presidency are palpable, such messages are reassuring in themselves. They signal that the heavyweights within the U.S. strategic community are not likely to support a policy that seeks to de-couple the United States from its European (and Asian) allies. Given the nervousness of Europeans about the possibility of a future U.S. president taking controversial decisions merely on a whim, the Report's language is soothing, all the more so as the bipartisan make-up of the Commission demonstrates a willingness to bridge the deep schism that seems to have

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<sup>7</sup> In presenting their Report, several panel members emphasized that their focus was on the future rather than the present—an observation that was probably intended to pre-emptively deflect some of this criticism.

emerged between both political camps on so many other policy issues.

Second, the appreciation of allies as a strategic asset is stated clearly and unequivocally: “Allies and partners are central to our findings regarding strategy and posture.”<sup>8</sup> For Europeans, such statements are a welcome antidote to the mixed messages regarding the value of allies that have emanated from the United States in recent years. They bring home that Washington remains geared to an internationalist political and military posture. Notably, as one Commission member put it, the Report repudiates the neo-isolationism that has crept into US political discourse.<sup>9</sup> Given that European defense is almost entirely organized in NATO, the Report also provides a welcome boost to this institution, which is mentioned several times. Even more, by putting the transatlantic security relationship into the broader context of defending a besieged global order, it implies that this relationship is not a waning asset but rather a prerequisite for success.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii. See also, p. vi: “Allies and partners are important as together we are stronger. Greater cooperation, coordination and integration with our Allies and partners is essential to deter conflict and prosper economically. National leaders must communicate to U.S. citizens the benefits and importance of U.S. global leadership, Allies and partners and extended deterrence, if they are to gain the support of the American people for the associated policy and costs.”

<sup>9</sup> Marshall S. Billingslea during a discussion with Commissioners of the Final Report of the US Strategic Posture Commission, Hudson Institute, October 23, 2023, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rD-nvttYFA>.

<sup>10</sup> See, *Posture Report*, op. cit., p. x: “The Commission believes it is in the U.S. national interest to maintain, strengthen, and when appropriate, expand its network of alliances and partnerships. These relationships strengthen American security by deterring aggression regionally, before it can reach the U.S. homeland, while also enabling U.S. economic prosperity through access to international markets. Withdrawing from U.S. alliances and partnerships would directly benefit adversaries, invite aggression that the United States might later have to reverse, and ultimately decrease American, allied, and partner security and economic prosperity. Further, the Commission believes that our defense and the defense of the current international order is strengthened when Allies

Third, while the Report stresses the progress made by European allies, individually and through NATO, in bolstering their conventional capabilities, it also states that the Europeans could and should do more. In particular, it warns that under-investment in conventional forces would force the United States to rely increasingly on nuclear weapons.<sup>11</sup> This is a strong message to Europeans, whose defense budgets are on the rise, but not yet in a way commensurate with the evolving threat environment. Like the United States, Europe has not succumbed to the nuclear threats coming from Moscow in the context of Russia's assault on Ukraine. However, the nuclear issue nevertheless looms large, as some observers blame the hesitancy of some European governments to deliver long-range weaponry to Ukraine on their fear of overstepping a (presumed) Russian "red line." That the Commission puts the nuclear question in the context of the defense of Europe makes its message all the more credible. The United States worries about its nuclear posture precisely because it remains committed to the security of its allies and is afraid that it cannot deliver.

Fourth, the Report's recommendation that the U.S. "theater nuclear force posture should be urgently modified to .... deter or counter Russian .... limited nuclear use in theater"<sup>12</sup> suggests a considerable push for the introduction of new nuclear systems, presumably along the lines of the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, which had advocated two new "supplemental" nuclear capabilities to bolster extended deterrence in Europe.<sup>13</sup> While some European experts have echoed the U.S. concern about Russia acquiring new

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can directly contribute to the broader strategic posture, and the United States should seek to incorporate those contributions as much as possible."

<sup>11</sup> See, *Posture Report*, op. cit., p. 96.

<sup>12</sup> See, *Posture Report*, op. cit., pp. viii, 35.

<sup>13</sup> See *Nuclear Posture Review 2018*, p. 55, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>.

regional nuclear options against Europe,<sup>14</sup> most European governments thus far have sought to avoid any discussion about the deployment of new nuclear systems. Neither Russia's violation of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty nor its war against Ukraine and the accompanying nuclear threats changed this, presumably because the war remains geographically confined and because one fears potentially divisive domestic debates akin to NATO's "Euromissile crisis" in the mid-1980s. At the risk of oversimplifying the point: arguing for more conventional capabilities remains much easier in Europe than arguing for more nuclear weapons. Hence, if the United States wants to create a more favorable political climate for the introduction of new types of nuclear weapons, it will have to engage diligently with many hesitating governments (also see the point on consultations below).

Fifth, the Report also puts missile defense in the context of extended deterrence. Some Europeans may take issue with the notion of China and/or Russia carrying out "coercive" limited conventional or nuclear strikes on the U.S. homeland in order to deter Washington from intervening in a conflict. As with other parts of the Report, it reveals a tendency to short-sell the deterrence value of the current U.S. conventional and nuclear arsenal. However, the logic of denying an attacker any option for blackmailing the defender is principally sound, as it goes to the heart of extended deterrence. In line with the Arab proverb that one should not expect help from someone who cannot defend himself, minimizing U.S. vulnerabilities is in the European interest. In a multi-nuclear world, missile defense is an important element in making the risks of internationalism

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<sup>14</sup> See Heinrich Brauss and Joachim Krause, "Was will Russland mit den vielen Mittelstreckenwaffen?" (What does Russia want to achieve with its many medium range weapons?), *SIRIUS*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2019, pp. 154–166, available at <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/sirius-2019-2005/pdf>.

more tolerable to the United States.<sup>15</sup> In addition, many European allies are also heavily investing in missile defense, and they have also made missile defense a key element of their military aid to Ukraine.

Sixth, the Report's emphasis on the need to strengthen the non-kinetic elements of deterrence and defence, such as cyber and space capabilities, is in line with the European security debate. NATO allies have recognized cyber and space as distinctive domains, noting their increasing importance for a holistic approach to deterrence and defense. Initial hesitations by some allies regarding offensive cyber operations have given way to a more sober evaluation of cyber as a true battlespace in any 21<sup>st</sup> century conflict. Moreover, in particular since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, the debate within NATO and the European Union on "hybrid" challenges has brought home how non-kinetic threats can undermine traditional military defense preparations. NATO's collective emphasis on enhancing the resilience of national infrastructures also reveals a growing awareness by the transatlantic allies that acquiring a better grasp of the non-kinetic domains could well be essential for prevailing in future wars.<sup>16</sup>

Seventh, the Report's recommendations to increase investments in emerging technologies is mirrored by similar trends among European allies, for whom "effectively transitioning new applied technologies to the warfighter"<sup>17</sup> is proving equally challenging. With many new technologies such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, additive manufacturing, or big data analytics now being developed by the private sector rather than the military, and with more actors gaining access to them, countries need to set up

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<sup>15</sup> See Michael Rühle, "U.S. Strategic Culture and Ballistic Missile Defense," *Information Series*, No. 466, September 2020, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/IS-466.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> See NATO, "Resilience, Civil Preparedness and Article 3," *NATO.int*, August 2, 2023, available at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_132722.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132722.htm).

