***ICBM EAR Week of December 6, 2024, Prepared by Peter Huessy, President of GeoStrategic Analysis and Senior Fellow at the National Institute for Deterrence Studies***

***Highlights:***

* The ICBM Ear this week has four new special reports/essays; (1) On Ukraine, (2) Is WWIII here? (3) The prospects for nuclear anarchy; and (4) A detailed assessment of why the US needs the Sentinel ICBM force especially in the context of the continued push for disarmament and Global Zero.
* We have some key quotes of the week from Senator Fisher and Admiral Correll.
* Then we have an update on Congressional Activity to finish work on both the NDAA and a funding bill through March 2025.
* Then we extensively summarize some of the Reagan Defense Forum on December 7th, 2024 especially the Peace Through Strength Panels. Particularly interesting are the comments from HAC Defense Subcommittee Chair Ken Calvert and the new Chair of the Senate Strategic Forces SASC Subcommittee Senator Fisher.
* We also post a FAS essay on the nuclear guidance document of the Biden administration. FAS says China will not be a peer competitor and the US should restrain its nuclear forces. With commentary from the ICBM EAR.
* Under Strategic Developments we provide an excellent review of Russian nuclear forces as well as the most recent report from the DNI.
* Next is the first part of the 2025 Nuclear Deterrent Schedule Five seminars with 10 top speakers on Iran, China, Russia, the Strategic Posture Review, and Missile Defense
* In tribute to those we lost at Pearl Harbor some 83 years ago, we post an essay from Lawrence Kadish.
* And a lengthy ICBM EAR essay on why the United States needs to build the Sentinel and how US nuclear modernization fits into the history of arms control and strategic nuclear stability, as well as placing the cost of the missile system in context.

***Top Quotes of the Week:***

***Senator Deborah Fischer***: The reality e face is we have two peer nuclear adversaries. I focus on nuclear modernization and to maintain deterrence that maintains pace. When we do not invest at the needed level, we will not be able to deal with or deter conflicts around the world. Reagan Defense Forum, December 7, 2024

***USSTRATCOM Deputy Commander Vice Adm. Richard Correll*** during a ceremony earlier this week at Naval Base Kitsap-Bangor, “At no time in our nation’s history has the role of strategic deterrence been more vital.

***Comments***

***AFGSC Commander Gen. Thomas Bussiere:*** Underscored the importance of the Air Force maintaining its current strategic deterrence posture while simultaneously fielding modernized nuclear systems

***Gen. Bussiere*** Suggested that the Air Force should examine the possibility of accelerating the production schedule for the B-21 Raider, and possibly obtaining more than the 100 bombers that form the official program of record

***“Russian FM Sergey Lavrov***: The recent use of a hypersonic missile in the Ukraine war sought to make the West understand that Moscow was ready to use ‘any means’ to stave off defeat.

***Sen. Kevin Cramer (R-ND)*** “They’re back! The first of 17 B-1B Bombers arrived at Grand Forks AFB for a short stay, something I’ve been working on with @usairforce & [Grand Forks AFB] for a couple years. They’ve been away too long. Many more exciting missions ahead for this special place!! Welcome home Lancers!!”

***Congressional Developments***

***CR/Approps Bill for FY2025***: Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer confirmed Monday that bipartisan discussions aimed at preventing a government shutdown this month are “on the right track.”

Speaking from the Senate floor, Schumer noted that progress to avoid a [government shutdown](https://dailycaller.com/2024/01/08/conservatives-unhappy-border-security-mike-johnson-govt-funding-compromise/) is being made on a bill that could garner bipartisan support and pass both the House and Senate, but he warned against “divisive” provisions, [according](https://thehill.com/business/budget/5018285-schumer-negotiations-government-shutdown/) to The Hill. Schumer said he was satisfied with the current direction of the talks. He said he was grateful to the members from both chambers.

“We need to keep divisive and unnecessary provisions out of any government funding extension, or else it will get harder to pass a [continuing resolution] in time,” he said. “For now, I’m pleased negotiations are on the right track, and I thank the appropriators in both chambers for their good work.” After the presidential election, lawmakers from both parties had aimed to negotiate a comprehensive deal for the full-year government funding of fiscal 2025,

However, conservatives in both chambers are increasing pressure for a temporary measure into next year. Some Republicans said they are optimistic about extending funding until March, although defense advocates are worried about the implications of a funding freeze on the Pentagon, the outlet said. Legislators from states severely impacted by hurricanes Helene and [Milton](https://dailycaller.com/2024/10/07/hurricane-milton-category-five-west-coast-florida/) are pushing for swift emergency relief as they argue that the upcoming funding bill should include disaster relief funds, as officials warn of depleting resources.

Republicans in the House have been pressing for policy wins, particularly on hot-button issues such as abortion and voter registration requirements, [according](https://www.politico.com/news/2024/09/08/chuck-schumer-government-funding-00177898) to Politico. These demands are creating significant friction with Senate Democrats, who, along with President Joe Biden, are advocating for a more straightforward funding extension. Several Republican representatives openly [criticized](https://dailycaller.com/2024/09/23/republican-lawmakers-frustrated-mike-johnson-funding-bill/) House Speaker Mike Johnson’s previous funding proposal and called it a continuation of unsustainable spending levels. After Johnson’s initial proposal was rejected due to fiscal concerns, he submitted a new continuing resolution in September, which has also met with disappointment from fiscal conservatives in his party.

