

ICBM EAR Week of June 25, 2024, Prepared by Peter Huessy, Senior Fellow at NIDS and President of Geostrategic Analysis of Potomac, Maryland

Summary: The US Congress and Administration are now grappling with how to improve US deterrence in the face of military conflict in the Middle East and Ukraine, and the growing possibility of an additional military conflict in the Western Pacific. The common thread is the coordination of such military aggression by North Korea, Iran, Russia and China. The current defense budget is constrained by a 1% cap on any increase for FY2025, significantly below what most recognize as what is required for the US to spend, even with a coordinated effort by the US and its allies to all increase defense investments. Some House members have called for a change in defense but to do so after the November election. The Senate SASC did approve a \$25 billion increase in defense spending to \$768 billion (not including NNSA) which was originally proposed by Senator Wicker, the ranking member of the Committee.

Key Events of the Week

Lt Gen Michael Lutton (Deputy Commander of USAF Global Strike Command) and Maj Gen Stacy Jo Huser (Commander of 20th USAF) spoke on Friday June 28th at 10am and 2pm, respectively, on the ICBM and bomber nuclear programs as part of the ongoing nuclear seminar series by NIDS/Huessy. Links are available from alex.littlefield@thinkdeterrence.com A full report on their remarks will be available in next weeks report.

Triad Conference June 20th at LSUS

<https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/3819202/strategic-systems-programs-promotes-workforce-modernization-at-nuclear-triad-sy/>

Quotes of the Week:

Ms. Kelly Lee, SSP's Director of Plan and Programs: "Strategic deterrence is a team sport, and all three legs are needed to win." (At the LSUS, NIDS and BFR Triad Symposium, June 20th.)

Mr. Cole (R-OK) "They've [the Senate Democrats] got to learn to prioritize a little bit. It's a lot more dangerous world than one would like right now, so I think defense ought to be the priority."

Mr. Diaz-Balart (R-FL) "A 1% increase with inflation is basically a 5% reduction. Obviously, logic would tell you that's not good enough."

Republican Study Committee Chair Kevin Hern (R-OK): "The cap should stay where it's at overall and something else has to give--we would agree to increase defense spending in exchange for cuts to nondefense funding."

Hill Developments

The Congress is currently in the midst of a Congressional tug of war to pass a new defense bill but which also responds to the need for a greater nuclear and conventional deterrent capability as outlined by the Posture Commission of the United States.

The House HASC has kept within the 1% budget growth required by the previous budget deal agreed to by the Administration. The HASC nearly fully funded most of the nuclear deterrent.

The SASC added a number of new nuclear provisions (outlined in my remarks below to the LSUS/NIDS/BFR Triad Symposium in Shreveport, Louisiana on June 20th, 2024.) while increasing overall defense spending by \$25 billion as proposed by Senator Wicker of Mississippi the ranking member of the Committee.

However, the HAC defense subcommittee cut \$324 million from the Sentinel program and according to CQ added ICBM language to the Committee report, while also sticking to the 1% budget growth as required by the law:

HAC Report June 2024 Minuteman Modernization / Ground Based Strategic Deterrent

The United States currently deploys more than 400 Minuteman intercontinental ballistic missiles, and under the current nuclear modernization program the Air Force plans to replace the Minuteman with the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD) system (named the "Sentinel").

The measure appropriates \$3.4 billion for continued research and development of the GBSD, \$324 million less than requested.

Section II. Major Weapons Systems Fact Sheet No. 118-29

In January 2024, the Air Force notified Congress that Sentinel is two years behind schedule and that overall costs have increased from \$96 billion to more than \$130 billion. The schedule delays triggered a Nunn-McCurdy breach, which occurs when a major acquisition program experiences delays beyond a threshold used to manage the costs of major programs.

In its report, writes CQ, the HAC said it was surprised to learn about the program acquisition unit cost breach of at least 37% and is concerned that the issues driving the critical overruns were not identified sooner. The measure therefore directs GAO to assess the impact of program turnover within 180 days of passage of this act.

