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BY THE HOUSE ARMED SERVICES
COMMITTEE STRATEGIC FORCES
SUBCOMMITTEE

STATEMENT
OF
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DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF FOR STRATEGIC DETERRENCE & NUCLEAR INTEGRATION
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON STRATEGIC FORCES
OF THE
HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
ON
FY27 Budget Request for Nuclear Forces and Atomic
Energy Defense Activities
April 22, 2026

1 **INTRODUCTION**

2 Thank you, Chairman DesJarlais, Ranking Member Moulton, and distinguished members of the
3 House Armed Services Subcommittee for Strategic Forces. I am honored to appear before you
4 representing the Department of the Air Force’s (DAF) Nuclear Enterprise. Our strategic deterrent is
5 at a critical inflection point. Our mission, to maintain a strong, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent,
6 remains foundational to our national security. However, the systems we rely upon are decades past
7 their planned lifespans and were developed for a strategic environment that no longer exists. The
8 choice is no longer between maintaining these legacy platforms or replacing them. It is now a matter
9 of modernizing them promptly or facing capability shortfalls.

10
11 The urgency we face is heightened by an increasingly complex and challenging strategic
12 environment. This era is not a return to the Cold War. It represents a new paradigm defined by the
13 challenge of multiple, simultaneous nuclear-capable competitors. China is engaged in a rapid and
14 opaque expansion of its nuclear forces. Russia continues to modernize and diversify its entire nuclear
15 arsenal, while leveraging frequent coercive nuclear threats during the conflict in Ukraine. The
16 persistent threats from North Korea and Iran add further instability. These challenges are
17 compounded by adversary advancements in conventional strike, space, and cyber capabilities that
18 increase the potential for sudden and unpredictable strategic shifts.

19
20 In response to this environment, the 2026 National Defense Strategy makes clear that a robust and
21 modern nuclear deterrent is of paramount importance. A credible nuclear force underpins our national
22 defense and protects the security of the American people and our national interests. Accordingly, the
23 DAF, in partnership with the other agencies across the Department of War and Department of Energy,
24 is executing a comprehensive recapitalization of our nuclear enterprise, from delivery platforms to
25 the command, control, and communications architecture that enables them. This mission is a DAF
26 priority, executed by dedicated Airmen and Guardians whose unwavering professionalism is the
27 bedrock of our Nation’s security. We have a solemn obligation to provide them with the modern tools
28 required to successfully deter all current and emerging threats.

29
30 The Air Force’s Strategic Deterrence and Nuclear Integration Directorate (AF/A10) is committed to
31 ensuring the DAF fields and maintains the capabilities necessary to protect the United States. The
32 continued bipartisan support of Congress is a vital component of this enterprise, directly enabling the
33 success of all those working tirelessly to maintain strategic deterrence.

34
35 **THE THREAT**

36 The strategic threat environment facing the United States has grown in both scale and complexity.
37 The Nation now confronts multiple, distinct nuclear-armed competitors, a development that
38 presents unprecedented challenges to global stability and deterrence.

39
40 China has embarked on an ambitious expansion, modernization, and diversification of its nuclear
41 forces. China has now surpassed 600 deliverable nuclear warheads and is on pace to have more
42 than 1,000 operational nuclear warheads by 2030. This includes a larger and more diverse nuclear
43 force, comprised of systems ranging from low-yield precision strike missiles to intercontinental
44 ballistic missiles (ICBMs) with very high yields to provide options across the escalation ladder. In
45 early February of this year, the Department of State disclosed publicly that China has conducted
46 nuclear explosive tests in violation of its test ban commitments, ostensibly to enable its nuclear
47 developments. Their expanding range of nuclear capabilities, combined with a policy shift toward a

48 launch-on-warning or early-warning counterstrike posture, will provide the Chinese Communist
49 Party and military leaders with new options for nuclear coercion, despite China’s stated “no first-
50 use” policy.”

