



LITERATURE REVIEW

National Institute for Deterrence Studies, *Peace Through Strength: Renewing America's Nuclear Deterrent—A Proposed Nuclear Posture Review for 2026*, November 10, 2025, 53 pp.

In recent years, the global security environment has continued to deteriorate to the detriment of U.S. national security. China's increasingly aggressive and expansionist goals and Russia's revanchist policies have been underpinned by repeated coercive nuclear threats to the West over Ukraine and Taiwan. North Korea continues to develop nuclear weapons and Iran's nuclear ambitions remain unmoderated despite the success of Israeli and American military actions targeting Tehran's nuclear weapons enterprise.

Nearly one year into the second Trump Administration, only one of the seminal strategy documents that explain how the administration intends to confront the growing challenges of this dynamic security environment has so far been released—the *National Security Strategy*. The *National Defense Strategy* has reportedly been delayed, and it remains unclear whether a new *Nuclear Posture Review* or *Missile Defense Review* will be forthcoming. Some observers have argued that there is no need for a new *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR), as the 2018 NPR promulgated by the first Trump Administration provides a sufficient framework for modernizing the nation's nuclear deterrent to address contemporary security challenges without the need for a lengthy, bureaucratic process.¹ Others support issuance of a comprehensive NPR to address changes in the security environment since the first Trump and Biden Administration NPRs.

The National Institute for Deterrence Studies falls squarely in the latter camp and has developed a notional NPR that could form the basis for an official and comprehensive nuclear strategy document. *Peace Through Strength: Renewing America's Nuclear Deterrent—A Proposed Nuclear Posture Review for 2026*, provides a detailed and well-articulated rationale for strengthening U.S. nuclear posture to deter adversary aggression. It calls for the development and deployment of more flexible strategic and non-strategic nuclear forces tailored to convince potential adversaries that the costs of aggression vastly outweigh the perceived benefits. Overall, it provides an excellent tutorial on the importance of U.S. nuclear weapons and the requirements for deterrence and extended deterrence in an ever-changing world.

The Preface of *Peace Through Strength* takes issue with those who argue that a new NPR is unnecessary, contending that the world has changed “dramatically” since the first Trump Administration and advocating for a clear and succinct policy document that provides an “unambiguous declaratory statement, providing specific guidance to the force for planning and resourcing.” It declares that “a new NPR is necessary, not optional.” It notes that the U.S. nuclear arsenal, among other things, deters strategic attacks, strengthens alliances, and

¹ See, for example, Madelyn Creedon and Franklin Miller, “Deterring the Nuclear Dictators,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 20, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/deterring-nuclear-dictators#>.



supports U.S. non-proliferation goals. It states that advanced conventional forces can augment but cannot substitute for nuclear capabilities and calls for a “maximalist deterrence strategy.” This maximalist strategy requires the modernization and expansion of U.S. nuclear forces to ensure a sufficiently robust and credible nuclear deterrent.

Among the policy recommendations the report advocates are improving the survivability of all three legs of the U.S. strategic nuclear Triad, including through support for President Trump’s “Golden Dome” missile defense initiative; suspending the New START Treaty to allow for the upload of non-deployed “hedge” weapons on existing platforms; and updating the U.S. extended deterrent policy to reflect what it characterizes as a “Shared Regional Deterrence” approach.

Interestingly, although the report argues that changes in the strategic environment since the first Trump Administration have been significant enough to require a new NPR, many of the policy courses it advocates reflect the conclusions and recommendations contained in the 2018 NPR. For example, it calls for a tailored deterrent force that “addresses the unique factors in each adversary’s decision-making, values, and interests.” It supports “hedging against an uncertain future” by developing a diverse nuclear arsenal to close any capability gaps on the so-called escalation ladder (a position the 2022 Biden NPR explicitly rejected), including the deployment of a nuclear sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N). It rejects “minimum deterrence,” “no first use,” and “sole purpose” policies. And it reiterates that the United States would only use nuclear weapons in “extreme circumstances,” noting that “non-nuclear strategic attacks” may be met with a nuclear response.

The report does go further, however, arguing for uploading nuclear weapons on existing platforms (a recommendation of the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission and others); fostering the ability to launch on “credible warning,” rather than riding out a first-strike attack; restoring alert status to the bomber fleet; re-roleing the B-1B bomber for nuclear missions; re-MIRVing at least some of the Minuteman III ICBM force; implementing mobile ICBM options (another Strategic Posture Commission recommendation); reactivating decommissioned SLBM launch tubes on *Ohio*-class submarines; and improving the survivability and resilience of the nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3) infrastructure. It also advocates for developing new offensive and defensive capabilities, improving continuity of government exercises, and revitalizing the nuclear deterrence workforce.