<sup>17</sup> *Posture Report*, op cit., p. 71.

procedures to make these technologies available for enhancing their national defense, not least to avoid strategic surprise.<sup>18</sup> This requires an “innovation ecosystem” that ensures that the market to support deep tech innovation is sufficiently funded. For example, the NATO Investment Fund (NIF), its first venture capital fund, has been established to support promising startups that are developing emerging and disruptive technologies. These kinds of investments are essential for achieving the long-standing objective of, to quote former President Eisenhower, getting the “most defense at less cost with least delay.”<sup>19</sup>

Finally, the Report highlights the importance of consultations with allies on U.S. defense policies, noting that “any major change to U.S. strategic posture, policies, or capabilities will have great effect on Allies’ perceptions and their deterrence and assurance requirements. As a result, any changes should be predicated on meaningful consultations.”<sup>20</sup> It also notes that “[in] regional defense, because Allies’ survival can be at stake, Washington must continue to closely consult with U.S. Allies, as they remain acutely attuned to any indication Washington may adjust its declaratory policy or posture.”<sup>21</sup> Europeans will no doubt agree. While they have been consulted regularly during the drafting of major U.S. reports, including the current Strategic Posture Report, the U.S. naturally holds the pen and thus ultimately determines these reports’ recommendations. It is therefore all the more important to have U.S. experts remind their own strategic community that whatever they say or do will not only be noticed by one’s adversaries, but also by one’s allies. At the same time, this part of the Report can be read as encouraging the

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<sup>18</sup> *Posture Report*, op. cit., p. ix.

<sup>19</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 87<sup>th</sup> Congress*, Second Session, Volume 108, Part 9, June 26, 1962, p. 11771, available at <https://www.congress.gov/bound-congressional-record/1962/06/26/house-section>.

<sup>20</sup> *Posture Report*, op. cit., p. 80.

<sup>21</sup> *Posture Report*, op. cit., p. 78.

European allies to seek an intensified dialogue with Washington on defense matters. Given the now familiar European hand-wringing about its ever more estranged transatlantic cousin, such an offer would appear most timely.

### **Conclusion**

If the main purpose of the Report is to alert the U.S. strategic community to the need to adjust the U.S. strategic posture to a fundamentally altered security environment, it certainly succeeds. By spelling out the challenges of simultaneously confronting two peer competitors, the Report introduces a new and demanding yardstick for assessing the adequacy of the U.S. strategic posture, even if it occasionally appears to underestimate the deterrence value of existing U.S. strategic capabilities. For Europeans, the Report's main message to allies is most reassuring: the United States will remain in the extended deterrence business. This does not suggest that the Reports' recommendations regarding the eventual deployment of new nuclear systems in Europe would be easy to implement, nor are the European allies likely to increase their defense budgets to a level that the United States would consider sufficient. However, the absence of any dismissive tone vis-à-vis the allies, and the repeated emphasis on the need for a common transatlantic approach, suggests that even if a future U.S. president would publicly scold allies as free-riders or worse, the Commander-in-Chief would find it hard to break the transatlantic security bond.

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# The October 2023 Strategic Commission Report and U.S. Nuclear Weapons Requirements

**Mark B. Schneider**

The October 2023 bipartisan Congressional Strategic Posture Commission's report was extremely perceptive. It examined the 2027-2035 threat environment and recognized the increased risk of nuclear war resulting from Russia's Putin and China's Xi, stemming from their aggressive behavior in Europe and Asia and their military and nuclear buildup. The Commission's report represents a repudiation of the Biden Administration's flawed *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, calling for a substantial strengthening of the U.S. nuclear deterrence posture. The Commission recognized that the United States will soon be threatened not by "one, but two nuclear peer adversaries, each with ambitions to change the international status quo, by force."<sup>1</sup> It noted that Russia is already ahead in numbers and that China will achieve "...rough quantitative parity with the United States in deployed nuclear warheads by the mid-2030s."<sup>2</sup>

The Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Commission noted that "...a number of commissioners believe it is

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This essay is adapted from Mark B. Schneider, "The October 2023 Strategic Commission Report and U.S. Nuclear Weapons Requirements," *Information Series*, No. 568 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, December 1, 2023).

<sup>1</sup> Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, *America's Strategic Posture, The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, Institute for Defense Analysis, 2023, p. V, available at <https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/a/am/americas-strategic-posture/strategic-posture-commission-report.ashx>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.



inevitable that the size of the U.S. nuclear stockpile and the number of delivery systems should increase.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, there are a remarkable number of consensus recommendations that would increase the number of U.S. nuclear weapons and delivery systems beyond the Biden Administration’s program of record. It stated:

- “The current modernization program should be supplemented to ensure U.S. nuclear strategy remains effective in a two-nuclear-peer environment.”
- “Deployed strategic nuclear force requirements will increase for the United States in such a threat environment.”
- “To avoid additional risk and meet emerging challenges, the United States must act now to pursue additional measures and programs. Additional measures beyond the planned modernization of strategic delivery vehicles and warheads may include either or both qualitative and quantitative adjustments in the U.S. strategic posture.”
- “The U.S. strategic nuclear force posture should be modified to: Address the larger number of targets due to the growing Chinese nuclear threat.”
- “[T]he current POR [Program of Record] is not a like-for-like transition in capacity, and may demand more SSBNs [nuclear ballistic missile submarines] if the United States chooses to deploy additional missiles and nuclear warheads.”
- “First, the Commission recommends that the Air Force and Navy exercise uploading ICBM and SLBM warheads” and, “Prepare to upload some or all of the nation’s hedge warheads.”

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vi.

- “Increase the planned production of Columbia SSBNs and their Trident ballistic missile systems, and accelerate development and deployment of D5LE2 [Trident D-5 Life Extension Program II].”
- “Increase the planned number of B-21 bombers and the tankers an expanded force would require.”
- “Initiate planning and preparations for a portion of the future bomber fleet to be on continuous alert status, in time for the B-21 Full Operational Capability (FOC) date.”
- “Plan to deploy the Sentinel ICBM in a MIRVed configuration.”
- “Increase the planned number of deployed Long-Range Standoff Weapons [nuclear long-range cruise missiles.]”
- “Address the need for U.S. theater nuclear forces deployed or based in the Asia-Pacific theater.”
- “Finally, the U.S. theater nuclear force posture should be modified in order to provide the President a range of militarily effective response options to deter or counter Russian or Chinese limited nuclear use in theater.”<sup>4</sup>

Unlike the Biden Administration, the Commission recognized that “...there is no prospect of a meaningful arms control Treaty being negotiated with Russia in the foreseeable future...”<sup>5</sup> It noted that, “Over the past 20 years, Russia has either violated or has failed to comply with nearly every major arms control treaty or agreement to which the United States is or was a party.”<sup>6</sup> It continued, “...given Russia’s history of noncompliance and illegal treaty suspensions, and China’s continued intransigence on

