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THE HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
STRATEGIC FORCES SUBCOMMITTEE

STATEMENT

OF

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BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON STRATEGIC FORCES

OF THE

HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

ON

B61-12 LIFE EXTENSION PROGRAM DELAY

25 SEPTEMBER 2019

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Good afternoon, Chairman Cooper, Ranking Member Turner, distinguished members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss modernization efforts for the B61-12 gravity bomb. It is an honor to represent the Air Force before you today.

The return of Great Power competition means the United States faces a more diverse and advanced nuclear-threat environment than ever before. The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review highlighted that Russia has adopted military strategies and capabilities that rely on nuclear escalation for their success, which is a troubling doctrinal trend. Despite United States (U.S.) efforts to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in international affairs and to negotiate reductions in the number of nuclear weapons, neither Russia nor China have reduced the role of nuclear weapons in their national security strategies or the number of nuclear weapons they field. Rather, they have moved decidedly in the opposite direction. Over the last two decades, Russia and China have increased the prominence of nuclear capabilities in their doctrine, modernized their conventional, space, cyber, and nuclear arsenals, and engaged in anti-area/access denial strategies. In light of this, the U.S. must maintain a credible nuclear deterrent to ensure our ability to deter aggression, assure our allies and partners, hedge against technological uncertainties, and achieve U.S. objectives should deterrence fail.

Modernization and recapitalization are paramount to maintain a credible deterrent in the evolving strategic security environment. The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review calls for the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Energy (DOE) to prioritize and fund their respective nuclear delivery systems and warhead programs to remain on schedule for synchronized delivery. The B61-12 life extension program (LEP) and Tailkit Assembly is one such effort and ensures the B61 meets United States Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) requirements well into the 21st century.

The B61-12 LEP extends the service life of the B61 by at least 20 years and maintains the capability to forward-deploy nuclear weapons with heavy bombers and dual-capable fighter aircraft in support of extended deterrence and assurance commitments to U.S. allies and partners. The addition of the Tailkit Assembly consolidates and replaces four B61 gravity weapon designs (B61-3, B61-4, B61-7, and B61-10), and improves safety and security at the same time.

The National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) has a crucial role to play as all of our nuclear programs require warheads developed and sustained by NNSA. NNSA is working

diligently to deliver assured, reliable capabilities on time to the warfighter. NNSA has identified an issue with capacitor components that did not meet reliability requirements and consequently, the B61-12 LEP and concurrent W88 Alteration 370 programs will not meet initial production date requirements. The Air Force is working with NNSA, USSTRATCOM, and NATO partners to understand and mitigate associated costs, near-term impacts to deployment, and any follow-on implications due to the delay to the B61-12 program. The Air Force Tailkit Assembly is unaffected by the delay and continues on schedule. Additionally, testing and other program activities will continue as planned in order to reduce risk in other areas as the Air Force awaits resolution of the capacitor issue.

Program delays are unfortunately a potential reality for any acquisition program; therefore, the Air Force is coordinating with stakeholders and partners to modify original deployment plans to meet combatant commander requirements and reduce risk with aging components. I am confident that the capacitor issue will be resolved through the efforts of DOE and DoD's skilled nuclear enterprise workforce, robust inspection and manufacturing processes, and solid industrial base. The Air Force will continue synchronizing efforts with the Navy, Office of the Secretary of Defense, and USSTRATCOM, working in lock step through the Nuclear Weapons Council to ensure that our nuclear modernization efforts support the nuclear triad, forward-deployed nuclear forces, and joint force requirements.

The Air Force values the continued support of Congress and the Nation. The U.S. requires the tools necessary to prevent the most existential threat to our survival as a nation. The flexible capabilities and complementary nature of the nuclear triad, forward-deployed nuclear forces, and associated nuclear weapons ensure the credibility of the U.S. deterrent while complicating an adversary's decision calculus. Our nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence are the backstop of U.S. national security and underwrite every military operation on the globe, and we are committed to ensuring the successful modernization and recapitalization of these critical programs.