***The NDAA***: The House and Senate lawmakers who are writing a final version of the fiscal 2025 defense authorization bill are nearing the finish line, knowledgeable congressional aides said Monday.

The chairmen and ranking members of the House and Senate Armed Services committees have concluded their deliberations and have written a compromise NDAA measure, one aide said.

“The only issues left to be resolved are at the congressional leader level,” the staffer said.

Most notably, Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., and Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer, D-N.Y., have been discussing several dozen provisions pertaining primarily to controlling trade with China and fostering the development of artificial intelligence.

***But the clock is ticking on those leadership discussions. Lawmakers hope to file the bicameral National Defense Authorization Act compromise package by the end of this week and send it to the White House by Christmas.***

Once the bill is filed, the House is likely to vote first on the measure, with the Senate expected to then clear the legislation for the president’s signature as one of the last acts of this Congress before it adjourns for the holidays — most likely the week of Dec. 16.[These are from News Sources]

***Strategic Developments***

Great Review: [What Do We Know About Russia’s Nuclear Weapons?](https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/12/03/what-do-we-know-about-russias-nuclear-weapons-a87203)

US Intelligence Report: <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/gt2040-home/introduction>

***Reagan Forum: Peace Through Strength***

Quotes/Comments of the Week from the Reagan Forum. These may be paraphrased in many instances-for the exact quotes please watch this video link from the President Reagan forum December 7, 2024 at the Reagan Library. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UgIJPn-AUvM>

***Senator Ernst:*** China is expanding its ability to use force around Taiwan

**Secretary Austin**: China is establishing a worldwide network of bases to expand their use of military power

**Cong Waltz:** China is building port facilities throughout Central America, right in our own backyard.

***Cong Smith***: China and others are trying to convince the world that the world is worse off with the US in it.

***JCS Chairman Brown***: We have to be so formidable so our adversaries will always say “Not Today.”

***Reagan Forum December 7, 2024***

Introduction and Theme: Enormous changes in strategic environment since 2022 and we are looking forward to a new administration and a new strategic and defense policy.

***Commentator:*** The first issue to discuss is the 2027 deadline from China re invading Taiwan. With a new administration, what should be the US defense strategy?

**Cong Calvert** We should pass approps bills and get back to regular order. We passed all 12 approps bills by August and 5 through the floor. Need to get all these bills passed. We should also fund the unfunded priorities list that Admiral Pappano has proposed. Approps folks hate CRS. Have to bring back regular order. House should vote in January to get all the approps bills done. Even though a CR may continue into March 2025.

**Marine Corps Head Gen Eric Smith**: We have a lot of waste when we only get a CR and funding for part of the year. But I have to train and assume the forces might be needed tonight. We will lose an entire regiment if there is an additional CR although we have met our recruitment goals so far.

**Navy Admiral Paparo**, Indo Pacific Command: We deter with our strength any use of force to change conditions in the Western Pacific . If conflict, huge impacts on employment and hundreds of thousands of lives over 5 years. For 52 years we have provided this deterrent. The US has to take seriously the Indo-Pacific and what China has planned for Taiwan in 2027.

**Cong Calvert**: Xi is not building the China’s military just to look at. Xi has made it very clear that he wants to go into Taiwan by 2027. The best thing is for a strong deterrent to be funded by the Congress to prevent that.

**Admiral Paparo:** We have to be ready every second of every day to deter conflict. The margin we have is eroding and have made great gains in our capability.

**Marine Corps Smith**: What would you pay the day after you lose the war? What would you pay not to have lost a war? Everything and Anything.

**Admiral Paparo**: Before Vietnam we were paying 11% of GDP on defense. The environment was not as grave. Today it is around 3% of our GDP. Although 77% of Americans are concerned that the nation’s interest on the debt will cut into the defense budget

**Cong Calvert:** The first priority of the gov is the security of its citizens and protection of the country. We in Congress need a 3-4% growth in the country to bring in more revenue, add DoD efficiencies, fix the procurement system, and add new technology. However direction we move to address the national debt, we have to continue to deter. And fund all the intelligence agencies and the nuclear program in DOE which are all in the defense budget. .

***A Reagan library*** survey found that 41% win wars against Russia and China simultaneously; 20% win wars against China and a lesser country; 12% win just against China; 12% defend our borders only; 5% fight to a draw with China.

Here is the link for panel #1. <https://youtu.be/UcK0X4Uj_zc>

***Reagan Forum Panel on Innovation and the Speed of relevance in the defense structure***

**DOD Official Heidi Shu:** New companies that can manufacture and provide alternative supply chains and help companies overcome the supply chain problems. We also have an office that can provide key capital resources that can help small, innovative companies to grow. And not be bought out by China.

**Senator Todd Young** (R-Indiana) Gravest threats are biological and China is considerably ahead of the United States—bio surveillance; reduce signatures; , for example gene editing/biological engineering. And the US agriculture and health care systems & supply chains are deeply integrated within the Chinese system; there are big vulnerabilities in systems.