Some in the House GOP reject Senate bid to renegotiate budget deal for defense spending boost, seek boost after November's election.

By [Lindsey McPherson](#) - *The Washington Times* - Wednesday, June 26, 2024

Senate defense hawks want to renegotiate a budget cap deal signed into law last year to spend an extra \$25 billion on national security, but most House Republicans do not want to revisit the contentious spending level debate.

The House has managed to address pressing defense needs from deterring conflict with China to ensuring troops get a pay raise while sticking to budget caps, Republicans argue.

“They love to spend, those senators,” Rep. Nick LaLota, New York Republican, told The Washington Times. “Opening up the deal is opening up a can of worms and is probably not what we should do.”

Mr. LaLota, who serves on the House Armed Services Committee that oversees defense policy, said the 1% increase in defense spending the House has proposed, in alignment with the budget cap, “meets the moment.”

Republicans on the House Appropriations Committee, which oversees spending, had differing views about the Senate’s proposed defense increase. Some prefer to stick to the budget cap and others are sympathetic to spending more on defense to keep up with inflation and rising foreign conflicts.

But GOP appropriators seem to agree that renegotiating the spending limits would run contrary to their goal of cutting nondefense spending. Senate Democrats are demanding any boost to defense be paired with an equal percentage increase to domestic funding.

“It does make it problematic,” Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, Florida Republican, told The Times. “So, we’ll see what they try to come up with.”

Mr. Diaz-Balart is, however, supportive of increasing defense spending beyond the 1% allowed under the statutory limit.

“A 1% increase with inflation is basically a 5% reduction,” he said. “Obviously, logic would tell you that’s not good enough.”

More conservative members of the Appropriations Committee said they want to stick with the spending limits enacted last year as part of the debt limit law, the Fiscal Responsibility Act.

“It’s the law of the land. There’s no need to negotiate it,” said Rep. Andy Harris, Maryland Republican.

House Appropriations Chair Tom Cole, Oklahoma Republican, said the House will continue passing spending bills that adhere to the budget caps, including the defense appropriations bill that is on the floor this week.

As for his willingness to renegotiate spending levels with the Senate, Mr. Cole said, “Not between now and the election.”

“I’m all for additional money for defense, and we’ll sit down and bargain afterward,” he told The Times.

Mr. Cole also had a warning for Senate Democrats pushing for equal increases to nondefense spending: “They’ve got to learn to prioritize a little bit. It’s a lot more dangerous world than one would like right now, so I think defense ought to be the priority.”

While Mr. Cole would be involved in any negotiation over spending levels, he said any decision on whether to revisit the spending caps is up to House Speaker Mike Johnson, Louisiana Republican.

Mr. Johnson’s office did not respond to a request for comment. However, the speaker tends to consult his members on such decisions, and the prevailing view in his conference is to stick to the spending limit.

“The cap should stay where it’s at overall and something else has to give,” Republican Study Committee Chair Kevin Hern of Oklahoma said, noting GOP members would agree to increase defense spending in exchange for cuts to nondefense funding.

Senate Democrats would not go for that. They are already complaining House Republicans have not fully adhered to last year’s deal. In addition to the spending caps enacted into law, the deal included unenforceable side agreements involving budget maneuvers appropriators could use to spend more on defense and nondefense programs without technically breaching the law’s limits.

Since the side deal was brokered under former Speaker Kevin McCarthy, House Republicans, now under new leadership, have disregarded it. House Republicans' appropriations bills "ignore the deal that they negotiated in favor of devastating cuts to nondefense," Senate Appropriations Chair Patty Murray said in a floor speech last week. The Washington Democrat called on the Senate to "chart a different path" and "provide additional resources beyond the caps to address major shortfalls and new challenges."