51
52 China has a nuclear Triad consisting of bombers, submarines, and land-based missiles. The 2025
53 China Military Power Report to Congress noted China continues to expand its silo-based and
54 mobile ICBM force, all of which can reach the U.S. homeland. China likely loaded more than 100
55 solid-propellant ICBM missile silos at its three recently constructed silo fields with DF-31 class
56 ICBMs. The 2025 report also stated that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is probably pursuing
57 nuclear weapons with yields below 10 kilotons. Such weapons address long-held PLA desires to be
58 able to both conduct limited nuclear counterstrikes against military targets and control nuclear
59 escalation. Of China’s currently fielded systems, the DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missile
60 (IRBM) and the H-6N strategic bomber’s air-launched ballistic missile are both highly precise
61 theater weapons that would be well suited for delivering a low-yield nuclear weapon.

62
63 Russia maintains the largest and most diverse nuclear weapons stockpile and is actively expanding
64 and modernizing its nuclear capabilities. Russia is nearing the completion of its current strategic
65 nuclear force modernization effort. As of February 2024, Russia claimed to have upgraded 95% of
66 its nuclear forces. Russia continues to develop nuclear-capable systems meant to penetrate or bypass
67 existing U.S. missile defenses, to include space-based antisatellite nuclear weapons, which, if
68 deployed, would be inconsistent with its obligations under the Outer Space Treaty. Russia is also
69 modernizing its stockpile of approximately 2,000 tactical nuclear weapons, including nuclear air-to-
70 air missiles and novel nuclear systems – such as the nuclear-powered, nuclear-armed autonomous
71 underwater vehicle and nuclear-powered, nuclear-armed cruise missile. Russia is also expanding its
72 nuclear posture to Belarus by establishing missile and nuclear capable aircraft capabilities, renovating
73 a nuclear weapons storage site, and training Belarusian crews to handle tactical nuclear weapons. In
74 February 2026, the last remaining nuclear arms control agreement between the United States and
75 Russia, New START, expired. The United States and Russia have entered into an environment
76 unconstrained by any formal nuclear arms control agreements for the first time in over 50 years.

77
78 North Korea continues to pursue destabilizing capabilities by performing routine ballistic missile
79 flight tests and training launches as well as expanding the quantity and types of nuclear-capable
80 delivery systems. North Korean strategic forces include short-range ballistic missiles, medium-range
81 ballistic missiles, IRBMs, and ICBMs, along with claimed hypersonic glide vehicle capabilities. Kim
82 Jong Un remains committed to increasing North Korea’s nuclear warhead stockpile and improving
83 his country’s ballistic missile capabilities to threaten the United States and its allies. At the February
84 2026 Workers’ Party Congress, Kim vowed to further bolster North Korea’s nuclear forces. During
85 a 2026 military parade, North Korean forces showcased multiple launch rocket systems reportedly
86 capable of delivering nuclear warheads. North Korean high-level statements threatening nuclear
87 employment suggest potential nuclear use at any stage of a crisis or conflict.

88
89 The United States has consistently made clear that Iran will not be allowed to acquire nuclear
90 weapons. At the President’s direction, USCENTCOM is currently conducting Operation EPIC
91 FURY, striking targets to dismantle the Iranian regime’s security apparatus while prioritizing
92 locations that pose an imminent threat. Coupled with last year’s precision strikes as part of Operation
93 MIDNIGHT HAMMER, the United States has crippled Iran’s nuclear program. However, Iran’s
94 leaders do not appear to have abandoned their ambitions to obtain a nuclear weapon and it continues

95 to pose a destabilizing threat to the region and beyond.

96

97 Lastly, observed strategic alignment and partnerships between these four countries create a dangerous
98 synergy as an emerging anti-western coalition. The introduction of North Korean forces in the war
99 against Ukraine is only one example of this emerging alignment. As a result, the United States now
100 confronts the potential for simultaneous conflicts with two or more nuclear-armed powers. The DAF
101 cannot face these threats alone, and we will increasingly look for ways that we can collaborate with
102 our allies and partners to share the security burden to maintain global strategic stability and peace
103 through combined strength.