Despite the overall solid conclusions and recommendations in the report, there are some areas that appear somewhat schizophrenic. For example, the report calls arms control treaties “essential to the liberal rules-based international order,” though it acknowledges that arms control agreements “frequently fail to achieve their intended goals” and “often fail to adapt to the fluctuating geopolitical threats, shifting national interest, or technological advancements.” Consequently, it notes that the United States “must prepare for a world without mutual and verifiable arms control.” On the other hand, it argues that an adequate deterrent force will “motivate an adversary’s interest in and compliance with arms negotiations and treaties” and holds out hope that rebuilding the nation’s nuclear deterrent

will cause adversaries to “change their perspective, abandon their revanchist goals, and actively support the rules-based international order.”

Although the notion that arms control “promotes diplomacy, cooperation, and multilateralism to reduce nuclear threats and enhance stability” is an often-asserted generality, the historical evidence challenges this common perception. As long as adversary goals and objectives are fundamentally at odds with those of the United States, the prospect of arms control serving U.S. national security interests are slim to non-existent. And the notion that improvements to the U.S. nuclear deterrent force will help compel adversary compliance with arms control agreements seems problematic at best given that adversaries see arms control as a tool to advance their own strategic objectives at America’s expense. On this point, the report correctly notes that “it is unlikely that autocratic regimes with nuclear weapons and aggressive goals will engage in arms control in a way that aligns with the spirit of international order.”

In addition, the report advocates for a strategy of “Dynamic Parity,” which it defines as “achieving a symmetrical balance of nuclear capabilities with those of our collective nuclear adversaries.” While it is true that increased cooperation and collaboration among adversaries requires sufficient U.S. nuclear capabilities to deter the possibility of coordinated aggression, this may suggest to the reader matching adversary capabilities one-for-one. Indeed, the report states that Dynamic Parity “emulates adversarial nuclear behavior.” Some greater definitional and analytical clarity would have been useful here. Moreover, the notion of “parity” (“dynamic” or otherwise) is an insufficient yardstick for measuring either the success of arms control or the adequacy of U.S. deterrent capability. As Colin Gray insightfully explained, what matters is “the net freedom of action permitted each side and of the implications of that judgment for conflict outcomes at all levels.”² And as he and Keith Payne noted, “A condition of parity or essential equivalence is incompatible with extended deterrent duties because of the self-deterrence inherent in such a strategic context.”³

The notion of Shared Regional Deterrence is a call for greater allied burden sharing, which is consistent with the Trump Administration’s approach. In this regard, the report asserts that “The past strategy of Extended Deterrence fails to meet the demands of the new global security environment” for various reasons, including growing allied concerns over the credibility of U.S. security guarantees, different allied interests, and past underinvestment in regional defense capabilities due to allied “free riding.” The solution is to minimize “regional capability disparities that can promote destabilizing aggression and miscalculation” through capability enhancements, forward deployment of U.S. forces, and improved regional missile

² Colin Gray, “The Strategic Implications of the Nuclear Balance and Arms Control,” in Richard Staar, ed., *Arms Control: Myth Versus Reality* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1984), p. 26. Gray elaborated on this point, noting, “Roughly equivalent strategic forces, posing roughly equivalent kinds and scales of damage to superpower homelands - were this the case - should be hindered in their ability to provide for stability in deterrence because one party, the United States, would have a visibly fearful populace to act as a brake upon policy, while the other party would not. In short, the asymmetry in political systems could mean that parity in strategic forces may not translate readily into parity in deterrent effect.” See Colin S. Gray, “War Fighting for Deterrence,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1984, p. 8.

³ Colin S. Gray and Keith B. Payne, “Victory Is Possible,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 39, Summer 1980, p. 16, https://dn720003.ca.archive.org/0/items/victory_is_possible/victory_is_possible.pdf.

defenses. The report's support for enhancing U.S. regional nuclear capabilities is a welcome recommendation, though the problems it identifies with extended deterrence are unlikely to be fully rectified by the burden sharing approach it recommends.