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. viii, 34, 35, 43, 45, 46, 48.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

arms control dialogue, the United States cannot develop its strategic posture based on the assumption that arms control agreements are imminent or will always be in force.”<sup>7</sup>

While the Commission’s assessment of the nuclear threat to the United States and its allies appears more realistic than any public Pentagon assessment in over two decades, it is still based upon executive branch estimates that probably underestimate Russian and Chinese nuclear capabilities. The Pentagon admits Russia has more nuclear warheads than the United States and is increasing the number but provides few details.<sup>8</sup> Russian sources suggest that Moscow’s nuclear arsenal may be as much as twice the Washington assessed level.<sup>9</sup> Regarding China, there is a large disconnect between the alarming growth of its nuclear missiles including MIRVs and the relatively low assessed number of Chinese nuclear warheads. For example, a current force of 500 ICBM launchers, 350 ICBMs, 72 armed SLBM launchers, 250 IRBM launchers, and 500 nuclear-capable IRBMs suggests that official DoD estimates of 500+ “operational” nuclear warheads in May 2023, growing to 1,000+ “operational” warheads in 2030, and which are “on track to exceed previous projections,” i.e., 1,500 warheads in 2035, may be significant understatements.<sup>10</sup> The

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Mark B. Schneider, *How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Russia Have? The Size and Characteristics of the Russian Nuclear Stockpile*, Occasional Paper, Vol. 3 No. 8, October 2023, pp. vii, 5, 10, 11, available at <https://nipp.org/papers/how-many-nuclear-weapons-does-russia-have-the-size-and-characteristics-of-the-russian-nuclear-stockpile/>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023*, pp. VIII, 55, 59, 67, 110, 111, 188, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/1/2023-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>. Also see Mark B. Schneider, “Will the Pentagon Ever Get Serious About the Size of China’s Nuclear Force?,” *Real Clear Defense*, December 15, 2022, available at [https](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2022/12/15/will_the_pentagon_ever_get_serious_about_the_size_of_chinas_nuclear_force_.html)

Pentagon's unrealistic assumption is that the new Chinese silos house older single warhead DF-31 ICBMs.

## U.S. Nuclear Targeting

Nuclear targeting is *not* the same as deterrence. As Dr. Keith Payne has pointed out deterrence is much more *complicated* and *uncertain*.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, if our adversaries know that U.S. force levels preclude effective nuclear targeting, this is unlikely to help deterrence.

For decades, U.S. targeting policy has focused on holding at risk "tactical and strategic nuclear forces, military command centers, conventional military forces including armies in motion, and industrial facilities supporting military operations."<sup>12</sup> As a matter of policy, the United States avoids deliberately targeting cities with the objective of killing civilians.<sup>13</sup> The drastic post-Cold War

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[://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2022/12/15/will\\_the\\_pentagon\\_ever\\_get\\_serious\\_about\\_the\\_size\\_of\\_chinas\\_nuclear\\_force\\_870335.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2022/12/15/will_the_pentagon_ever_get_serious_about_the_size_of_chinas_nuclear_force_870335.html)

<sup>11</sup> Keith B. Payne, "Deterrence is Not Rocket Science: It is More Difficult," *Information Series*, No. 527, July 6, 2022, available at [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/keith-b-payne-deterrence-is-not-rocket-science-it-is-more-difficult-no-527-july-6-2022/](https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-deterrence-is-not-rocket-science-it-is-more-difficult-no-527-july-6-2022/).

<sup>12</sup> Willaim Burr, "Jimmy Carter[']s Controversial Nuclear Target Directive PD-59 Declassified," National Security Archive, September 14, 2012, available at <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb390/>.

<sup>13</sup> Keith B. Payne, *The Great American Gamble*, National Institute Press, 2008, pp. 128, 180-182, 190-192. Also see Keith B. Payne, John R. Harvey, Franklin C. Miller and Robert Soofer, "The Rejection of Intentional Population Targeting for 'Tripolar' Deterrence," *Information Series*, No. 563, September 26, 2023, available at [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/keith-b-payne-john-r-harvey-franklin-c-miller-and-robert-soofer-the-rejection-of-intentional-population-targeting-for-tripolar-deterrence-no-563-september-26-2023/](https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-john-r-harvey-franklin-c-miller-and-robert-soofer-the-rejection-of-intentional-population-targeting-for-tripolar-deterrence-no-563-september-26-2023/), and David J. Trachtenberg, "Mischaracterizing U.S. Nuclear Deterrence Policy: The Myth of Deliberate Civilian Targeting," *Information Series*, No. 542, December 14, 2022, available at [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/david-j-trachtenberg-](https://nipp.org/information_series/david-j-trachtenberg-)

reduction of American tactical nuclear weapons eliminated most capability against moving armies and warships. In 2012, former United States Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM) Commander Admiral (ret.) Richard Mies, wrote that the "...longstanding [U.S.] targeting doctrine of flexible response – [was] a doctrine designed to hold at risk our potential adversaries' military forces, war-supporting industry, command and control capabilities, and military and while minimizing to the maximum extent collateral damage to population and civilian infrastructure."<sup>14</sup> In 2013, the Obama Administration's nuclear weapons employment policy stated, "The new guidance requires the United States to maintain significant counterforce capabilities against potential adversaries. The new guidance does not rely on a 'counter-value' or 'minimum deterrence' strategy."<sup>15</sup> Elaborating on this, the Department of State noted, "The United States will not intentionally target civilian populations or civilian objects," adding that U.S. strategy, "Seek[s] to minimize collateral damage to civilian populations and civilian objects."<sup>16</sup> The 2020 Trump Administration nuclear employment strategy declared that the, "United States will not intentionally target civilian populations," and that it "...will strive to end any conflict at the lowest level of damage possible..."<sup>17</sup> By deliberately

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[mischaracterizing-u-s-nuclear-deterrence-policy-the-myth-of-deliberate-civilian-targeting-no-542-december-14-2022/](https://www.mises.org/story/542).

<sup>14</sup> Admiral Richard Mies, USN (ret.), "Strategic Deterrence in the 21st Century," *Undersea Warfare*, Spring 2012, p. 15, available at [https://issuu.com/julianne.m.johnson/docs/usw\\_spring\\_2012](https://issuu.com/julianne.m.johnson/docs/usw_spring_2012).

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States Specified in Section 491 of 10 U.S.C.," 2013, available at <https://man.fas.org/eprint/employ.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Nuclear Employment Strategy," Fact Sheet, October 6, 2016, available at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/rls/2016/263488.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> Department of Defense, *Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States – 2020 Specified in Section 491(a) of Title 10 U.S.C.*, pp. 2,

targeting soft “countervalue” targets such as undefended and vulnerable cities, a policy of minimum deterrence has the opposite effect. Given the value the United States places on preserving innocent civilian lives, it lacks credibility against anything other than in-kind retaliation.