104

105 **STRATEGY & THE NUCLEAR TRIAD**

106 U.S. strategy has consistently outlined three roles for nuclear weapons: deter aggression, assure allies
107 and partners through extended deterrence, and achieve objectives if deterrence fails. With nuclear
108 threats advancing at a rapid pace, U.S. nuclear forces and their enabling infrastructure are more
109 important today than ever before. The nuclear Triad, consisting of ICBMs, strategic bombers, and
110 submarine-launched ballistic missiles, has served as a cornerstone of U.S. defense strategy for
111 decades. Each element of U.S. nuclear forces provides unique and complementary attributes. These
112 capabilities are enabled by nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3) architecture,
113 which ensures critical communication and decisions are sent and received. The Triad offers the
114 President flexibility and resilience to sustain credible assurance and deterrence.

115

116 **REQUIREMENTS, MODERNIZATION, AND RECAPITALIZATION**

117 Strategic deterrence is a no-fail mission. Decades of deferring modernization of Cold War-era
118 systems make it imperative to modernize U.S. nuclear forces to ensure a credible strategic deterrent.
119 While credible today, legacy systems have been extended well past their intended lifespan. The
120 DAF's nuclear modernization programs of record – including the B-21 bomber, the Sentinel ICBM,
121 the Long-Range Stand Off Weapon (LRSO), upgrading the B-52 bomber, and the construction of
122 advanced Weapons Generation Facilities – will recapitalize current systems and supporting
123 infrastructure to deliver modern and credible deterrence capabilities by providing next generation
124 nuclear delivery systems, such as the F-35A and B61-12. We are also adapting our NC3 architecture
125 and capabilities to increase resilience and responsiveness. This is a once in a generation effort that
126 has not occurred on this scale since the 1980s. Even as the DAF modernizes, we must simultaneously
127 sustain current systems to maintain the strategic deterrence mission.

128

129 As we modernize and sustain, informed debate continues regarding the long-term sufficiency of U.S.
130 nuclear force structure and posture in light of a changing strategic environment. Since the inception
131 of the programs of record, the security environment has become more complex. As such, the current
132 recapitalization effort is necessary but may not be sufficient. Continued evaluation of strategic
133 adequacy is both prudent and responsible, and we must be prepared to support national leadership
134 through any potential adjustments to our own deterrent posture. The DAF remains committed to
135 working with partners across the Department of War and Department of Energy's National Nuclear
136 Security Administration (NNSA) to explore the full range of options available now and in the future.
137 However, successful execution of the programs of record remains essential. They constitute the
138 foundation of the Nation's nuclear deterrent for decades to come. Should future assessments indicate
139 a requirement for adjustments to force capacity, posture, or supporting capabilities, those actions
140 must be sequenced and resourced in a deliberate manner that reinforces, rather than competes with,
141 the existing modernization program. Delivering these programs as planned remains the Department's

142 highest priority in sustaining a credible, flexible, and effective deterrent.

143
144 The successful modernization of the U.S. nuclear enterprise is a national effort, critically dependent
145 on the partnership between the DAF, the NNSA, and a revitalized defense industrial base. Our
146 shared objective is to deliver recapitalized nuclear capabilities without creating operational gaps – a
147 goal that has consistently received bipartisan support. While this effort has encountered significant
148 challenges, particularly in rebuilding industrial capacity, the DAF and its partners remain steadfast.
149 To that end, the continued support of Congress is a fundamental requirement to sustain this
150 enterprise, overcome inherent obstacles, and ensure our Nation’s strategic deterrent remains
151 credible now and into the future.