**Palantir CEO** wants to bring back tough testing and rid the DoD of identity politics; and have greater # of competitors. Also, the country is due every 80 years for a major change: 1776 founding, then the 1860 civil war, then the 32-45 great depression/WWII and now 2025---

***Reagan Defense Forum Peace Through Strength Panel #2***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UgIJPn-AUvM>

***Reagan: The safety and security of pour people is our top priority. And goodwill alone won’t protect our security. There are those who scorn our way of life. Peace does not come and freedom doesn’t come because of good intentions. America will always meet its responsibilities to keep the peace.***

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**Abby Phillips** from CNN says that despite the election and an America First agenda that Americans (58%) according to surveys want the USA to be involved with the world.

**Senator Deborah Fisher** says that indeed 58% of American want the US to be more engaged in the world. Primarily as they have a better understanding of the threats America faces. Worrisome is certainly China is a peer nuclear armed adversary.

**Ranking HASC Member Smith**: Americans did not necessarily endorse an American First agenda. Economic uncertainty worries many Americans. They look at the world and see the same kind of problems. And the world is not convinced that the US has a positive role to play in the world--what is the challenge for the Trump administration to convince the world we are a power for good.

**Palantir CEO**: America is the most loving people in the world and the American people want to know why is China and Mexico sending fentanyl to this country and killing us, why are these enemies doing this? We spend $1 trillion on defense but people are holding US hostages in dungeons; I want people in the world who want to harm us to be afraid of us. Attacking our allies; maligning us at the United Nations. These bad guys need to wake up scared. They want to know America is safe and they do not care about pagan wokeness. Many of the leftist intellectuals were captured by the Berkeley faculty which the American people didn’t buy. [Applause]

**Cong Smith** (in response) says only our enemies should fear us. We need to convince our “friends” that we are ok. And the far left in the Democratic Party have far too much influence not because Americans endorsed an America First agenda.

**CNN’s Abby Phillips:** A survey says 69% of Dems, 44% of Reps and 55% of all Americans support aid to Ukraine/; what’s the likelihood of what happens re US policy in Ukraine?

**M. Ortegas:** I think Americans voted for an American First Agenda. And it was a reaction to what started in 2021: Russia invades Ukraine; the Afghan withdrawal was a disaster; Israelis are attacked by Hezbollah missiles and slaughtered by Hamas/all backed by Iran and we only talk about reigning in Israel. Trump sanctioned Russia more than any other Prez since Reagan and deterred Moscow from invading.

**Senator Fisher:** The administration didn’t ask the question what Ukraine needed to actually win and laid out a plan that was understood by the American people.

**Rep Smith:** If you allow autocrats through the use of military force to take Ukraine in this case, that emboldens China in Taiwan, and thus we need to stop Russia from destroying Ukraine.

**CEO Palantir:** But the opposite policy was used re the defense of Israel---the ideology was Israel is not allowed to win!! That is where the America first policy comes from.

***The Reagan Forum*** also did a survey on Israel. Only 30% of Harris voters supported Israel winning while 64% of Trump voters did. In addition, only 46% vs 48% of Harris voters approved of sending weapons to Israel but 67% vs 29% of Trump voters did. Nationwide for all Americans, 45% supported a cease fire and 45% supported Israel winning, while 54% supported sending weapons and 39% said no.

***Senator Deborah Fischer: The reality e face is we have two peer nuclear adversaries. I focus on nuclear modernization and to maintain deterrence that maintains pace. When we do not invest at the needed level, we will not be able to deal with or deter conflicts around the world.***

***Essay of the Week Commentary***

The essay of the week is from the Fderation of American Scientists. The essay calls on the United States not to worry about China’s nuclear force buildup as it won’t match either the US or Russia in submarines, stockpiled weapons or strategic bombers. And otherwise, the good news is “In practice, China is unlikely to become a peer of Russia and the United States.”

The FAS essay is however very worried that the ***incoming President*** , (not China or Russia), is not going to be ***constrained*** and may follow the recommendations of the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission to expand US nuclear forces.

FAS is upset that the Biden administration left the decision of what nuclear force level the US will have to the incoming Trump administration, and that the recent Biden directive does “little to advance President Obama’s initiative” to reduce US reliance on nuclear forces. [Is President Obama still in office?]

FAS says China will not become a peer nuclear force. Perhaps they might ask Dr. Chris Yeaw why China in 2035 ***will have some 3600 nuclear warheads*** compared to the current US deployed strategic and theater force of around 2000 which FAS appears determined not to have increased.

If FAS thinks we have nothing to worry about, let them have a debate with Dr. Chris Yeaw and Dr. Mark Schnieder and Dr. Rick Fisher and Gordon Chang and Dr. Brad Thayer. NIDS will host such a discussion if FAS wishes to engage and they can bring whomever they wish to have such a debate.

Somehow it appears that FAS does not believe there will be any Chinese buildup leaving the PRC with an almost two to one advantage over the United States. Or (and here the FAS essay is not clear) that even should China build such a force, it will be unimportant or without strategic significance.

If so, why then does the US-Russia strategic balance matter? In fact, why then have arms control agreements such as New START where numbers on each side are equal in numbers? Why then is FAS troubled that the Biden administration’s nuclear guidance leaves open the door to enhance the overall level of nuclear forces as the Posture Commission recommends? Does FAS know something the US intelligence community does not? Is China not building up its nuclear forces? Was Admiral Richard incorrect when he explained the Chinese nuclear buildup was breathtaking?

As the new ICBM EAR essay explains, the global zero disarmament campaign is about cutting back on US military power, especially our nuclear capability, and not on reducing the nuclear power of our adversaries. FAS calls for the United States to cut back another one-third of its strategic nuclear forces. For some reason, the US must show restraint in the face of our enemies breathtaking buildup. And irrespective of the policies of China and Russia, reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US security policy.

