

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Fail-Safe Failure? Metrics on the Nuclear Arsenal Are Inadequate

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President Obama’s fiscal year (FY) 2013 budget request uses inadequate metrics to evaluate the strategic objective to “maintain a safe, secure, and effective nuclear arsenal to deter attack on the U.S. and on our allies and partners.” Two categories being evaluated are:

1. “Number of formal Department of Defense-led meetings with international partners to reaffirm U.S. commitments to extended deterrence,” and
2. “Passing percentage rate for Defense Nuclear Surety Inspections (DNSIs).”

This is an overly simplified way to assess the safety, security, and effectiveness of the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal, let alone whether U.S. nuclear weapons are being perceived

by adversaries as deterring. The Pentagon should realize the importance of the U.S. nuclear umbrella and adjust its metrics accordingly.

### **A Culture of Excellence**

**Desirable.** DNSIs are conducted by the Defense Threat Reductions Agency at Air Force bases and Navy ports every 60 months. They are aimed at eliminating the possibility of nuclear accidents, incidents, unauthorized use, or degradation in performance.

The Comptroller’s comment regarding the 85.7 percent passing percentage rate for the first-time DNSIs is telling: “Maintaining a 100 percent passing rate on first-time DNSIs may appear to be a good standard, but it could generate unrealistic expectations and a potential ‘zero tolerance’ culture that is neither sustainable nor appropriate for achieving long-term excellence in the nuclear enterprise.” This is plainly false. As Lieutenant General Frank Klotz, then-commander of the Air Force Global Strike Command, has stated:

[T]he Command was founded on the premise that as important as other defense priorities may be, none are more important than the responsibility for

operating, maintaining, securing and supporting nuclear weapons. For if there is one unchanging, immutable truth about this awesome capability, it is that it demands constant and undivided attention.<sup>1</sup>

A “zero tolerance” culture is not necessarily a bad thing when it comes to America’s most important weapons. The Department of Defense maintained a 100 percent standard and a “zero tolerance” culture for decades during the Cold War. If anything, maintaining this standard of excellence should be more important than ever as the U.S. proceeds with unilateral nuclear weapons cuts, other countries expand their strategic arsenals, and new nuclear weapon players such as North Korea emerge.

It is also necessary that the internal structure of inspections to meet the goal is not changed. That way, the U.S. will have an “apples-to-apples” comparison on a year-by-year basis.

**U.S. Credibility Not Derived from Number of International Meetings.** The belief that the U.S. will use its capabilities to protect its own interests and those of its allies constitutes a deterrent to potential attacks. Adversaries will be more

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likely to attack if they believe that the U.S. is unwilling to respond, self-deterred from responding, or incapable of responding on a credible basis. An appropriate U.S. nuclear posture would employ a mix of offensive and defensive forces and conventional and nuclear forces to defeat any strategic attack on the U.S. or its allies—as opposed to continuing the Cold War strategy of maintaining deterrence through the threat of mutually assured destruction by a devastating counterstrike.

The Department of Defense therefore should:

- Adjust the metrics that determine whether the U.S. maintains a safe, secure, and effective nuclear arsenal to deter attack so that it can more appropriately evaluate whether U.S. nuclear weapons fulfill this strategic objective.
- Include in these metrics a percentage of U.S. nuclear weapons that are capable of destroying deeply buried or hardened targets.

Adversaries tend to value their survival and means of attack.

- Recognize that the credibility of U.S. nuclear weapons in the view of U.S. allies and adversaries will diminish if nuclear weapons are not properly maintained.

The current U.S. arsenal is comprised of very high-yield nuclear weapons designed for targeting other countries' populations. North Korea, Iran, and China have proven time and again that they do not care about their populations. In addition, if the U.S. does not maintain its nuclear weapons arsenal, it will lose its credibility—i.e., the belief that it will come to the aid of its allies. As a result, allies could develop or expand their current nuclear weapon arsenals.

The Administration and the Senate were aware of this possibility when the Administration committed to providing for nuclear weapons modernization during the New START ratification debate. In his FY 2013 budget proposal,

President Obama does not honor this commitment.

**Maintain the Umbrella.** More than 30 countries all over the world depend on U.S. nuclear security guarantees. While meetings are an important element of U.S. nuclear posture and assurance regarding its allies, they are certainly not a decisive factor when it comes to making judgments about U.S. credibility. DNSIs are only one element indicating the responsiveness and health of the U.S. strategic forces. The Department of Defense should adjust its metrics to better reflect the reality of this complex strategic environment.

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1. Lieutenant General Frank G. Klotz, "Status of the Air Force Nuclear Security Roadmap," testimony before the Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, March 17, 2010, at [http://216.109.75.135/e\\_research/source\\_docs/us/congress/house\\_representatives/16.pdf](http://216.109.75.135/e_research/source_docs/us/congress/house_representatives/16.pdf) (February 15, 2012).