Administration Statement of Administration Policy threatens to veto House defense spending bill

InsideDefense.com, June 24 (1550) | Tony Bertuca

President Biden would veto the GOP-led House's version of the fiscal year 2025 defense appropriations bill if it were to pass in its current form, according to a new statement of administration policy from the White House Office of Management and Budget. The administration opposes all the House GOP's appropriations bills on the grounds that they make steep cuts in non-defense spending and eliminate various initiatives related to climate change mitigation, abortion services and diversity, according to OMB.

ICBM Critics push the Pentagon for 'unbiased' review of costly Sentinel nuclear missile program

The Hill Online, June 24 (1001) | Brad Dress

A group of Democrats led by the congressional Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control Working Group sent a letter to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Monday calling for a "comprehensive, thorough, and unbiased assessment" of the controversial Sentinel nuclear missile program, which has soared in costs over the years. In the letter, provided first to The Hill, the lawmakers expressed concerns that the Pentagon's review of the Sentinel program, which is mandatory after a significant cost overrun in January, was "being prepared with an end-state in mind."

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"Given the imperative of advancing nuclear policies that promote stability and prevent escalation, we demand a thorough review of all alternatives," they wrote. "At this critical juncture, we must not allow momentum and preconceived notions to cloud our judgment in reviewing whether this program provides for our national security or is wasting U.S. taxpayer dollars.

"The American people have a right to know how their money is being spent and to what end, particularly for our nation's nuclear policy," the lawmakers added.

The congressional working group, which is holding a July hearing on Sentinel, is co-chaired by Democratic Sens. Ed Markey (Mass.) and Jeff Merkley (Ore.) and Reps. John Garamendi (Calif.) and Don Beyer (Va.).

The letter was also signed by several other Democrats, including Sens. Elizabeth Warren (Mass.), Chris Van Hollen (Md.), and Ron Wyden (Ore.) and Reps. Sara Jacobs (Calif.), Mark Pocan (Wis.), Barbara Lee (Calif.), Jim McGovern (Mass.) and Jerry Nadler (N.Y.). -20-

The Monday letter signals that concerns are growing about the embattled Sentinel nuclear missile program, with more Democrats pressing for an honest review of the initiative and of the alternatives.

Sentinel aims to replace the more than 50-year-old Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) scattered across the rural western U.S. in underground silos. The 400 ICBMs are one part of the nuclear triad, along with bomber planes and submarines.

But the program, which awarded its first contract in 2020 to defense giant Northrop Grumman, the contractor likely to keep developing the program, overran its costs by 37 percent in January, triggering a Nunn-McCurdy breach that requires a Pentagon review.

Sentinel is expected to now cost around \$130 billion, far more than the original roughly \$60 billion about a decade ago. Much of the increase is tied to a vast real estate project as the Air Force looks to modernize related infrastructure for the new missiles.

In the letter, the lawmakers said the Air Force “has relied on a budget projection that underestimated costs, made poor assumptions, and relied on incomplete data to gain Congressional approval for the program’s authorization.”

“It’s unacceptable that such flawed assumptions were the basis for a project of this magnitude and that these types of errors persist to this day,” they wrote.

Supporters of Sentinel argue that it is critical for the U.S. to maintain its nuclear triad and modernize each leg as competition increases with China and Russia. Skeptics have questioned whether ICBMs provide a necessary deterrence, considering they lack the abilities of fast bomber planes or clandestine submarines.

Modernization, however, remains a key national security strategy under the Biden administration, and Air Force officials have said that Sentinel must be funded.

The Democratic lawmakers on Monday said Sentinel, after the Nunn-McCurdy breach, can only be continued if there are no alternatives, the program’s cost is reasonable and can be constrained further, and if the program is essential to national security and a higher priority than other programs that may be cut.

In the letter, however, they pointed to past comments by the Air Force and Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment William LaPlante, vowing that Sentinel will be funded as “concerning signs that past preferences prejudiced the outcome of this new review.”