Reducing US nuclear forces to 1000 implies either zero ICBMs or only 6 submarines, leaving (in the worst case) the US with 12 or fewer discrete nuclear targets or only 348 warheads at sea, a force about 5% of the projected China and Russia nuclear forces in 2035. Daryl Kimball of the Arms Control Association proposes that Trump simply extend the terms of the New START agreement leaving the US with the current 1550 warheads, compared to the projected China number of roughly double that force. . .

***US Administration Developments***

## Biden Nuclear Weapons Employment Guidance Leaves Nuclear Decisions to Trump

### Federation of American Scientists, Dec. 5 | Adam Mount and Hans Kristensen

#### In early November 2024, the United States released a report describing the fourth revision to its nuclear employment strategy since the end of the Cold War and the third since 2013. The public report summarizes a classified employment guidance reportedly issued by President Joseph Biden in April and was submitted to Congress as required by law (and is sometimes known as the section 491 report after the relevant section of the U.S. Code).

The Nuclear Weapons Employment Planning Guidance of the United States “directly informs DoD’s development of nuclear employment options for consideration by the President in extreme circumstances and establishes requirements that shape U.S. nuclear weapons capabilities and posture.”

The report is notable as the first known effort by a U.S. president to provide guidance on the nuclear employment strategy amid growing concern about China’s dramatic buildup of nuclear forces. The report does not reflect the recommendation of the Congressional Strategic Posture Commission and several other expert groups to expand the size or capability of the nation’s nuclear forces. However, because of an ambiguity in the text about what is required to “deter” multiple adversaries simultaneously, the report is likely to support the narrative that the Biden administration accepts the need for an eventual buildup. Biden’s guidance appears to leave major questions in nuclear strategy to the incoming Trump administration.

*Timing and tone*

Like its predecessor, the Biden administration released its nuclear employment guidance report following the election of a new president. The timing of these releases decreases the time that administration officials can work with planners and acquisition managers on implementation and therefore reduces their ability to affect plans. The timing of the release also decreases the presidents’ ability to inform and assure allies, given outstanding questions about whether, when, and how the incoming president will modify nuclear strategy.

The 2024 report marks a distinct shift in tone from the unclassified 2020 report, which summarized the classified employment guidance issued in April 2019. The unclassified summary was a broad defense of US nuclear strategy and devoted considerable time to arguing against proposed shifts that had been debated in Congress, in public, and on the campaign trail (including a sizable section arguing against a “sole purpose” declaration that the incoming president had endorsed while a candidate). In this sense, the 2024 report is less a political and persuasive document than a simple summary of the president’s guidance. Where the 2020 report sought to constrain the incoming president, the authors of the 2024 guidance appear to have taken pains to leave options open.

*Ambiguity on the “two peer problem”*

Contrary to public reports, the new guidance does not “reorient America’s deterrent strategy to focus on China’s rapid expansion in its nuclear arsenal.” Although the importance of China is increasing, Russia is still the focus due to its much larger nuclear arsenal.

The report also does not directly articulate or address the so-called “two peer problem”—the concern that US nuclear forces are insufficient to simultaneously deter both Russia and China. The document does note that “growing collaboration and collusion between Russia, the PRC, the DPRK, and Iran” raises the “possibility of coordinated or opportunistic aggression.” But it does not state that Russia and China are peer threats, apparently reflecting the description in the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review that China is “a growing factor in evaluating our nuclear deterrent.”

The new guidance document refers to “multiple nuclear competitors,” but does not explicitly use the “two peer” description frequently used in the public debate by defense officials and others. While the guidance report does not repeat quantitative estimates for China’s buildup that appear in Department of Defense reports, it does state that China has attained a “nascent nuclear triad.” That description credits China with sophisticated air and sea legs, both of which lag significantly behind the capability of US forces, especially the bomber leg. In practice, China is unlikely to become a peer of Russia and the United States in total stockpiled warheads, ballistic missile submarines, or in long-range bombers in the foreseeable future.

The guidance report simply states that “it may be necessary to adapt current U.S. force capability, posture, composition, or size,” and directs the Pentagon “to continuously evaluate whether adjustments should be made.” This language effectively leaves it to the incoming Trump administration to decide whether to expand the U.S. arsenal in response to China’s buildup. Though some Biden administration officials have hinted that they expect to need more capacity, the employment guidance report does not establish a presumption one way or the other.

The closest that President Biden’s guidance comes to an answer to the “two peer problem” is to direct that “the United States be able to deter Russia, the PRC, and the DPRK simultaneously in peacetime, crisis, and conflict.” Yet the document does not require U.S. forces to maintain the capability to perform other or all objectives against multiple adversaries simultaneously. It does not, for example, require the U.S. forces to limit damage against multiple peer adversaries simultaneously or to restore deterrence in the event that it fails—both objectives that are likely to carry higher quantitative or qualitative requirements than deterrence. Including either requirement would effectively endorse the recommendation of the Strategic Posture Commission that China’s buildup demands that the United States follow suit.