One aspect missing from the report that would be useful for the reader is the lack of footnotes identifying the source of certain information. For example, the report states that "America's spending on conventional weapons has surpassed its spending on nuclear weapons by a ratio of more than five to one"; China "is the fastest-growing nuclear power on the planet, producing over 100 nuclear warheads per year"; Russia's Sarmat ICBM is "capable of carrying 12-20 MIRV warheads"; "North Korea could have as many as 300 nuclear warheads and 50 ICBMs by 2035"; and "other experts suggest that [Russia's non-strategic nuclear] advantage may be as high as 25 to 1." These statements may indeed be true, but without proper sourcing the reader is left wondering about their veracity. There are several bibliographic references listed at the end of the document, but only by title, and some of these are unexplained (e.g., "Nuclear Stockpile Hedge Capabilities & Activation Timelines" and "Extended Deterrence Forward Deployment Options").

Peace Through Strength provides an excellent analysis of the nuclear threat to the United States and its interests. Although there are some glaring omissions, such as the lack of any discussion of the nuclear testing issue, it contains a plethora of intellectually sound policy recommendations that should be seriously considered by the Trump Administration. Of course, the value of any strategy lies in its implementation, and that requires resourcing. While the authors of this report are to be commended for addressing how the United States can successfully confront the deterrence challenges it is likely to face in the future, the difficulties of turning recommendations into reality become devastatingly apparent in the face of political and bureaucratic resistance.

Regardless of whether the administration produces a new *Nuclear Posture Review*, one can only hope that the report's well-reasoned analysis and recommendations will translate into a critical mass of support for the policies and programs it advocates. In today's increasingly dangerous international environment, nothing less will suffice.

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A. Wess Mitchell, *Great Power Diplomacy: The Skill of Statecraft from Attila the Hun to Kissinger* (Princeton University Press, 2025), pp. 352.

In *Great Power Diplomacy: The Skill of Statecraft from Attila the Hun to Kissinger*, Wess Mitchell makes a brilliantly-executed attempt to reconceptualize diplomacy as a part of strategy. The author argues that this is how diplomacy was practiced over the past centuries, but forgotten, at least in the United States. The utopian euphoria after the end of the Cold War assumed that people around the world share a common goal of living together in peace

and that states will forego war as a legitimate instrument their foreign policy. Mitchell's message is clear: the United States has much to gain from resurrecting pragmatic diplomacy as a part of its grand strategy.

Mitchell's case studies span thousands of years and different cultures and political systems, from the fifth century Byzantine Empire attempting to evade the wrath of Attila the Hun's invading forces to President Richard Nixon's opening of China in the late 1970s. The other case studies discuss: the 15th century Venetian Republic and its dealings with the Ottoman Empire; 18th century Habsburg Empire and its brilliant strategist Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz's organization of alliances against Prussia; diplomacy of the 19th century's Austrian Foreign Minister Klemens Von Metternich who organized a balance of power system also known as the Concert of Europe; the late 19th century Otto Von Bismarck's *realpolitik* in Germany; and, the British leaders and diplomats' efforts to secure the empire from multiple-front war in 20th century, including Britain's ill-fated attempts at appeasing Hitler prior to World War II.

The author identifies prerequisites for diplomacy that enable it to perform its core function—to concentrate one's power while diluting adversary's. In the examined cases, diplomacy contributed to the prevention or delay of a two-front war at a time when a state was unwilling or unable to sustain and support the military forces that would be capable of countering such a conflict. Among these prerequisites are knowledgeable and skillful diplomatic apparatus focused on the core mission of advancing a state's interest, rather than distracted by bureaucratic infighting, and intimate knowledge of opponents' strategic culture.

Yet, as Mitchell points out, success in diplomacy is not guaranteed under the best of conditions. Diplomacy can fail for a variety of reasons, including bad luck or poor grasp of other state's interests. At the end of the day, Mitchell's analysis begs the question: whether successful diplomacy bears seeds of a state's own failure, for when diplomacy contributes to a state's sense of security, it becomes yet more difficult for a government to fund forces upon which this security ultimately depends. The added tragedy of appeasement and utopian sentiments that took hold of the public discourse in the 1920s and 1930s and which diplomacy fostered, was that they made it that much harder to rearm the free world in the face of brutal aggressive and revisionist threats.

Mitchell's book demonstrates that diplomacy can make a strategic difference in nation's security affairs. The author's discussion of diplomacy's successes as well as failures strengthens his case and makes for a more compelling read that should not be missing from any practitioner's bookshelf.

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