

Understanding the Strategic Posture Commission Report

By

Peter Huessy

The new [Congressional Commission](#) on the Strategic Posture of the United States report unanimously concluded the United States is unprepared to face China and Russia as two nuclear-armed peer adversaries. The 12-member commission, evenly split between Republicans and Democrats, was co-chaired by Madelyn Creedon, a former Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) staff member and former official in the Department of Defense and National Nuclear Security Administration, and Jon Kyl, a former Senator from Arizona.

After getting many high-level threat briefings from across the intelligence community and hearing from American allies, the commission found the US is running out of time to remedy a sharply deteriorating strategic nuclear environment. The speed of the threat is accelerating, leading the commission to recommend dozens of new initiatives, some to be initiated immediately, with the remainder fully implemented in a phased manner over the next fourteen years.

Notably, the commission recommended an even stronger bolstering of the delivery options and capacity of the modernized nuclear triad by deploying multiple warheads on the new Sentinel intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), building a road-mobile version, adding more strategic *Columbia*-class submarines, and acquiring more B21 strategic bombers. Additionally, the [commission recommended](#) the deployment of an Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD) system for the protection of the continental United States against threats from China and Russia, including, [if technologically feasible](#), space-based components.

Such missile and air defenses are critically important to deal with coercive nuclear threats from Russia and China, especially in the context of enemy “[escalate to win](#)” strategies. The [commission concluded](#) that China and Russia will both continue their aggressive policies seeking to replace the United States as the leading power in the world. And Russia and China will continue their modernization and expansion of their conventional, space, cyber, and nuclear capabilities.

The commission warned that regional conflicts with China and Russia are the most likely future conflicts and could escalate to direct confrontation. Expanding on this point, commission co-chairs Creedon and Kyl [underscored](#), in Senate testimony, that “coercive or bullying strikes” with cruise and hypersonic missiles could be used to make the US “buckle” under Chinese or Russian threat.

Neo-isolationism was rejected. Instead, the commission implored the US to work with allies and cooperate with partners while improving American security policy. The whole-of-government approach was also noted as key to better deterrence policy, including diplomatic and financial measures.

One of the [commission’s more interesting points](#) was the emphasis on the urgency of these recommendations. This position was underscored by their assertion that even if many of their recommendations were adopted immediately the United States will lag until modernization programs are complete.

Nonetheless, commission proposals would be adopted in a phased manner as the United States moves from legacy forces to modernized elements of the nuclear enterprise. The period

2023–2027 is the first phase and beyond 2035 is the last phase, including building additional *Columbia*-class strategic submarines after the current 2042 planned program sunset.

The commission also highlighted the fact that the current nuclear program of record is based on [an old assessment of the threat](#). For example, the program of record limits nuclear warheads to 1,550, a number that is insufficient for the current threat. Thus, an additional margin of deployed capability, including hundreds of new nuclear warheads, is desired.

It was also noted that, as compared to the strategic environment of the 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR), it is important to acknowledge the dramatic changes of the past decade. For example, [explained one commission member](#), at the time of the 2010 NPR, the US assumed China and Russia would engage with the US to help deal with that time period’s top nuclear priority, preventing nuclear proliferation to terrorists. This is no longer the primary concern.

The commission did [encourage lessening](#) American dependence on nuclear weapons, which lines up well with the current administration’s goals. However, the report indicated that strategy would require deep investments with the acquisition of not 100 but 200 or even 300 new stealth bombers along with the requisite number of new refueling aircraft to make such a recommendation possible.

Also of import was the commission’s recommendation that the US field the “hedge,” contained in all nuclear arms deals—adding to deployed nuclear warheads. Such an expansion of deployed warheads would be a reversal of American policy since the adoption of the START I reductions in 1991.

Nevertheless, the commission [recommended the US maintain](#) its targeting policy that avoids [infrastructure and population centers](#) while still holding at risk what America’s adversaries value most: their leadership, the security apparatus that maintains their power, and their exquisite weapons. The commission was open to future arms control agreements, but as [Creedon explained](#), “[t]he prospects for arms control remain bleak.”

Finally, perhaps the most surprising statement came when the [commission called](#) for deployment of a national missile defense system. Not simply to defend against the growing North Korean “rogue” missile threat but to expand American missile and air defenses to the point of being able to credibly defeat “coercive nuclear threats” from China *and* Russia.

This change in US policy would jettison the notion that US missile defenses have to be “limited” in scope and defend only against rogue state threats. Such thinking assumed that a robust American missile defense would create an unstable strategic situation *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union.

In late 2002 Russian President Vladimir Putin said that the American withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty would [have no deleterious impact](#) on Russia’s security. Nevertheless, the United States has not deployed more than a relatively limited number of interceptors and currently has no plans for a space-based system, [which is necessary](#) for an [effective national missile defense](#) capability, a point the commission underscored.

To implement the recommendations found in the report, the commission estimated it would require 6 percent of the defense budget. Such an expenditure is certainly affordable. As former Secretary of Defense General James Mattis [once said](#), “America can afford survival.”