[ICBM Ear’s Editor’s note: why is not damage limitation part of deterrence requirements? What other kind of deterrence is required? ]

The language of the employment strategy report does not clearly indicate whether U.S. forces are required to perform these more demanding objectives. The president could have stated, for example, that U.S. forces are not required to maintain the capability to limit damage against multiple adversaries simultaneously. Without this statement, many will continue to assume that this requirement does exist because counterforce deterrence requires damage limitation.

The 2024 employment strategy does not add any requirement to increase the size of U.S. strategic forces, but it does help to lay the groundwork for future increases. It is a far cry from the 2013 employment strategy’s conclusion that the United States could “ensure the security of the United States and our Allies and partners and maintain a strong and credible strategic deterrent while safely pursuing up to a one-third reduction in deployed nuclear weapons from the level established in the New START Treaty.”

*Guidance on other issues*

On conventional forces, the 2024 employment guidance requires “the integration of non-nuclear capabilities into U.S. nuclear planning.” This language reflects similar passages in each US nuclear policy document since the end of the cold war. The 2013 version referred to planning “to assess what objectives and effects could be achieved through integrated non-nuclear strike options, and to propose possible means to make these objectives and effects achievable.” The 2020 version noted that the Pentagon “is pursuing the integration of conventional and nuclear planning when appropriate.”

Like its predecessor, the 2024 guidance does not adopt the Obama administration’s aspiration to increase reliance on conventional forces for kinetic strike. Even more than the 2020 document, the 2024 language portrays conventional forces as supportive of the “nuclear deterrence mission.” The language could pertain to, for example, interoperability of nuclear and conventional forces for signaling or strike missions, which is fully consistent with the Trump administration’s concept of “conventional-nuclear integration.” However, the 2024 document is more direct in requiring changes to nuclear plans and characterizes the classified guidance as placing a “greater emphasis” on non-nuclear capabilities. For the guidance to have the intended effect on plans, U.S. officials would have to participate in revisions to operational plans in the coming years, a process that is no longer possible for Biden appointees.

The integration of non-nuclear planning is facilitated by adaptive nuclear planning, according to the guidance document. Unlike deliberate plans, which are flexible employment plans tailored to deter and, if necessary, achieve objectives against specific nuclear-armed adversaries, adaptive plans “would be implemented as needed in a crisis or conflict to tailor deterrence operations and employment options in accordance with the emerging circumstances of a contingency.” The guidance stresses the increasing “importance of managing escalation in U.S. planning for responding to limited strategic attack…including reducing the likelihood of a large-scale nuclear attack…” Adaptive nuclear planning is not new but the guidance document explains it is linked to non-nuclear options as well.

On the law of armed conflict, the 2024 guidance reiterates previous statements that “all nuclear plans must be consistent with the Law of Armed Conflict,” though it does not clarify what this requires or how compliance is assessed. The 2024 document does not repeat its predecessors’ statements on civilian targeting. It does not repeat the 2013 language that the United States “will not intentionally target civilian populations or civilian objects,” nor the lower bar in the 2022 document removes the clause on “civilian objects.” The elision does not signal an intention to target civilian populations or objects and is probably the result of an attempt to reduce the length of the report. However, the oversight may make it difficult to assess whether the Trump administration is reinterpreting its law of armed conflict obligations.

On arms control, the document promises that the United States “will abide by the central limits of the New START Treaty for the duration of the Treaty as long as it assesses that Russia continues to do so,” but offers no assurances beyond February, 2026, either reciprocal or unilateral. The guidance states that “future bilateral agreements or arrangements with Russia… will need to account for U.S. deterrence requirements and other strategic threats globally.” U.S. arms control agreements with Russia have always done that so the explicit condition in the new guidance appears intended to constrain bilateral arms control. However, the passage lends more ammunition to opponents of arms control.

On sole authority, the document goes out of its way to affirm that the president has taken no steps to adjust the requirements or procedure for nuclear launch authorization. Especially in the final months of the first Trump administration, several current and former U.S. officials expressed concern about the existing system of sole authority. When Donald Trump again takes custody of the nuclear codes in January, he will find no new guardrails on his ability to order use of U.S. nuclear weapons.

*Conclusion*

As the 2024 nuclear employment guidance report states, it offers “more continuity than change with the approach of previous administrations.” The Biden administration could have chosen to try to influence ongoing debates on strategy and force structure, but instead prefers to leave these questions to the incoming Trump administration.

President’s Biden’s employment strategy does break with previous administration’s in one important respect. As written, ***it does little to advance President Obama’s objective*** to decrease the nation’s reliance on its nuclear arsenal. It is possible that certain components of the document—on the requirement to “deter” multiple adversaries simultaneously and on integration of nonnuclear capabilities—***are intended to advance this goal but the current text will likely do more to increase reliance on nuclear forces.***

And with the declaration in June that “we may reach a point in the coming years where an increase from current deployed numbers is required” if the trajectory of adversary arsenals doesn’t change, ***the Biden administration has essentially set the stage for the Trump administration to increase the deployed arsenal.***

If the president’s intention was to reduce reliance on nuclear forces and reduce upward pressure for new nuclear forces, senior administrations should clarify the language before leaving office.