Both nuclear warhead numbers and technical characteristics such as survivability (about which the Commission voiced concern),<sup>18</sup> yield, accuracy and defense penetration potential are critical elements in nuclear targeting, which explains many of the Commission’s recommendations. The number of targets in Russia and China may be much greater than generally believed. For example, in 1985, Chairman of the Joint Chief’s of Staff General John W. Vessey Jr. told President Reagan that the United States needed more “prompt hard target kill capability” and that even against soft targets, “With a fully generated force [all available weapons made ready] we can cover all soft targets today; whereas the day-to-day coverage was only 50% today...”<sup>19</sup> He said the United States needed 100 MX (Peacekeeper) ICBMs (only 50 were deployed). In 1985, the United States had about 10,000 strategic nuclear weapons compared to under 2,000 today, despite the large growth in adversary underground

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6, 7, available at

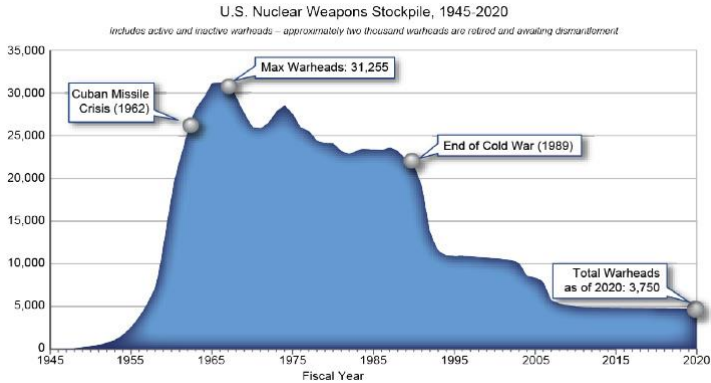
[https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/NCB/21-F-0591\\_2020\\_Report\\_of\\_the\\_Nuclear\\_Employment\\_Strategy\\_of\\_the\\_United\\_States.pdf](https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/NCB/21-F-0591_2020_Report_of_the_Nuclear_Employment_Strategy_of_the_United_States.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> *America’s Strategic Posture, The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, op. cit., pp. 48, 63, 104.

<sup>19</sup> “National Security Council Meeting, June 3, 1985 on Interim Restraint Restraint Policy,” The Reagan Library, available at <http://thereaganfiles.com/19850603-nsc-on-interim.pdf>.

facilities.<sup>20</sup> The following chart indicates the scope of U.S. nuclear weapons reductions since the end of the Cold War.<sup>21</sup>

Figure 1: 2020 U.S. Nuclear Warhead Stockpile



The number of hard targets the United States faces is increasing. Russia reportedly is deploying its new Sarmat “super-heavy ICBM,” its SS-27 Mod 2/Yars ICBM and its Avangard hypersonic missile in superhard silos. Russian silos are reportedly hardened to 15,000-25,000 pounds per square inch (psi) and Sarmat silos are reportedly being upgraded.<sup>22</sup> In 2019, Putin was briefed that Russia would

<sup>20</sup> Harold A. Feiveson, Richard H. Ullman, and Frank von Hippel, “Reducing U.S. and Soviet nuclear arsenals,” August 1985, p. 145, available at <https://sgs.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/2019-10/feiveson-ullman-vonhippel-1985.pdf>. Also see Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, “Nuclear Notebook: United States nuclear weapons, 2023,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January 16, 2023, available at <https://thebulletin.org/remium/2023-01/nuclear-notebook-united-states-nuclear-weapons-2023/>.

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Fact Sheet Transparency in the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Stockpile,” October 5, 2021, available at [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Fact-Sheet\\_Unclass\\_2021\\_final-v2-002.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Fact-Sheet_Unclass_2021_final-v2-002.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> James R. Howe, “Russia’s Strategic Nuclear Weapons: Observations,” Vision Centric, September 27, 2023, mimeo, p. 4. Also see Matthew G. McKinzie, Thomas B. Cochran, Robert S. Norris, and William M. Arkin, “U.S. Nuclear War Plan: A Time For Change,” National Resources

deploy 20 Sarmat regiments, which is at least 120 launchers, compared to 46 SS-18 silos before Sarmat silo conversion began.<sup>23</sup> Russia is also reportedly building new deep underground command and control bunkers, which Putin acknowledged.<sup>24</sup> It is only reasonable to assume that they are harder and better protected than the older bunkers. China has built its Underground Great Wall, a 5,000-km long tunnel system to protect its mobile ICBMs.<sup>25</sup> The 2023 DoD China report noted that, “The PRC has thousands of UGFs [Underground Facilities] and constructs more each year” with the purpose of protecting, “C2 [Command and Control], weapons of mass destruction, logistics, and modernized missile, ground, air, and naval forces.”<sup>26</sup> China is engaged in a massive expansion of its ICBM force (now at least 300 new silos plus mobile ICBMs<sup>27</sup>). If the new silos are

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Defense Council, June 2001, p. 43, available at [http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/warplan/warplan\\_ch4.pdf](http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/warplan/warplan_ch4.pdf), and “Yesin: Russia Will Have RS-20 Missile Replacement in 2018,” *ITAR-TASS*, April 12, 2011, available at <https://wnc-eastviewcom.mutex.gmu.edu/wnc/article?id=31220894>.

<sup>23</sup> “Testing of Sarmat Intercontinental Missile to be over in 2021 - Russian Defense Management Center,” *ITAR-TASS Daily*, December 24, 2019, available at <https://on-demand-eastviewcom.mutex.gmu.edu/browse/doc/56709629>.

<sup>24</sup> Bill Gertz, “Russia Sharply Expanding Nuclear Arsenal, Upgrading Underground Facilities,” *Washington Free Beacon*, December 13, 2017, available at <https://freebeacon.com/national-security/russia-sharply-expanding-nuclear-arsenal-upgrading-underground-facilities/>. Also see “Meeting with heads of Defence Ministry, federal agencies and defence companies,” *Kremlin.ru*, November 11, 2020, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64396>.

<sup>25</sup> William Wan, “Georgetown students shed light on China’s tunnel system for nuclear weapons,” *The Washington Post*, November 29, 2011, available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/georgetown-students-shed-light-on-chinas-tunnel-system-for-nuclear-weapons/2011/11/16/gIQA6AmKAO\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/georgetown-students-shed-light-on-chinas-tunnel-system-for-nuclear-weapons/2011/11/16/gIQA6AmKAO_story.html).

<sup>26</sup> *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023*, op. cit., p. 88.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64, 104.



built with new concrete reportedly hardened to 30,000 psi,<sup>28</sup> they would be extremely difficult to destroy, eroding the U.S. counterforce capability.

U.S. presidents since Ronald Reagan approved sensible nuclear employment policies but allowed the U.S. deterrent to age and ordered nuclear weapons reductions that made it impossible to implement U.S. nuclear guidance fully and effectively. The Clinton Administration terminated many nuclear modernization plans and programs. The George W. Bush Administration reduced by two-thirds the number of deployed strategic nuclear weapons and eliminated without replacement two of the three best counterforce weapons -- all Peacekeeper ICBMs, all Advanced Cruise Missiles and 70 percent of the older AGM-86B nuclear cruise missiles.<sup>29</sup> The only remaining missile warhead in the U.S. arsenal with a good counterforce capability is the W88 on the Trident D-5 SLBM; however, only 400 were reportedly produced compared to the Reagan plan for thousands.<sup>30</sup> Producing more W88s is virtually impossible without restoring the U.S. fissile material pit production capability. The Minuteman III ICBMs (with about 400 deployed warheads<sup>31</sup>) with 1970 accuracy have some

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<sup>28</sup> Joe Nasvik, "Ultra-High Performance Concrete." *Construction Pros.com*, August 21, 2018, available at <https://www.forconstructionpros.com/concrete/article/21015846/ultra-high-performance-concrete>.