152
153 **GROUND LEG - INTERCONTINENTAL BALLISTIC MISSILES**

154 The ICBM force is the most responsive leg of the U.S. nuclear Triad, providing an indispensable
155 deterrent to strategic attack. The force's high readiness, geographic dispersion, and sheer quantity
156 create a nearly insurmountable targeting problem, complicating any adversary's decision calculus.
157 Furthermore, its capacity for rapid re-targeting and potential for multiple warhead upload provides
158 essential flexibility in a multi-adversary environment. The Minuteman III weapon system, a
159 platform first fielded in 1970, currently provides these unique attributes. To mitigate the significant
160 operational risks posed by operating a system decades beyond its intended service life, the DAF is
161 executing extensive sustainment programs to address obsolescence across ground, air vehicle,
162 communication, secondary launch, and cryptographic systems. These efforts are essential to ensure
163 the Minuteman III force remains safe, secure, and effective until it is fully recapitalized by the
164 Sentinel system. However, these extensive sustainment programs are not an indefinite solution.
165 Rather, it is a temporary bridge to a fully modernized and fielded Sentinel program.

166
167 The Sentinel program represents the future of land-based nuclear deterrence, providing the next
168 generation ICBM. This includes not only the missile itself, but also the expansive ground
169 infrastructure, secure command and control, and a comprehensive support structure encompassing
170 highly trained operators, maintainers, security forces and logistics personnel. Taken collectively,
171 the program will bring enhanced safety, security, and reliability features, along with new
172 capabilities, by replacing both the aged missile and much of the supporting infrastructure. The
173 program is moving forward with purpose and momentum and is expected to complete the
174 restructure and enter into a Milestone B decision by the end of 2026, targeting initial capability for
175 the early 2030s. The program completed a full-scale static qualification test of Sentinel’s Stage-2
176 solid rocket motor in July 2025, which built on the Stage-1 qualification in March 2025. Last fall,
177 the program assembled Sentinel’s first complete three-stage ground test missile and concluded the
178 critical design review for the Sentinel Launch Support System that will support all test and
179 operational launches throughout the system’s life. Moreover, the DAF determined that use of new
180 silos, rather than refurbishing existing silos, will provide an opportunity to explore more efficient
181 design concepts, develop highly predictable and stable cost estimates, consider parallel construction
182 efforts, and optimize deployment of the weapon system. To ensure focused leadership, the
183 Department of War established a new single accountable decision authority, the Direct Reporting
184 Portfolio Manager for Critical Major Weapons Systems, to synchronize efforts and strengthen long-
185 term program success.

186
187 **AIR LEG – BOMBERS, NUCLEAR-CERTIFIED FIGHTERS, AND ASSOCIATED**
188 **NUCLEAR WEAPONS**

189 Strategic bombers constitute the most flexible leg of the nuclear Triad. Their high visibility enables
190 the United States to signal intent, demonstrate resolve during a crisis, and provide tangible
191 assurance to allies. The bomber force is uniquely recallable and tailorable, providing the President
192 and Combatant Commanders with scalable options across the full spectrum of conflict. Capable of
193 generating with a mix of conventional or nuclear munitions, these aircraft possess the global reach
194 to strike targets, should deterrence fail.

195
196 The B-21, and modernized B-52 with stand-off weapons, will ensure the ability to reach any target,
197 anytime, anywhere in the world with overwhelming force. The sixth generation B-21 will provide
198 the backbone of our military's flexible strike capability, possessing the range, payload, and
199 advanced technology to penetrate heavily defended airspace and accomplish its mission. The B-21
200 continues its flight test campaign with a second aircraft arrival at Edwards AFB on September 11,
201 2025. The B-21 program of record is based on a minimum fleet of 100 B-21 aircraft. As it enters
202 low-rate initial production, the DAF is working with Department of War stakeholders to ensure the
203 final procurement quantity aligns with evolving strategic requirements. The modernized B-52 will
204 include new engines, flight systems, radar, and communications, enabling a more reliable, modern,
205 and integrated platform through 2050+. The B-52's Commercial Engine Replacement Program
206 (CERP) and Radar Modernization Program (RMP) have made significant progress over the past
207 year. This summer, the CERP is expected to reach a Milestone B decision, while the RMP is
208 planned to achieve a Milestone C decision. The Air Force will sustain and upgrade legacy strategic
209 bombers, such as the B-2 and non-nuclear B-1 bombers, to meet national and warfighter
210 requirements until they are retired in the mid-2030s.

