

LECTURE

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The Future of the U.S. Nuclear Triad, Fiscal Austerity, and the Vision of “Nuclear Zero”

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Abstract

The U.S. government’s own policies risk creating a gap between U.S. nuclear capabilities and the future demands of the uncertain strategic environment. As a matter of national security, the U.S. must revitalize its nuclear-weapons complex. On June 27, 2012, The Heritage Foundation’s Michaela Bendikova addressed an audience of nuclear experts and future leaders at the conference of the Project on Nuclear Issues (a project of the Center for Strategic and International Studies) at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. She explained why the U.S. nuclear-weapons complex and strategic delivery platforms require significant continuing investments.

Churchill once said that, “Americans can always be counted on to do the right thing ... after they have exhausted all other possibilities.” When it comes to doing the right thing on U.S. nuclear-weapons policy, this maxim may not hold true anymore. Fiscal and arms control policies of the U.S. government are putting us on the path toward a world without U.S. nuclear weapons. Never mind that the U.S. nuclear deterrent has safeguarded our, and allied, security for decades.

Today, we are at risk of creating a gap between U.S. nuclear capabilities and the future demands of the uncertain strategic environment. We must revitalize the U.S. nuclear-weapons complex. We simply don’t know what the future holds.

Let’s look at the current situation: Most members of this audience are younger than our strategic systems. In about 2030, we will have 60-year-old intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), 40-year-old submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and 35-to-70-year-old strategic bombers—a truly aging U.S. nuclear triad. At this point in time, there are no certain nuclear modernization plans.

These are just the delivery systems. The United States has not

KEY POINTS

- U.S. fiscal and arms control policies are leading toward a world without U.S. nuclear weapons. Never mind that the U.S. nuclear deterrent has safeguarded American, and allied, security for decades.
- The U.S. now operates under spending caps established under the Budget Control Act of 2011, which will result in an approximately \$483 billion defense cut over the next nine years.
- The essential U.S. nuclear triad could be dismantled in the case of sequestration: The new strategic bomber program could be terminated; the next generation of ballistic missile submarines could be delayed and the current fleet reduced to ten boats; and the ICBM leg of the U.S. nuclear triad could be eliminated.
- U.S. nuclear weapons continue to serve critical national security interests. The essential U.S. nuclear-weapons complex and strategic delivery platforms deserve continuing investments.

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explosively tested its nuclear weapons since 1992. This country has underfunded its nuclear-weapons complex for years.

Our nuclear warheads were designed for safety and yield-to-weight ratio. They were not designed for long service lives in an environment in which nuclear testing is precluded. In a few years, for the first time since the dawn of the nuclear age, the new generation of U.S. nuclear-weapons experts will have no nuclear-testing experience. Few of them will have participated in the design of a new nuclear weapon. Yet, these people will be relied upon to make judgments about changes to U.S. nuclear weapons. In the words of former Defense Secretary Robert Gates: “To be blunt, there is absolutely no way we can maintain a credible deterrent and reduce the number of weapons in our stockpile without either resorting to testing our stockpile or pursuing a modernization program.”

The country now operates under spending caps established under the Budget Control Act of 2011. These will result in an approximately \$483 billion cut to the defense portion of the budget over the next nine years (the amount varies depending on which baseline is used). Unless the law is changed, another process called sequestration will result in about a half-trillion-dollar additional reduction of the defense budget. Secretary of Defense Panetta described these cuts as “devastating.” Here is what could happen to U.S. strategic systems: The new strategic bomber could be terminated; the next generation of ballistic missile submarines could be delayed and the current fleet reduced to ten boats; and the ICBM leg of the U.S. nuclear triad could be eliminated.

Unrelated to the Budget Control Act, other critical nuclear complex

modernization projects have been delayed in the President’s FY 2013 budget request. This happened despite the President’s own certification to the Senate during the debate on the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). He promised to accelerate the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research and Replacement facility. He promised to request full funding for this project. Yet, for FY 2013, the Administration proposed to defer the construction of this facility for at least five years. It has cut the funding by 83 percent (compared to the FY 2012 enacted level).

The Administration also agreed to a nuclear-complex modernization plan in the updated 1251 Section of the 2010 National Defense Authorization Act. Its promises did not survive the first year of New START’s entry into force. The nuclear-weapons modernization requirements in the New START resolution of ratification were completely ignored. While the Administration pledged \$7.9 billion for nuclear infrastructure modernization in FY 2013, the President’s current budget request misses this mark by \$0.3 billion.

Decisions that the United States makes today will influence its strategic posture and modernization plans for years to come. According to the President’s Nuclear Posture Review, “preventing nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism” and “reducing the role of U.S. nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy” are the two key objectives of U.S. policy and posture. Deterring nuclear war is third on the list of priorities.

Yet, there is no demonstrated link between the number of U.S. nuclear weapons and non-proliferation. U.S. policies are not the most important factor when a state decides on

its nuclear program. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has reduced its total stockpile by 75 percent. Yet new actors armed with nuclear weapons have emerged.

U.S. nuclear weapons continue to serve critical national security objectives. Among these objectives is the deterring of an attack against the U.S. and allies. In a post-Cold War environment, U.S. policymakers must ask Dr. Keith Payne’s favorite question about the capability needed for effective strategic deterrence:

“How much is enough?” The Obama Administration seems to think that the lower the number of U.S. nuclear weapons, the better off the United States will be. Relying on minimal standards of force adequacy is risky. It requires fundamental shifts in U.S. targeting policy from counter-force to counter-value targets, such as cities. Counter-value targeting is an insufficient foundation for an effective deterrence.

The tension between the desire for a world without nuclear weapons and the need to support funding for nuclear-force modernization is particularly striking. The U.S. nuclear-weapons complex and strategic delivery platforms require significant investments. These investments are essential because U.S. nuclear weapons continue to serve critical American security interests. They deserve our support. Churchill needs to be right.

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