<sup>29</sup> Wade Boese, "United States Retires MX Missile," *Arms Control Today*, September 19, 2005, available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2005-10/united-states-retires-mx-missile>. Also see Hans Kristensen, "US Air Force Decides To Retire Advanced Cruise Missile," *Federation of American Scientists*, March 7, 2023, available at [https://fas.org/publication/us\\_air\\_force\\_decides\\_to\\_retire/](https://fas.org/publication/us_air_force_decides_to_retire/).

<sup>30</sup> "The W88 Warhead," Nuclear Weapons Archive.org, October 1, 1997, available at <https://nuclearweaponarchive.org/Usa/Weapons/W88.html>.

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Department of State, "New START Treaty Aggregate Numbers of United States Strategic Offensive Arms," Fact Sheet, December 1, 2020,

counterforce capability but they are not comparable to the Peacekeeper.<sup>32</sup> All available W88s cannot be deployed and reportedly no more than six of the 12 available Trident submarines are normally at sea,<sup>33</sup> reducing American prompt counterforce capability except under generated alert (i.e., maximum crisis availability and survivability of the force.)

Most of the current strategic modernization program will not start until after 2030 and the new Sentinel ICBMs, the Columbia-class missile submarines and the B-21 bombers are already behind schedule.<sup>34</sup> The Sentinel will have more counterforce capability but it will only carry 400 warheads. According to the Strategic Posture Commission, the new W93 warhead (available in 2040<sup>35</sup>) will provide “new military capabilities” but the report provided no details.<sup>36</sup> While the new Mark 7 reentry vehicle might have increased accuracy, its yield is unlikely to be sufficient to provide substantial counterforce capability without an apparently unprogrammed upgrade in the Trident D-5’s 1990 missile accuracy.

This nation’s nuclear posture is mainly the product of the 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review* which assumed a benign security environment. It reportedly determined the

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available at <https://www.state.gov/new-start-treaty-aggregate-numbers-of-strategic-offensive-arms-15/>.

<sup>32</sup> John T. Correll, “The Ups and Downs of Counterforce,” *Air and Space Forces Magazine*, October 1, 2005, available at <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/1005counterforce/>.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Huessy, “Nuclear Deterrence: Painting a Bull’s Eye On the US,” Gatestone Institute, June 16, 2010, available at <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/1372/us-nuclear-deterrence>.

<sup>34</sup> *America’s Strategic Posture, The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, op. cit., p. 43.

<sup>35</sup> Whitney Spivey, “W93,” *Global Security Organization*, July 26, 2021, available at <https://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/systems/w93.htm>.

<sup>36</sup> *America’s Strategic Posture, The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, op. cit., p. 44.

requirement was for “1500 ‘arms control accountable’ warheads—about 1850 ‘real’ deployed warheads...”<sup>37</sup> A 2012 Heritage Foundation study by Rebecca Heinrichs (a member of the Commission) and Baker Spring concluded that the United States needed approximately 2,700-3,000 deployed strategic nuclear warheads because of the requirement to hold at risk adversary “hardened and mobile targets with high confidence...”<sup>38</sup> Some approaches to targeting mobile ICBMs likely require large numbers of nuclear warheads. Other approaches may necessitate the deployment of nuclear hypersonic missiles. Neither of these are in the Biden Administration’s nuclear deterrence plan. The Russian and Chinese nuclear missile buildup and UGF construction of the last decade probably require about 1,000 additional counterforce capable warheads.<sup>39</sup> In addition, threatening China’s so-called Underground Great Wall would likely require hundreds to thousands of high counterforce performance warheads (i.e., capable of threatening very deeply buried targets), depending on the targeting approach. This is highly unlikely with the current and planned U.S. nuclear capability, even under generated alert.

The Biden Administration’s 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* involved: 1) programming an inadequate number of

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<sup>37</sup> “Speaking Notes: U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policies and Programs Strategic Weapons in the 21st Century Ronald Reagan Building, Washington, DC John R. Harvey 23 January 2014,” mimeo., p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Rebecca Heinrichs and Baker Spring, “Deterrence and Nuclear Targeting in the 21st Century,” The Heritage Foundation, November 30, 2012, available at <https://www.heritage.org/node/12067/print-display>.

<sup>39</sup> Mark B. Schneider, “The Chinese Nuclear Breakout and the Biden Administration’s Nuclear Posture Review,” *Real Clear Defense*, August 28, 2021, available at [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2021/08/28/the\\_chinese\\_nuclear\\_breakout\\_and\\_the\\_biden\\_administrations\\_nuclear\\_posture\\_review\\_792021.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2021/08/28/the_chinese_nuclear_breakout_and_the_biden_administrations_nuclear_posture_review_792021.html).

nuclear weapons to implement U.S. strategy, 2) reversing the decades old policy of maintaining a nuclear “hedge,” 3) killing the nuclear sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) program and 4) eliminating the B-83 high-yield bomb, the weapon most capable of threatening hard and *very* deeply buried facilities (HDBTs) built in hard rock.<sup>40</sup> This reportedly includes some of the deep underground bunkers that President Putin depends upon to keep himself alive during a nuclear war.<sup>41</sup>

The 2005 National Academy of Science (NAS) report on HDBTs cited 10,000 HDBTs worldwide, noting that some could survive a “few” nuclear strikes and 100 were candidates for a robust nuclear earth/rock penetrator which could lower the necessary yield by a factor of 15-25.<sup>42</sup> The number of HDBTs is likely much higher today. The NAS concluded that conventional weapons have inadequate capability against HDBTs even with high-quality intelligence.<sup>43</sup> The NAS calculations are still valid because U.S. nuclear forces have not been improved since 1997.

In October 2023, the Pentagon announced the Biden Administration would move forward with the B61-13 nuclear bomb, which “...will provide the President with additional options against certain harder and large-area

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<sup>40</sup> Mark B. Schneider, “Biden’s NPR: Assured Survival for Vladimir Putin,” *Real Clear Defense*, April 21, 2022, available [https://www.realcleardefense.com/2022/04/21/bidens\\_npr\\_assured\\_survival\\_for\\_vladimir\\_putin\\_8282\\_55.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/2022/04/21/bidens_npr_assured_survival_for_vladimir_putin_8282_55.html).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> National Research Council, *Effects of Nuclear Earth-Penetrator and Other Weapons*, The National Academies Press, 2005, pp. S-2, 124, available at <https://doi.org/10.17226/11282>.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. S-3.

military targets...<sup>44</sup> Reportedly, only 50 will be built,<sup>45</sup> and they "...will not increase the overall number of weapons in our nuclear stockpile," as other existing weapons in the stockpile will be eliminated.<sup>46</sup> Two senior Republican defense committee leaders, Congressman Mike Rogers and Senator Roger Wicker, supported the decision but noted that while it "...will better allow the Air Force to reach hardened and deeply-buried targets, it is only a modest step in the right direction."<sup>47</sup> However, the B61-13 is apparently not a deep earth/rock penetrator.<sup>48</sup> Based on the NAS analysis and the reported yield of the B61-13,<sup>49</sup> it is insufficient to threaten the *deepest* HDBTs without earth/rock penetration capability.<sup>50</sup> While there are many important targets, including HDBTs, that the B61-13 can

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<sup>44</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "Fact Sheet on B61 Variant Development," October 27, 2023, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/27/2003329624/-1/-1/1/B61-13-FACT-SHEET.PDF>.