211
212 Air-launched cruise missiles provide range and penetrability options that enable U.S. strategic
213 bombers. The AGM-86 Air-launched Cruise Missile (ALCM) was fielded in 1982, also with a 10-
214 year initial design life, and is now operating in its 44th year. The growth and expansion of advanced
215 integrated air defense systems necessitate a modern capability. LRSO will replace ALCM,
216 providing improved survivability and standoff range to complicate an adversary's defense calculus.
217 LRSO is well into its flight test campaign with six successful flight tests completed and remains on
218 track to meet its planned fielding date.

219
220 In addition, the nuclear-certified F-35A, coupled with modern B61-12 nuclear gravity bombs,
221 significantly modernizes NATO's deterrent capability. In 2025, the DAF fully deployed the B61-12
222 in Europe as part of the Nation's commitment to NATO. These capabilities provide a crucial,
223 advanced element within the alliance's overall defense posture.

224
225 **INFRASTRUCTURE & WEAPONS GENERATION FACILITIES**

226 The modernization of the DAF's nuclear arsenal is critically dependent upon the recapitalization of
227 its supporting infrastructure. Many of these Cold War-era facilities are failing, posing a direct
228 impediment to mission readiness and the efficiency of our Airmen. To rectify this, the Department
229 is replacing obsolete Weapon Storage Areas with modern Weapons Generation Facilities (WGFs).
230 These facilities provide a consolidated and secure environment for weapon storage, maintenance,
231 generation, and training that enhances the operational readiness of both the ICBM and bomber
232 forces. This investment is not merely an upgrade; it is a fundamental requirement for ensuring the
233 safety, security, and effectiveness of the Nation's deterrent. While less visible than the weapon
234 systems they support, these facilities are the essential foundation of credible deterrence.

235

236 The DAF has made significant progress in modernizing its nuclear weapons support facilities. The
237 WGF at F.E. Warren AFB has fallen slightly behind schedule due to issues discovered during
238 government acceptance. The facility is now scheduled for nuclear certification by the end of this
239 fiscal year and Initial Operational Capability (IOC) status early in FY27. The lessons learned at
240 F.E. Warren offer improvements and efficiencies in the construction of the Malmstrom AFB WGF,
241 which remains on schedule for IOC before the end of the decade. At Barksdale AFB, the first
242 bomber-focused WGF, is ahead of schedule with Phase II construction progressing rapidly towards
243 IOC in 2028. Furthermore, construction of the first B-21-focused WGF at Ellsworth AFB is also
244 ahead of schedule, also targeting IOC before the decade is out. Minot AFB, supporting both ICBM
245 and B-52 missions, presents unique complexities. The DAF continues to assess the requirements
246 for this strategically important location to ensure the most effective modernization approach.

247

248 **NUCLEAR COMMAND, CONTROL, AND COMMUNICATIONS**

249 Underpinning the U.S. nuclear deterrent is robust NC3. For credible nuclear deterrence, the
250 President and senior leaders must be able to detect nuclear threats, make decisions, and direct
251 nuclear forces. Our NC3 network consists of over 150 systems, of which the DAF manages
252 approximately 75%.