*--Adam Mount, Ph.D. is a Senior Fellow and Director of the Defense Posture Project at the Federation of American Scientists, where his work covers U.S. nuclear strategy and force structure, conventional deterrence, and progressive foreign policy.*

***The Strange Strategic Development of The Week***

… A Chinese illegal immigrant was [arrested](https://e.boomtrain.washingtontimesnews.com/click?EcGh1ZXNzeUB0aGlua2RldGVycmVuY2UuY29t/CeyJtaWQiOiIxNzMzMzMxMzQ2MDQ4NzRlNWQ3M2I0MzM2IiwiY3QiOiJ3YXNoaW5ndG9uLXRpbWVzLWM2NzA0NzBiY2I4ZWYwOTYwNjA1Y2YzY2I0MWI2ZDBmLTEiLCJyZCI6InRoaW5rZGV0ZXJyZW5jZS5jb20ifQ/VaHR0cHM6Ly93d3cud2FzaGluZ3RvbnRpbWVzLmNvbS9uZXdzLzIwMjQvZGVjLzMvY2hpbmVzZS1uYXRpb25hbC1zaGVnaHVhLXdlbi1hcnJlc3RlZC1jYWxpZm9ybmlhLWEv/SWkhfd2FzaG5ld3NfRE1CQU0xMjA0MjAyNGMxNDg5MTQxYjE/Ld3Qx/qP3V0bV9zb3VyY2U9Qm9vbXRyYWluJnV0bV9tZWRpdW09c3Vic2NyaWJlciZ1dG1fY2FtcGFpZ249dGhyZWF0X3N0YXR1cyZ1dG1fdGVybT10aHJlYXRfc3RhdHVzJnV0bV9jb250ZW50PXRocmVhdF9zdGF0dXMmYnRfZWU9VXdySkMzdHhkaGNZNUFSakc3bzRpa3MlMkYyNGlNNkpVcVpqaVlSWnBXeHdmN3JUU2FYZnY2bW9iRVhIdXFJRkUyJmJ0X3RzPTE3MzMzMzEzNzk0NDA/gZ1CJyA/s8ma45e6c9a) in California on suspicion of sending weapons to North Korea in shipping containers.

Vladimir Putin's Nuclear Bluff

Wall Street Journal, Dec. 6, Pg. A17 | Amy Knight

When Vladimir Putin announced in a Nov. 21 video address that Russia had launched a new high-speed ballistic missile with nuclear capacity against Ukraine, he didn't move his hands or fingers for nearly eight minutes. Observers concluded that the video had been doctored to hide the fact that Mr. Putin suffers from hand tremors. Before the announcement, he had been absent from public view for 13 days. According to reliable Kremlin watchers, Mr. Putin's appearances as shown on his website during that period were "canned goods," or prerecorded.

***Special Reports***

**Could Russia Ever Be Driven Out of Crimea & Donbass?**

***by*** ***Dr. Stephen Blank, Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy Research Institute and Peter Huessy, Senior Fellow, The National Institute for Deterrence Studies***

During his first administration,  President Trump demanded to know what plan the United States military had for defeating ISIS. There was at the time no plan beyond muddling through. The President said that was unacceptable. He gave notice that the military had one year to destroy and thus defeat ISIS. The United Sates military developed a plan, carried it out and at the end of a year ISIS was destroyed. No more endless war.

The new administration under President Trump faces a similar dilemma in Ukraine. There is no apparent plan for victory and defeating Russia—armed as it is with 5000 nuclear weapons of varying ranges and yields—is a horse of a different color.

However, is the objective of restoring Ukraine’s sovereignty and with it the complete withdrawal of Russian forces from the Donbass and Crimea possible? And could such an objective be achieved relatively quickly, such as within a year and actually be caried out through the adoption of multiple lines of attack against Moscow, many of which would involve the adoption of policies on which President Trump campaigned?

The Russian economy is suffering huge losses. 750,000 young men have been killed or injured.  Inflation is reaching the point of being galloping, commodities like butter are disappearing, the ruble’s value is plunging and, despite a state policy of militarizing the economy, there are numerous signs that in many areas the defense sector cannot meet state requirements.  Hence the large-scale aid from North Korea, Yemen, and China without which continuation of the war would be doubtful. Meanwhile the new state budget calls for a 25% hike in an already militarized economy and represents the most closed budget in Russian Federation history.

Russia recently suffered 2000 casualties in one day in late November, and since Putin refuses to call a general mobilization, he has mobilized criminals, and sought soldiers abroad from such places as Yemen, Nepal, and North Korea. Finally, any observer of Russian television and newspapers can quickly find multiple signs of despair, apprehension, and even foreboding about this war and its likely consequences.

The Russian government depends more on energy sales for its revenue than ever before but Russian oil and gas markets in Europe, the main source of energy revenue, have largely dried up.  In turn this trend has forced Moscow to devise means of skirting sanctions by selling crude oil and natural gas to China and India, using many so called “ghost ships” or “shadow” tankers carrying oil and gas abroad but selling at steep discount. Russia is also losing oil and gas revenue as it is exchanging oil and gas to North Korea in return for soldiers, a barter exchange that only a few governments are willing to carry out, but which loses Russian important oil and gas revenue.

Russia annual budget is officially pegged at $340 billion a year of which an estimated 40% is for defense and security. Despite official claims to the contrary, the annual national deficit is estimated at $28 billion or 9% of the budget. Over twenty percent of the Russian people or nearly 30 million people live in poverty and that number is increasing as the aforementioned pressure upon living standards grows.