<sup>45</sup> Hans Kristensen and Matt Korda, "Biden Administration Decides To Build A New Nuclear Bomb to Get Rid Of An Old Bomb," Federation of American Scientists, October 27, 2023, available at <https://fas.org/publication/biden-administration-to-build-a-new-nuclear-bomb/>.

<sup>46</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "Department of Defense Announces Pursuit of B61 Gravity Bomb Variant," October 27, 2023, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3571660/department-of-defense-announces-pursuit-of-b61-gravity-bomb-variant/>.

<sup>47</sup> "ROGERS, WICKER STATEMENT ON B61-13 GRAVITY BOMB," House Armed Services Committee. October 27, 2023, available at <https://armedservices.house.gov/news/press-releases/rogers-wicker-statement-b61-13-gravity-bomb>.

<sup>48</sup> Joseph Trevithick, "Plans For More Destructive B61 Nuclear Bomb Unveiled," *THE WAR ZONE*, October 27, 2023, available at <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/plans-for-more-destructive-b61-nuclear-bomb-unveiled>.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> *Effects of Nuclear Earth-Penetrator and Other Weapons*, op. cit., pp. 13, 124.

destroy, the deepest HDBTs are not among them. It is possible to plan for multiple strikes on each HDBT, but the United States will not have enough B61-13 (or other types of nuclear weapons) to do this on a large scale.

In 2012, General James Cartwright, a former USSTRATCOM Commander, chaired the drafting of a report by a self-styled “Commission” supporting an “international movement for the elimination of all nuclear weapons.”<sup>51</sup> It was apparently an effort to suggest that a small force could effectively and credibly implement the requirements of U.S. nuclear strategy.<sup>52</sup> (It did not assign nuclear forces against Russian and Chinese nuclear forces threatening U.S. allies, Russian or Chinese tactical nuclear forces or conventional forces.) Notably, the so-called *Global Zero* targeting plan allocated two nuclear warheads against each Russian and Chinese ICBM silo (China then had only twenty).<sup>53</sup> Today, it would probably require 1,000 or more counterforce capable warheads to target *known* Russian and Chinese missile silos and other important nuclear and missile related facilities with two-on-one attacks. It would also likely require hundreds to thousands more to target effectively the Chinese Underground Great Wall, depending upon the targeting approach, not to mention thousands more warheads to hold at risk the thousands of Chinese UGFs the Pentagon has revealed or to threaten deployed mobile ICBMs.

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<sup>51</sup> James Cartwright, Chairman, *Global Zero U.S. Nuclear Policy Commission Report*, Global Zero, 2012, p. ii, available at [http://timemilitary.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/051612\\_globalzero.pdf](http://timemilitary.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/051612_globalzero.pdf).

<sup>52</sup> Mark Schneider, “Zero Deterrent?” *Air and Space Forces Magazine*, August 1, 2012, available at <https://www.Airandspaceforces.com/article/0812zero/>.

<sup>53</sup> Cartwright, *Global Zero U.S. Nuclear Policy Commission Report*, op. cit., p. 10.

## Conclusion

Due to the large growth in the nuclear threat over the last decade, the Biden Administration's nuclear deterrent probably could not implement even the flawed *Global Zero* targeting plan with high confidence. The United States does not have sufficient nuclear weapons and few of them have high-confidence capabilities (very high-yield or high-yield and earth/rock penetrating capability) to threaten *very deep* HDBTs. China's Underground Great Wall is reportedly hundreds of meters underground.<sup>54</sup> It would probably require two counterforce capable warheads against many aim points to achieve high damage expectancy against these tunnels.

The Strategic Posture Commission's recommendations on *future* U.S. nuclear force upload can be implemented *immediately* at virtually no cost. Putin's violation and illegal suspension of the New START Treaty is a material breach; hence, the option of U.S. Treaty suspension is legally available. The 2001 *Nuclear Posture Review* report stated that the three legs of the Triad can be uploaded in "weeks, months and years."<sup>55</sup> Without on-site inspections since March 2020, Russia may have uploaded all or most of its strategic forces, and there are other troubling noncompliance issues.<sup>56</sup>

Upload is the only short-term option available to the United States to prevent further erosion of America's

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<sup>54</sup> "China Builds Underground 'Great Wall' Against Nuke Attack," *Chosun.com*, December 14, 2009, available at [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2009/12/14/2009121400292.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2009/12/14/2009121400292.html).

<sup>55</sup> Donald H. Rumsfeld, *Annual Report to the President and the Congress*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2002), p. 83, available at [https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/annual\\_reports/2002\\_DoD\\_AR.pdf?ver=2014-06-24-153732-117](https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/annual_reports/2002_DoD_AR.pdf?ver=2014-06-24-153732-117).

<sup>56</sup> Schneider, *How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Russia Have?*, op. cit., pp. 116-120, 130-131, 135-146, 150, 168.

nuclear deterrent. According to then-USSTRATCOM Commander Admiral Charles Richard, "...two-thirds of those [U.S. nuclear] weapons are 'operationally unavailable' because of treaty constraints, such as provisions of the New START treaty with Russia."<sup>57</sup>

It is reasonable to assume that warhead upload would get Putin's and Xi's attention and enhance deterrence. It could double the survivable U.S. nuclear force. In 2022, Admiral Richard lamented that, "As I assess our level of deterrence against China, the ship is slowly sinking."<sup>58</sup> In the nuclear arena, upload might reverse this trend. In the mid- to long-term, the effectiveness of the U.S. nuclear deterrent depends upon the modernization program. Still, numbers count and the Commission's recommendation on upload and re-MIRVing ICBMs would about double the number of survivable warheads in the modernized force and substantially increase American counterforce potential and damage expectancy at *virtually no cost*. The Commission's recommendation for placing bombers on nuclear alert could also increase the survivable U.S. nuclear force.

Dictators like Putin and Xi can be expected to care a great deal about the number and damage expectancy of U.S. nuclear weapons against their military and underground leadership facilities, on which they depend to expand their empires and keep themselves alive if war escalates to nuclear use. The Strategic Posture Commission cogently

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<sup>57</sup> Bill Gertz, "EXCLUSIVE: China building third missile field for hundreds of new ICBMs," *The Washington Times*, August 12, 2021, available at

<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/aug/12/china-engaged-breathtaking-nuclear-breakout-us-str/>.

