

HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

STATEMENT OF
GENERAL PAUL SELVA, USAF
VICE CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF
BEFORE THE 115TH CONGRESS
HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
MILITARY ASSESSMENT OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS REQUIREMENTS
8 MARCH 2017

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The fundamental role of U.S. nuclear forces is to deter a strategic attack against the United States, its allies, and its partners. Simply put, nuclear weapons pose the only existential threat to the United States and there is no substitute for the prospect of a devastating nuclear response to deter that threat.

Our nuclear forces play other important roles as well, to include reducing the risk of nuclear proliferation, allowing us to maintain escalation control during a crisis and contributing to deterring large scale conventional war. By extending a nuclear umbrella over allies and partners, many of which confront significant threats to their security, the United States decreases the likelihood that they might one day pursue nuclear weapons of their own. And by convincing adversaries that they cannot escalate their way out of failing conventional military campaigns, the United States can deter such conflicts in the first place or, failing that, keep them from escalating beyond the conventional level.

Deterrence, assurance, and escalation control are longstanding objectives that have served U.S. national security interests. But our ability to achieve these objectives cannot be taken for granted.

No one should doubt that our weapons, delivery systems, the infrastructure that supports them, and the personnel who operate, monitor, and maintain them are prepared today to respond to any contingency. Our current challenge, however, is to maintain this high level of readiness and capability as long as the policy and strategy of this nation depends in part on nuclear weapons for its security. This hearing comes at a critical moment for meeting that challenge.

For more than two decades, the Joint Force has implemented U.S. policy to reduce the role of nuclear forces in our strategies and plans and decrease the number and types of nuclear forces in our inventory. Yet a number of other nations, including potential adversaries, have not followed

our example. They are instead increasing their reliance on nuclear weapons, improving their nuclear capabilities, and, in some cases, expanding their nuclear arsenals.

Russia, for example, is not only modernizing its strategic nuclear triad and developing new nonstrategic nuclear weapons, but remains in violation of its Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty obligations and has threatened nuclear use against U.S. forces and allies in Europe. China continues to improve and increase its nuclear arsenal. North Korea has not relented in its drive to field a deliverable nuclear weapon that can reach the United States. And Iran's ballistic missile program, which is not covered under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), still presents a danger to U.S. forces and partners across the Middle East and beyond.

Our nuclear deterrent is nearing a crossroads. To date, we have preserved this deterrent by extending the lifespan of legacy nuclear forces and infrastructure—in many cases for decades beyond what was originally intended. But these systems will not remain viable indefinitely. In fact, we are now at a point where we must concurrently modernize the entire nuclear triad and the infrastructure that enables its effectiveness.

To understand the scope and scale of this effort, it is necessary to appreciate all of the capabilities that comprise our nuclear deterrent. Two in particular often receive the most attention.

The first is nuclear weapons themselves, including the warheads that are carried by missiles and the cruise missiles and gravity bombs that are delivered by aircraft. Preserving the safety, security, and reliability of these weapons is crucial, and we work closely with our partners in the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Agency toward that end.

The second well-known element is the triad of strategic delivery platforms, including nuclear ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and nuclear-capable bombers. Each of these systems provides unique and complementary attributes that enhance deterrence. SSBNs at sea are highly survivable and guarantee that the United States will be able to respond to any nuclear attack. ICBMs on alert are highly responsive and, thanks to their numbers and dispersed locations, make a disarming strike extraordinarily difficult and extremely costly for any adversary. And bombers are highly visible, forward deployable, survivable once generated to alert, and have the flexibility to provide credible response options across a wide range of scenarios. Collectively, the three legs of the triad also provide a hedge against unforeseen technical problems or adverse changes in the security environment.

In addition to nuclear weapons and strategic delivery platforms, our nuclear deterrent also depends on three other capabilities: the indications and warning systems that provide early notice of a threat and give political leaders the opportunity to decide on an appropriate response; the command-and-control networks that ensure nuclear weapons will always be available if they are needed and that their use can only be directed by the President of the United States; and the dual-capable tactical aircraft that can be equipped with nonstrategic nuclear weapons, which enable the United States to credibly extend its nuclear umbrella to many of its closest allies.

The ability to preserve these capabilities beyond their intended lifespan is a technical achievement. However, nuclear modernization can no longer be deferred. Previous decisions to defer modernization have resulted in overlapping acquisition programs today, which present two major consequences.

First, any disruption to the current program of record or future acquisition plans will introduce risk to our strategic deterrent. In recent years we have used delays and deferrals to stretch our

original program of record until all remaining schedule slack has been removed. In other words, we are currently depending on “just-in-time” modernization and replacement of the nuclear enterprise.

Second, the cost of funding modernization and replacement of the entire nuclear enterprise all at once is substantial. According to current projections, the Department of Defense will increase spending on the nuclear deterrent from 3.2% of its FY 2016 budget to 6.5% of its annual budget in the late 2020s (based on the FY 2017 Future Years Defense Program), although this still represents less than one percent of total anticipated federal spending.

Despite these risks and costs, there is no higher priority for the Joint Force than fielding all components of an effective nuclear deterrent, including weapons, infrastructure, and personnel.

Perhaps the clearest indicator of this prioritization is how we have chosen to spend our resources and the tradeoffs we have been willing to accept. Although our current nuclear strategy and program of record were developed before the Budget Control Act imposed strict caps on defense spending, we are emphasizing the nuclear mission over other modernization programs when faced with that choice.