These signs of Russian weakness along with the slow and not particularly competent Russian method of attritional fighting present the incoming administration with many opportunities to gain leverage on Moscow.  President Trump wants to produce 3 million more barrels of oil per day to reach 16+ million barrels, an objective that, when achieved, could reduce the price of crude oil to $45 a barrel compared to the current world price of around $70. Russia in 2022 was earning $1.2 billion Euros per day selling crude oil but that has now dropped to $600 million Euros per day. (For our calculations we are assuming a Euro is roughly equal to $1 dollar although the current exchange rate is one Euro is worth $.95.)

Today Russia exports as much of 7 million barrels of crude a day to Asia and Europe as a number of European nations are exempt from the sanctions adopted following Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Oil revenue to the government is estimated to have grown by 41% in the first part of the year, or by $65 billion annually, with oi and gas revenue at roughly one third (even half earlier in the decade) of all national revenue. Since then, however, oil prices have slid below the sanctions cap of $60 but have now recovered to between $67-71 a barrel.

Nevertheless, of the 11 million barrels of oil produced daily in Russia, a decline of $25 for example  in the price of a barrel of oil could deprive Moscow of some $275 billion  sales income annually of which 50% goes to the government in the form of a tax on mineral production. The loss of export income could be $170 billion with a significant hit to government revenue and funds available to fight the war against Ukraine. The Russian government could lose upwards of a third of its budget revenue and an equal percent of its annual defense budget. Through simply having  the US increase oil production by 3 million barrels a day and selling it abroad, although what OPEC does at the same time  has to be taken into account.

On top of lowering the price of oil through expanding U.S. production, the new Energy Secretary nominee Mr. Chris Wright (currently CEO of Liberty Energy) and Interior Secretary nominee and Energy Czar Mr. Doug Burgun (currently Governor of North Dakota) have proposed in part that the US end the Biden administration policy of shutting down of further natural gas export terminals as well as the restrictions on natural gas production on Federal lands.

 In this way the administration can over time supply Europe with all the natural gas currently being imported from Russia, further depriving  Moscow of billions in government revenue, which we estimate at upwards of another 15-25% of the Russian military budget. As Warren E. Norquist  explained in his “How the United States Won the Cold War,” the US and Saudi expansion of oil production dropped oil prices from $30 to $12 a barrel. Reagan’s economic war against Moscow increased the USSR annual costs of empire that when added to lost energy and weapons sales as well put Moscow in debt by $67 billion a year, compared to earning $32 billion in foreign exchange in 1980.

Since this proposed American administration program of action fits well with the US and European  sanctions, this combination of increased American energy production and sales abroad, coupled with still more extensive sanctions on Russia’s energy customers in Asia and Europe, could  inflict great harm upon the already reeling Russian economy, and be the diplomatic and political leverage the United States needs.   Deploying the energy weapon in this way along with consistent military support for Ukraine to pressure Moscow to negotiate can further Trump’s stated agenda.  But even more importantly it could help[ bring a cessation of hostilities to Ukraine, deprive Putin of a victory, constitute a warning to China, and promote Trump’s energy, defense, and foreign policy agenda.  Since the war in Ukraine now has global repercussions, Trump can utilize American power strategically to secure what all wars should lead to, namely, a better peace.

**A Last Chance to Prevent Nuclear Anarchy**

Can Trump Engage China and Russia Before It’s Too Late?

**By**[**Lewis A. Dunn**](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/last-chance-prevent-nuclear-anarchy?utm_medium=newsletters&utm_source=fatoday&utm_campaign=A%20Trumpian%20Policy%20for%20Africa&utm_content=20241204&utm_term=EDZZZ003ZX#author-info)

**December 4, 2024**

As Donald Trump prepares to begin his second term as U.S. president, he is faced with a world sliding into nuclear anarchy. Brinkmanship among major nuclear powers is rising: China is relentlessly expanding its nuclear forces but rejecting serious engagement with the United States on arms control; U.S.-Russian cooperation on nuclear matters, already in a dire state, has deteriorated further with President Vladimir Putin’s repeated nuclear threats in the course of Russia’s war in Ukraine. Recent reports based on information from senior U.S. officials indicate that the United States, too, could modify its posture and expand its arsenal to strengthen deterrence of coordinated Russian, Chinese, and North Korean nuclear adventurism. All these developments have eroded critical pillars of the nuclear order and raised the risk of nuclear warfare. The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), which was signed in 1968, is the only remaining major, legally binding mechanism to uphold that order. But the actions of nuclear weapons states that are party to the treaty, the disillusionment of many nonnuclear parties, and the consideration by other countries to build their own nuclear programs have placed the NPT’s future in doubt.

Responding to this continuing breakdown in a recent [*Foreign Affairs*](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/crumbling-nuclear-order)article, Doreen Horschig and Heather Williams called for the United States to “uphold existing nuclear norms” by establishing closer relationships with countries in the global South, fortifying partnerships with allies, and creating regional engagement between nuclear and nonnuclear countries. But such efforts are insufficient on their own. At this point, the United States must instead try again to directly engage China and Russia not only as nuclear adversaries to be deterred but also as potential collaborators in a final attempt to head off nuclear anarchy.

[Trump](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/topics/trump-administration), who prides himself on being a daring leader, should use his inaugural address to energize coordinated action by China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—the five nuclear weapons states that are party to the NPT—to prevent the collapse of the nuclear order. He should call on these countries’ leaders to join him in launching a frank and fast-paced assessment of the current dangers and to agree to a six-month “cooling off” period of nuclear restraint while the assessment is underway. Today, amid ever-greater nuclear arms racing and threat making, there is a concrete danger of these weapons being used for the first time in more than three-quarters of a century. The window for collective action is rapidly closing. The security of the United States and its allies is at stake. For Trump, the room for boldness at the start of a new presidential term and his preexisting relationships with Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping give him a distinct opportunity for global leadership.