“There must be an honest evaluation of the necessity of proceeding with this program now and at what cost we are willing to continue,” lawmakers said. “Inevitably, this means making hard decisions about how and where to spend taxpayer dollars. Billions of dollars and at least a decade have been spent justifying the \$130 billion Sentinel program. This requires reevaluation.”

International & Strategic Developments

U.S. to Hezbollah: Don’t count on us to stop an Israeli attack

Politico Online, June 24 (1926) | Nahal Toosi, Erin Banco and Lara Seligman

U.S. officials trying to prevent a bigger Middle East war are issuing an unusual warning to Hezbollah: Don’t assume that Washington can stop Israel from attacking you. The blunt message comes as many U.S. officials appear resigned to the possibility that Israel will make a major move against Hezbollah inside Lebanon in the coming weeks. Two U.S. officials told POLITICO that the militia needs to also understand that Washington will help Israel defend itself if Hezbollah retaliates. They stressed that the militant group should not count on America to act as a brake on Israeli decision-making.

Pentagon Confident It Can Still Defend Against Houthi Attacks Without a Carrier in the Region

Military.com, June 24 (1708) | Konstantin Toropin

The Pentagon said Monday it remains confident that it will be able to respond to ongoing Houthi attacks in the Red Sea after a Navy aircraft carrier strike group departed the region and it was unclear when another carrier group might arrive. "We still have capability in the region," Pentagon spokesman Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder told reporters. The Navy will "continue to work very closely with our international allies and partners toward that end when it comes to safeguarding the flow of commerce and safety of mariners in the Red Sea."

Air Force fires official overseeing Sentinel missile program

<https://thehill.com/policy/defense/4741560-air-force-fires-sentinel-missile-program-overseeing-official-charles-clegg/>

BY: [BRAD DRESS](#) for THE HILL // 06/26/24 3:22 PM ET

The Air Force has fired the top official overseeing the costly Sentinel nuclear missile program, which is currently under a [Pentagon review](#) for ballooning costs.

The commander of the Air Force Nuclear Weapons Center, **Maj. Gen. John Newberry**, fired **Col. Charles Clegg**, The Hill confirmed Wednesday. Clegg had assumed the position in August 2022, serving less than two years in the job that oversees the Sentinel program that began around a decade ago. An Air Force spokesperson said Clegg was removed from his job because of a loss of confidence and that it was not related to the **Nunn-McCurdy breach** in January, when Sentinel overshot its budget costs by 37 percent.

That triggered the Defense Department to review whether the program is still necessary and vital to national security. "He was removed because he did not follow organizational procedures. This removal action is not directly related to the Nunn-McCurdy review," the Air Force spokesperson said in an email. The spokesperson also said the removal does not impact the operation of the 400 Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) that Sentinel is supposed to replace.

Minuteman "remains our nation's safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent, just as it has been without interruption for the past six decades," the spokesperson added. The Sentinel program aims to create brand-new missiles to replace the aging, more than 50-year-old Minuteman ICBMs. But the project's cost has grown from around \$60 billion in 2015 to around \$130 billion now and has attracted more intense congressional scrutiny after the Nunn-McCurdy breach.

Several Democrats [sent a letter to the Pentagon this week](#) calling for a fair and honest review of whether Sentinel is vital to national security at the updated cost of the program. A congressional nuclear arms working group is also holding a July 24 hearing on the program. The sentinel is supposed to finish around 2030 but is now expected to be delayed. The main contractor on the project, Northrop Grumman, earlier this year announced it would not be conducting [a critical flight test](#) until 2026.

The project's costs are inflating in part because it also involves renovating or constructing new real estate, including infrastructure that will house the new missiles. The Minuteman ICBMs are spread out across several states in the rural Western part of the country. The Air Force has fired the head of its program to build the next intercontinental ballistic missile, whose projected costs have ballooned to \$131 billion.