<sup>58</sup> C. Todd Lopez, "Stratcom Commander Says U.S. Should Look to 1950s to Regain Competitive Edge," *DoD News*, November 3, 2022, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3209416/stratcom-commander-says-us-should-look-to-1950s-to-regain-competitive-edge/>.



outlined the threat that we face, the need to enhance our nuclear deterrent and some of its recommendations are very low cost. In light of the possible consequences of the failure of nuclear deterrence, the Commission's recommendations should be taken seriously.

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# Two and a Half Cheers for the Strategic Posture Commission Report

David J. Trachtenberg

Section 1687 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2022 established a bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission to “conduct a review of the strategic posture of the United States, including a strategic threat assessment and a detailed review of nuclear weapons policy, strategy, and force structure and factors affecting the strategic stability of near-peer competitors of the United States.”<sup>1</sup> Last October, the Posture Commission’s report was released publicly. The conclusions reached by the commissioners were reached on a bipartisan basis – not the easiest of accomplishments in today’s increasingly polarized and partisan political environment.

Although much attention to the Commission’s findings was overshadowed by the unprecedented outbreak of violence in the Middle East between Israel and Hamas and Russia’s ongoing aggression against Ukraine, the report itself is the product of more than a year of intense deliberations on critical strategic force issues and deserves to be considered seriously by a wide range of decision makers, policy analysts, and national security practitioners.

As the Commission notes, much has changed since the last Strategic Posture Commission issued its report in 2009. Those changes include a more aggressive Russia and the expansion of its nuclear capabilities, the growth in China’s nuclear forces, and greater overall threats to the stability of the existing U.S.-led world order. In light of these negative trends, the Commission reached the unanimous conclusion

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<sup>1</sup> Section 1687, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022* (Public Law 117-81, December 27, 2021), available at <https://www.congress.gov/117/plaws/publ81/PLAW-117publ81.pdf>.

that “the United States lacks a comprehensive strategy to address the looming two-nuclear-peer threat environment and lacks the force structure such a strategy will require.”<sup>2</sup>

As a result of its comprehensive review, the Commission makes 131 findings and 81 specific recommendations for U.S. policy. While avoiding specific programmatic and force structure recommendations, the report outlines the need for more substantial investments in U.S. nuclear and conventional forces to strengthen deterrence in an increasingly volatile international security environment. In particular, the report cites a growing risk of conflict with China and Russia, or both simultaneously, and calls for a flexible and tailored deterrent strategy that includes additional theater nuclear capabilities, modernizing the nuclear command and control system, preparing to upload warheads on strategic nuclear delivery vehicles, and planning for the deployment of MIRVed ICBMs.

The Commission considered the U.S. strategic posture over the 2027-2035 timeframe. Regarding emerging threats, it acknowledged that “The United States will face two nuclear peer adversaries for the first time,” noting that “The new partnership between Russian and Chinese leaders poses qualitatively new threats of potential opportunistic aggression and/or the risk of future cooperative two-theater aggression.”<sup>3</sup> To address this prospect, the Commission calls for “a truly integrated, whole-of-government strategy” that includes “effective deterrence and defeat of simultaneous Russian and Chinese aggression in Europe and Asia using conventional forces” and “a

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<sup>2</sup> *America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, October 2023, p. vii, available at <https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/Strategic-Posture-Committee-Report-Final.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 90.

nuclear posture capable of simultaneously deterring both countries.”<sup>4</sup> In short, the Commissioners favor strengthening both U.S. nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities in light of the deteriorating security environment and the potential prospect of a two-front war against two major U.S. adversaries. This is a prudent recommendation that deserves strong bipartisan support.

Although the Commission report lacks specific programmatic recommendations, a number of its conclusions suggest the United States should adopt policies and programs that run counter to the stated positions of the Biden Administration. For example, President Biden has been consistent in his opposition to the development and deployment of a nuclear sea-launched cruise missile, the SLCM-N, to bolster regional deterrence against Russia and China and to strengthen the credibility of U.S. security assurances to allies. The *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* stated that the SLCM-N program, proposed by the Trump Administration, would be cancelled, arguing that it was too costly and “no longer necessary... in light of other nuclear modernization programs and defense priorities.”<sup>5</sup>

Although the Commission report does not explicitly cite the SLCM-N, it provides clear justification for the capability such a system would provide, arguing:

Additional U.S. theater nuclear capabilities will be necessary in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific regions to deter adversary nuclear use and offset local conventional superiority. These additional theater capabilities will need to be deployable, survivable, and variable in their available yield options.... U.S. theater nuclear force posture should be modified in order to provide the

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. vii-viii, 31, 96.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, October 2022, p. 20, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

President a range of militarily effective response options to deter or counter Russian or Chinese limited nuclear use in theater... [a]nd to address Allied concerns regarding extended deterrence.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the Commission calls for the development and fielding of an Integrated Air and Missile Defense capability for the U.S. homeland “that can deter and defeat coercive attacks by Russia and China....”<sup>7</sup> This appears to challenge the long-standing belief that defending against the nuclear forces of Russia and China would be “destabilizing.” And, one could read the language of the report as at least supportive of the deployment of space-based interceptors, should the technology prove feasible. Indeed, the report states that, if feasible, “the department should pursue deployment with urgency,”<sup>8</sup> noting that “DOD must look at new approaches to achieving U.S. missile defense goals, including the use of space-based and directed energy capabilities, as simply scaling up current programs is not likely to be effective.”<sup>9</sup>

This is a remarkable recommendation from a bipartisan panel that included members who served in the Obama and Biden Administrations and who are not known to be strong supporters of investments in exotic missile defense technologies or the deployment of more robust missile defense capabilities against Russia or China. As the Biden Administration’s Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy told the Senate Armed Services Committee, “I support the longstanding U.S. policy that homeland missile defenses should remain focused on defending against comparatively limited rogue state ballistic missile attacks

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<sup>6</sup> *America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, op. cit., pp. 35, 48, 98, 100.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. x, 72, 105.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 73, 106.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

from North Korea and Iran, not against attacks by near-peers China and Russia which possess much larger strategic missile arsenals that could overwhelm U.S. homeland missile defenses.”<sup>10</sup> And, as the Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control Verification and Compliance declared, “today’s U.S. homeland BMD system is designed only to address ICBMs from rogue states such as the DPRK, and potentially Iran.... The United States depends upon the survivability, effectiveness, and credibility of its strategic nuclear forces for deterring Russia and the PRC. In this regard, I have no doubt the ‘future’ will continue to resemble the ‘present.’”<sup>11</sup> Such statements of support for a missile defense posture rooted in “balance of terror” thinking and Cold War notions of “stability” appear antiquated in today’s strategic environment and do not seem to align with the Commission’s recommendations.