253

254 The DAF is committed to modernizing and safeguarding these interconnected elements against
255 emerging threats. In 2025, the Department of War transitioned from the 1980s Military Strategic
256 and Tactical Relay (MILSTAR) satellites to Advanced Extremely High Frequency (AEHF)
257 satellites, enabling more capabilities for global operations and conferencing. Likewise, Space Force
258 continues modernizing AEHF through the Evolved Strategic Satellite Communications
259 constellation, providing critical missile warning and conferencing capabilities. In 2027, the DAF
260 plans to continue investing in NC3 and missile warning programs, to include Air Force systems and
261 networks and Space Force systems, networks, and missile warning elements. Across all NC3
262 modernization efforts, the DAF is implementing advanced cybersecurity programs to protect new
263 digital infrastructure from adversary threats.

264

265 The DAF is continuing investment in the E-4C Survivable Airborne Operations Center (SAOC) as
266 a replacement for the aging E-4B National Airborne Operations Center (NAOC). SAOC will
267 provide a worldwide, survivable, and enduring system to fulfill continued national security
268 requirements throughout all stages of conflict. The prime contractor, Sierra Nevada Corporation,
269 has acquired four operational aircraft and one additional aircraft, now undergoing engineering and
270 manufacturing development activities to integrate capabilities and other requirements. In August
271 2025, Sierra Nevada Corporation announced that the first aircraft test had taken place, beginning a
272 multi-year flight and ground testing campaign. Our goal is to deliver these critical aircraft to
273 recapitalize the E-4B NAOC fleet, which is approaching its end of service life in the 2030s.

274

275 In November 2025, the Deputy Secretary of War formally assigned responsibility to recapitalize the
276 Airborne National Command Post (“Looking Glass”) mission from the U.S. Navy to the U.S. Air
277 Force. The mission is currently executed through the Navy’s E-6B, which is rapidly reaching the
278 end of its service life. The transition will be planned in coordination with the U.S. Navy and DAF
279 leadership to ensure the United States continues to have a safe and effective nuclear deterrent.
280 Currently, the Air Force is in the early stages of planning, requirements development, and
281 acquisition strategy in preparation for the new mission. Funds have been provided to establish the
282 program office, as well as initial Engineering Maturation & Development (EMD) activities.

283

284 **NUCLEAR SECURITY**

285 In addition to modernizing our weapons systems and their supporting infrastructure, we must also
286 prioritize investments in the security of our Nation's nuclear arsenal. Several recapitalization efforts
287 are vital to sustain and enhance the capabilities of our nuclear security forces. The acquisition of new
288 Payload Transporters is essential for bolstering the security of ICBM warheads during transport.
289 These modernized vehicles will provide enhanced protection for our critical assets and warfighters,
290 both in terms of road safety and defense against hostile acts. Similarly, the aging Vietnam-era UH-
291 1N helicopters, which have served our ICBM installations for decades, are being replaced by the
292 MH-139A. These new aircraft are being delivered to our ICBM bases and are already conducting
293 security missions, representing a significant leap in capability. To date, the DAF has received 22
294 MH-139As and projects to receive 4 more by the end of April. Additionally, the DAF is replacing its
295 aging High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs), used for ICBM field security,
296 with modern Armored Utility Vehicles (AUVs). The transition to AUVs provides a more robust and
297 reliable platform, with improved safety, ensuring our Airmen can operate safely and effectively in
298 all conditions, maintaining a constant state of readiness. Vehicles continue to flow into the field, with
299 full delivery expected to be completed by 2027.

300

301 **CONCLUSION**

302 The nuclear Triad is the bedrock of strategic deterrence, safeguarding the Nation, assuring allies
303 through extended deterrence, and preserving the American way of life. Its credibility, however, is
304 not static. It must be actively demonstrated through unwavering commitment and tangible
305 capability, as both allies and adversaries scrutinize our resolve. In the face of evolving threats,
306 failure to modernize our aging forces constitutes a choice to cede strategic advantage to our
307 competitors. The DAF remains committed to executing this vital recapitalization, but success is
308 contingent upon the continued, timely, and sufficient support of Congress to ensure our Nation's
309 deterrent remains effective and unambiguous.