Sentinel Systems Director **Col. Charles Clegg** was removed because he “did not follow organizational procedures” and the service lost confidence in his ability to lead the program, Air Force spokesperson Ann Stefanek confirmed in a statement. The removal, first [reported](#) by Bloomberg, comes after the troubled program [breached](#) Nunn-McCurdy limits, which triggered the Pentagon to review the program and recertify it to stop it from being canceled.

However, Stefanek said Clegg's removal “is not directly related to the Nunn-McCurdy review.” The results of the Nunn-McCurdy process are due to Congress on July 9, but some lawmakers are already concerned that the Pentagon's process of evaluating the program hasn't been fair. The Air Force started the Nunn-McCurdy review with “biased and preconceived notions,” a group of Democratic lawmakers wrote in a June 24 [letter](#) to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. Those lawmakers want a “thorough review of all alternatives” before the Pentagon moves ahead with Sentinel

Important Essays To Review

Make All B52s Nuclear Capable

The SASC proposed making the entire B52 force nuclear capable. Here is what it might cost:
<https://www.twz.com/air/making-the-entire-b-52-fleet-nuclear-capable-what-it-would-take>

HSCI Chairman Mike Turner speaks About Nuclear Weapons and US Foreign Policy

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/nuclear-weapons-and-foreign-policy-conversation-hpsci-chairman-mike-turner>

Should the United States cut Nuclear weapons spending as part of a fiscal discipline strategy?

<https://www.heritage.org/missile-defense/commentary/we-cant-afford-cut-americas-nuclear-modernization-program>

Three Essays on ICBMs and nuclear deterrence by Peter Huessy

Is US Nuclear Deterrence In Jeopardy? Lost? - Warrior Maven: Center for Military Modernization

Nuclear Weapons Essay: Rust to Obsolescence or Modernize to Credibility? - Warrior Maven: Center for Military Modernization

Closing Remarks by Peter Huessy at the LSUS, BFR and NIDS Triad Symposium, June 20th, 2024, on the Campus of Louisiana State University in Shreveport, Louisiana in support of the USAF Global Strike Command

A leading progressive newspaper recently noted that the world has a “lot of arms but not much control.” And surprisingly, the editorial went on to explain—correctly---while the US has exercised restraint in its nuclear modernization—staying within the New START limits---not so Russia and China, with the result that a two-nation arms race is underway in which the United States is not participating.

As retired Admiral Charles Richard noted in 2022 China is adding to its nuclear arsenal at a breathtaking speed. Russia may have already engaged in a significant upload of its New START accountable warheads, as it has such a capability in the multiple thousands of warheads. And especially dangerous given there have been no New START inspections for many years, on top of thousands of Russian deployed theater nuclear forces under no arms limits.

North Korea and Iran, one an expanding nuclear armed rogue state and the other on the nuclear doorstep, are allied with Russia and China, adding to nuclear dangers. Acting with its proxy terror groups such as the Houthis, Hamas and Hezbollah, Iran shut down western allied freight traffic in the Red Sea and Suez, attacked US forces some 170 time in the region since October 2023, and launched thousands of rockets and missiles at Israel and other US allies. On top of which, Putin continues to make serial nuclear threats to Ukraine, while China says if Japan comes to the defense of Taiwan, it will suffer the same fate as the country did in WWII.

It is right to characterize the 2010 US nuclear program of record as consistent with the New START treaty. But absent a new agreement by China and Russia to restrict arms, the US is indeed projected in the 2025-35 timeframe to face two nuclear armed peer adversaries for the first time, each probably with unrestrained nuclear arsenals. In such an environment, the US nuclear deterrent strategy needs to be augmented as it was adopted in a more benign environment.

What then should the United States do?

There are two general approaches currently being discussed.