The Commission also recommends transferring missile defense sustainment and operations responsibilities to the individual military services so the Missile Defense Agency can concentrate its efforts on research and development of the necessary defensive technologies. This is likely to be a controversial recommendation, as investments in missile defense would then need to be prioritized among a plethora of competing service priorities. In such an environment, it is reasonable to assume that other program priorities considered to be of greater urgency may crowd out a

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<sup>10</sup> Senate Armed Services Committee, Advance Policy Questions for Ms. Alexandra Baker, Nominee for Appointment to be Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, p. 44, available at <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Baker%20APQ%20Responses1.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> “The Strategic Defense Initiative in Retrospect: The Past, Present, and Future of Missile Defense,” *Remarks of Mallory Stewart, Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance, before the George Washington University Space Policy Institute, April 28, 2023*, available at <https://www.state.gov/the-strategic-defense-initiative-in-retrospect-the-past-present-and-future-of-missile-defense/>.

stronger emphasis on developing more comprehensive missile defense capabilities.

With respect to arms control and disarmament, the report appears to take a more realistic approach than arms control devotees might like. It notes that establishing an effective strategy and force requirements to deal with a two nuclear peer threat environment are “prerequisites” to developing arms control proposals that serve the national interest.<sup>12</sup> It calls the vision of a world without nuclear weapons “more improbable now than ever”<sup>13</sup> and acknowledges that any future arms control agreements should “seek to limit all nuclear weapon types,” though it concedes that formal nuclear arms control agreements may not be possible.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, it concludes:

Arms control agreements in the U.S. national interest are potentially important tools to support U.S. policy goals, but given Russia’s history of noncompliance and illegal treaty suspensions, and China’s continued intransigence on arms control dialogue, the United States cannot develop its strategic posture based on the assumption that arms control agreements are imminent or will always be in force. In short, the United States must be prepared for a future with and without arms control agreements.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, op. cit., pp. x, 85.

<sup>13</sup> “Preface of the Chair and Vice Chair,” *America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, op. cit, p. v.

<sup>14</sup> *America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, op. cit., pp. x, 86, 110.

<sup>15</sup> *America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, op. cit., pp. 81, 109.

Such language may dishearten those in the arms control community who fervently believe in the overriding value of arms control agreements to solve the political difficulties that divide nations. But the Commission is clear-eyed in its understanding that arms control is a two-way street. Without compliance by the other party or parties to an agreement, any arms control treaty simply becomes a tool to facilitate U.S. unilateral disarmament. President Trump recognized this when he withdrew the United States from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019 and the Open Skies Treaty in 2020. Indeed, the Commission “condemns the unwarranted and illegal Russian suspension of New START”<sup>16</sup> and notes that “there is no prospect of a meaningful arms control treaty being negotiated with Russia in the foreseeable future” and that any such future agreement must address “all Russian nuclear weapons.”<sup>17</sup>

To ensure that the United States can maintain an effective nuclear deterrent in light of the deteriorating security circumstances, the Commission calls investments in the nuclear enterprise “the nation’s highest defense priority”<sup>18</sup> and states that “The current modernization program should be supplemented to ensure U.S. nuclear strategy remains effective in a two-nuclear-peer environment.”<sup>19</sup> This appears to be a call for adding additional deterrent capabilities to the U.S. nuclear arsenal, despite the Biden Administration’s reluctance to proceed down this path. To its credit, though, the administration has announced that the United States will go forward with the

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86, 110.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 82, 110.

<sup>18</sup> “Preface of the Chair and Vice Chair,” *America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, op. cit., p. vi.

<sup>19</sup> *America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, op. cit., pp. viii, 47, 99.



development of a modern variant of the B61, the B61-13, that “will provide the President with additional options against certain harder and large-area military targets....”<sup>20</sup> However, the number of B61-13s that will be produced will not result in a net increase in the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile as they will replace older, legacy systems such as the B83-1 and B61-7 on a one-for-one basis. In light of the administration’s proposed cancellation of the SLCM-N and retirement of the B83 bomb, this is a modest step that arguably does not fulfill the intent of the Commission’s recommendation.

Among its recommendations, the Commission calls for expanding the strategic infrastructure of the Department of Energy’s National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) in order to meet current and future force posture requirements, provide greater flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances, and hedge against multiple types of risk. Interestingly, the Commission recommends transferring congressional funding responsibility for the NNSA nuclear weapons complex to the House and Senate Defense Appropriations Subcommittees, instead of other subcommittees like the House Energy and Water Subcommittee where NNSA funding decisions currently reside.<sup>21</sup> Though the Commission does not explain in detail the rationale for such a recommendation, NNSA is part of the Department of Energy, a civilian agency, and therefore its budget is overseen by congressional non-defense committees with different sets of priorities. It is often difficult for nuclear weapons-related projects to compete for

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<sup>20</sup> Department of Defense, “Fact Sheet on B61 Variant Development,” October 27, 2023, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/27/2003329624/-1/-1/1/B61-13-FACT-SHEET.PDF>.

<sup>21</sup> *America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, op. cit., pp. ix, 61, 102.

funding with energy, water, and other “civilian” needs that directly benefit local communities.

There are other significant findings worth mentioning in the Commission’s more than 100-page report. Among the more troubling is the recognition that, despite the increase in threats to the United States and its allies and partners over the past decade and a half, the nation is not prepared to deal effectively with them without further investments in the national security apparatus. As the Commission Chair and Vice Chair make clear, “We do recognize budget realities, but we also believe the nation must make these new investments and U.S. leaders must communicate to U.S. citizens both the need and urgency to rebuild the nuclear infrastructure and modernize the nuclear forces.”<sup>22</sup> In addition, there is a strong call for greater coordination with allies and partners and a recommendation to pursue unspecified various risk reduction measures intended to heighten predictability and lower the chances for miscalculation that could lead to conflict.

Overall, the Commission’s report makes for sobering reading. Though there are those who may find the Commission’s findings lacking in urgency and devoid of explicit support for the programmatic decisions necessary to implement the policies it recommends, its assessment of the growing threats to U.S. security, the need for a more comprehensive and effective strategy to deal with those threats, its support for more robust measures to improve the nuclear enterprise and expand the DoE/NNSA infrastructure, and its calls to strengthen alliance relationships and to reduce strategic risks are well-reasoned and well-articulated. The Commission’s recommendations deserve to be taken seriously by U.S. policy makers,

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<sup>22</sup> “Preface of the Chair and Vice Chair,” *America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, op. cit., p. vi.

especially in light of the strong bipartisan support behind them.

In short, the Commission report is a thoughtful and valuable analysis of how U.S. strategic posture needs to be adapted to ensure the nation's security well into the future. It should be a wake-up call for decision leaders and policy makers that further procrastination on strengthening nuclear deterrence is not only unwarranted but may lead to the most dangerous of consequences. In a time of seemingly unprecedented partisan political posturing, the Commission deserves two and a half cheers for its ability to craft a strong and credible bipartisan consensus on the most serious strategic issues confronting the nation. But, like any study that makes sweeping recommendations, the proof of its enduring value will be in its implementation.

It will take more than positive comments to ensure the Commission's report is not simply consigned to a bookshelf to gather dust, like so many other sound studies and reports that identified problems and proposed solutions that were never effectively implemented. The security of the nation rests on the ability to make and execute major decisions smartly rather than debating them incessantly without resolution. We should all hope that the Biden Administration is up to the task.

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