As the Posture Commission noted, the program of record is necessary, even critical, but not sufficient. The Senate Armed Service Committee is listening it appears, and in the NDAA or national defense legislation, calls for at least four new initiatives: (1) make all 76 B52s nuclear capable; (2) deploy the Sentinel ICBM in all 450 silos; (3) establish a SLCM-N program office; and (4) create a high-level DoD official to oversee all nuclear programs. One could also reasonably add three additional Columbia submarines [post 2042] as well as add warheads to the SLBM and ICBM legs of the Triad.

Now some critics note that the US should just improve our conventional capability. But as senior US military officials have told Congress, if adversary nuclear weapons are introduced into a conventional conflict, “nothing holds,” thus requiring for the USA to have both a conventional and nuclear deterrent second to none.

This is where Putin and Xi are making the world dangerous---as they are threatening the use of nuclear force as an adjunct to their conventional capability, **using nuclear weapons not to deter**

conflict but to make it serve their purposes—getting the US and its allies to stand down in a conflict, what the Posture Commission described as nukes for bullying and coercion. It is this “gap” in US capability at the theater level particularly that needs to be remedied.

Especially as Professor Chris Yeaw told this conference, Russia and China combined may have within the decade some 10,000 deployed nuclear weapons both strategic and theater.

Now what are some alternative strategies than adding to the capability of the US nuclear deterrent?

Annie Jacobson new book calls US deterrent strategy as crazy---“mad” is her description. She says the US needs more negotiations and diplomacy---but not more weapons. But she does not say what we are negotiating for and where diplomacy will take us.

Some members of Congress call for unilateral measures---to make the US nuclear arsenal smaller—such as killing ICBMs. This would reduce the US strategic nuclear force by 70% fewer SNDVs or Strategic Nuclear Delivery Vehicles and 25% fewer warheads, while **also eliminating any hedge to build beyond the current New Start warhead level.**

This idea of killing our ICBM needs some examination. Some six arguments are common.

First, critics of ICBMs propose we just remove the silo targets, and then Russians wouldn't be tempted to attack them. If ICBM silos are first, logically would New York city be next? Would moving the people of New York throughout rural America stop Russia from attacking us with nuclear weapons? Are the targets at fault?

Second, ICBM's are apparently on a hair trigger although no President has ever called for their launch in the past 3.2 million minutes since the MMIII went on alert in Montana in October 1962. That is some excellent “launch control” but certainly not characteristic of any supposed hair trigger weapon.

Third, for some reason ICBM critics think the Russians are suicidal and will launch nearly all their New START accountable ICBM warheads---over 900---to take out 400 Minuteman ICBM silos and associated warheads and 45 launch control centers spread over 32,000 square miles over 5 states.

But Russia would be ignoring 350-400 sub warheads that could be deployed from Kings Bay and Bangor based submarines and 60 bombers from 3 bomber bases with anywhere between 600-1000 cruise missiles and gravity bombs available for retaliation. To say nothing, of the estimated 800 warheads at sea also available for retaliation.

Fourth, another implicit charge is if the Russians launch their submarine missiles at the ICBM silos, they secure a shorter flight time making it even more difficult for a President to launch our ICBMs back at Russia. But Moscow has around 500 submarine-based warheads in their entire fleet, not all of which are necessarily on alert. The force simply cannot hold at risk the entire US ICBM force.

Fifth, given the Russian missiles would have to either be launched at different times or would reach US soil at different times—either scenario would allow the US to launch after being attacked which would place Russia in nuclear jeopardy.

Sixth, critics often say the nuclear modernization effort is simply too expensive. But if you examine the defense budget, all strategic nuclear modernization efforts within DOD—subs, sub missiles, ICBMs, bombers, cruise missiles and NC3—come to \$18.6 billion annually, which is 2% of the defense budget, and one third of all DOD-NNSA nuclear expenditures, including all nuclear sustainment and all nuclear modernization.

Another way to measure the cost is that over the 50 years of the ICBM force being deployed, it comes to an annual investment of \$2.6 billion annually, compared to \$128 billion annually for food stamps and the \$76 billion annual Federal cost of caring for illegal aliens.

As General Mattis has said, “the US can afford survival.”

To restore deterrence and prevent the world from spinning out of control, continuing the program of record and the newly recommended additional capabilities is the only choice we have unless again as Admiral Charles Richard explained, we wish to disarm and get out of the nuclear deterrent business. We can rust to obsolescence or modernize to deter. Those are our only two choices.

Now will the US succeed in this unprecedented modernization effort? I think the presence of so many attendees here ---in record numbers---and your growing support for this Symposium will help America make the right choice. [Applause].

Thank you.

Political News of the Week

In the six battleground states, 44% say Mr. Trump will do a better job handling threats to democracy in the U.S., compared to 33% who said Mr. Biden would do a better job, according to a poll by The Washington Post and the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University.

The same poll found that 16% of swing state voters think neither candidate is equipped to handle threats to democracy, and 7% said both candidates are equally prepared to deal with threats.

Mr. Trump leads among so-called “deciders,” voters who fit into one or more categories such as voting in only one of the past two presidential elections, between 18 and 25, registered to vote since 2022, not sure if they will vote for Mr. Trump or Mr. Biden this year, or switched this support between 2016 and 2020.

Nearly 40% of “deciders” say they trust Mr. Trump more to handle threats to democracy while 29% say they have more trust in Mr. Biden. More than 20% of deciders say they don’t trust

either to handle threats to democracy while 10% say they are both equally prepared to deal with threats.

The poll surveyed 3,513 registered voters in Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin in April and May. Of those surveyed, 2,255 were classified as “deciders.”

Toons of the Week

As concern grows over the growing conflict in the Middle East, Michael Ramirez, the Pulitzer Prize winning editorial cartoonist, incapsulates in these toons the ongoing Iranian directed turmoil and the feckless response by the United Nations.

A recent news story about Iran’s latent nuclear program goes right to the heart of the Iranian capability: Iran’s strategy of warning that it will build a bomb has become more prominent, public, and explicit in the wake of October 7 and the ensuing [war in Gaza](#).

Throughout the conflict, Iran has mounted a steady drumbeat of attacks on Israel, U.S. forces, and international shipping via its surrogate groups across the region. Iran’s nuclear program has played a role in Iran’s management of the crisis, too, as Tehran has relied on a combination of technical signaling and rhetoric to bolster the credibility of its threshold deterrent and manage escalation risks.

That Iran’s leaders have not kept the nuclear program out of the spotlight is a sign that they view their threshold capability as more of an asset than a liability. For example, last December Iran reverted the configuration of its advanced centrifuges to a setup that in early 2023 had produced small amounts of 84 percent enriched material—a hair’s breadth away from the 90 percent needed for nuclear weapons.

Tehran knew inspectors would see and report the December change, which strongly suggests its leaders wanted to communicate that the possibility of producing weapons-grade uranium was back on the table. Iranian officials have also ramped up their commentary about the country’s ability to build nuclear weapons and the conditions under which they might do so. **In January, the head of Iran’s nuclear program, Mohammed Eslami, repeated the long-standing Iranian position that weapons of mass destruction have “never been part of [its] security and defense doctrine” but added that Iran’s nuclear latency—its inherent capacity to build nuclear weapons—provided a deterrent.**

“It is not about the lack of capability,” he declared in a televised interview. “I think we have achieved such deterrence We should not underrate our current achievements, thinking that we are not there yet.” The Iranian government then circulated Eslami’s statement on social media. The next month, his predecessor and one of the key negotiators of the 2015 nuclear deal, Ali Akbar Salehi, elaborated on Eslami’s point.

When asked whether Iran can build a nuclear bomb, Salehi replied that Iran has crossed “all the scientific and technical nuclear thresholds.” Using the example of manufacturing a car, he continued: “What does it take to make a car? You need a chassis, an engine, a wheel, a

gearbox If you are asking me if we [have] built the gearbox and the engine, my answer is yes.”

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The Archives

Lots of arms, too little control

Washington Post, June 18 (0115), Pg. A16 | Editorial

Russia and China are pushing the world toward a new nuclear arms race. And it could be even more dangerous, and more difficult to brake, than the Cold War competition that ended three decades ago. That was the unsettling message Pranay Vaddi, senior director for arms control, disarmament and nonproliferation at the National Security Council, delivered in a largely overlooked but important speech June 7 to the Arms Control Association.

In the near term, Mr. Vaddi declared, “the prospects for strategic arms control are dim.” Russia has rejected talks, and the last remaining U.S.-Russia treaty limiting strategic nuclear weapons, New START, which caps each side’s warheads on missiles, submarines and heavy bombers, expires in 2026 - possibly, Mr. Vaddi said, “without replacement.” China, for its part, has never had any nuclear arms agreements with the United States and has shown no interest in nuclear arms control. On the contrary, Mr. Vaddi noted that China, which has historically maintained a small stockpile of nukes, is “expanding and diversifying” its nuclear arsenals “at a breakneck pace,” as are Russia and North Korea. In refusing to discuss limits, these three geopolitically aligned adversaries “are forcing the United States and our close allies and partners to prepare for a world where nuclear competition occurs without numerical constraints,” he said.

To understand why this new arms race is dangerous, look back at the last one: The United States and the Soviet Union together amassed more than 60,000 nuclear warheads in a standoff that threatened mutual, possibly global, annihilation. The danger of an accidental launch grows when

great powers keep their nuclear weapons on launch-ready alert, as the United States and Russia still do today. Fortunately, arms control treaties and the end of the Cold War reduced both the tensions between the two countries and their respective arsenals. Thus, it was especially significant that Mr. Vaddi said that the shrinkage of those stockpiles over the past 25 years might now be reversed. “Absent a change in the trajectory of adversary arsenals, we may reach a point in the coming years where an increase from the current deployed numbers is required,” he said. China has more than 500 nuclear warheads and is aiming to accumulate more than 1,000 by 2030, compared with the 1,550 warheads the United States and Russia each currently deploy. A three-way arms race poses complex strategic questions - more complex than those presented by the two-way U.S.-Soviet conflict. Should the United States seek to match the combined strength of Russia and China, or just one of them? How would Moscow and Beijing respond? Mr. Vaddi said the United States would pursue “better” and not necessarily “more” nuclear weaponry. **This country does “not need to increase our nuclear forces to match or outnumber the combined total of our competitors to successfully deter them,” he said.**

That’s good, but no one knows whether that notion would hold up in a future arms race, nor whether Russia and China could or would make similar calculations.

Mr. Vaddi also warned of a “new and dangerous era” because of the efforts of Russia, China, North Korea and Iran to proliferate advanced weapons technologies, including missiles, drones, and chemical and biological weapons. “Unlike our adversaries,” he said, “we will not develop radiation-spewing, nuclear-powered cruise missiles - or nuclear weapons designed to be placed in orbit - which would be a clear violation of the Outer Space Treaty.” He was referring to Russia, which is reportedly developing both.

Ideally, more aggressive U.S. diplomacy might bring China to the table for tripartite arms talks with Russia and the United States. The prospects for that are dim, however, as the United States found when it made a proposal to China on managing strategic risks last year - and Beijing brushed it off. The Cold War arms race began to end when President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev found the political will to reduce the arsenals. Gorbachev was desperate to ease the burden of the arms race on his tottering communist system, and Reagan had long harbored an ambition to abolish nuclear weapons altogether. President’s Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, however, show no such flexibility or pragmatism. If anything, their pursuit of a new arms race reflects a desire for heightened geopolitical struggle.

Mr. Vaddi’s warning is deeply worrisome. It would be far more preferable to reach verifiable, binding treaties to limit nuclear weapons. **But diplomacy takes two to tango, or, in this case, three.**