**A CLOSING WINDOW**

Restrictions on nuclear arms buildups are falling away. Without dramatic action, it is all but certain that the New START treaty, which limits the size of Russian and U.S. strategic nuclear forces and provides predictability through its verification measures, will not be replaced when it expires in February 2026. Although both countries remain within the treaty’s numerical limits, Moscow has already stopped allowing onsite inspections and providing notifications as required by the treaty. If no replacement is created, there will be no regulation of the nuclear competition between the two most powerful nuclear weapons states for the first time since the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty was signed in 1972. An intensified nuclear arms race between the [United States](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/regions/united-states) and China also looks likely: China is projected to grow its nuclear arsenal to more than 1,000 deployed nuclear weapons by 2030, and in response, the United States has changed its nuclear doctrine and is preparing to increase both the number of deployed U.S. nuclear warheads and their readiness.

Of even greater concern is that experts and government officials in the United States and many other countries no longer assume that nuclear weapons will never be used in conflict. Officials are taking Putin’s threats seriously and paying increased attention to how to respond to nuclear use in the [war in Ukraine](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/tags/war-ukraine). Any reaction would need to balance different objectives: deterring follow-on nuclear use; restoring the so-called nuclear taboo, a norm against nuclear weapons use; and avoiding escalation to a global nuclear war. There is no clear answer for how to do so.

Partly because of these looming dangers, many countries no longer believe that the NPT is a credible means to end nuclear arms racing, reduce the risk of nuclear war, and advance disarmament. Some have already demonstrated their disillusionment with the NPT by creating, in 2017, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which bans not only the use of such weapons but also their testing, production, and possession. Any further steps backward—the collapse of bilateral nuclear arms controls or the resumption of nuclear weapons testing as part of intensified arms racing—could compel a number of nonnuclear countries to threaten to withdraw, or even formally withdraw, from the NPT.

On the other end of the spectrum, some countries are rethinking the principle of nonproliferation that the NPT protects. Iran continues advancing toward a capability to make nuclear weapons, although its leaders apparently believe that their regional ambitions are so far better served by not weaponizing the country’s nuclear latency. Heightened regional insecurities are making other countries, most prominently Japan and South Korea in Asia and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East, weigh the payoffs and risks of acquiring nuclear weapons themselves. Even among European countries, the war in Ukraine and fears of U.S. disengagement have reopened discussion of some type of bloc-wide nuclear deterrent, if not individual national programs. Here, too, the ultimate result is likely to be spiraling withdrawals from the NPT.

Together, these developments will fundamentally transform global nuclear relationships, all for the worse. They will decisively undermine the security of not only the United States but all countries, including U.S. nuclear adversaries. That prospect should be sufficient motivation for the world’s nuclear great powers to engage directly with one another in a joint assessment and cooling-off period.

**A HARD LOOK**

The joint assessment should be carried out by a small group of former cabinet-level officials or deputies, with two representatives from each of the NPT nuclear weapons states: one from foreign ministries, presidential offices, or intelligence agencies and another from the defense or military departments. The use of former officials would allow each government to incorporate into the discussion their and their allies’ concerns while officially remaining on the sidelines. Crucially, each government could agree to participate without having to step back from their positions on current political-military confrontations. The group should share its findings with the countries’ leaders within six months.

To coincide with the assessment, Washington should also call for a six-month nuclear cooling-off period, during which all five countries would exercise nuclear restraint. Although this would be defined differently by country, the point would be for each to avoid actions that its principal adversarieswould clearly regard as threatening. (Diplomatic and backchannel exchanges could help address the inevitable disagreements about which actions are or are not consistent with restraint.) For example, during the cooling-off period, the United States could go forward with previously established activities for the modernization of its nuclear forces but defer any decision to increase the number of nuclear warheads on its existing missile-delivery systems. [China](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/regions/china) could keep building additional missile silos but refrain from filling them. Russia could deploy its nuclear-powered cruise missile but avoid rhetorical saber rattling and freeze new nuclear exercises in Belarus. Of particular importance for preserving the NPT, no country would resume nuclear weapons testing—understood to mean large-scale tests generating nuclear yields.

If the assessment results in a sufficient acknowledgment of shared dangers ahead, then the cooling-off period should be extended for another six months. In parallel with this extension, two tracks of talks should get underway: one between the United States, its [NATO](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/topics/nato) allies, and Russia; another involving the United States, its allies in the Asia-Pacific, and China. In the short term, the goal of these dialogues would be to agree on coordinated but unilateral actions to reduce bilateral nuclear risks, buttress the NPT regime, and slow the slide to nuclear anarchy. Such talks should be overseen by a twice-yearly secretary-level meeting of all five countries, which could coordinate the separate tracks and identify opportunities for multilateral action. The meetings could furthermore provide the rest of the world a window into the decision-making of these nuclear powers, and thus help restore the legitimacy of the NPT and support for it among nonnuclear states.

There are many possible opportunities worth exploring. Each track of dialogues could first explore rules of the road that would help avoid an escalation to nuclear war by accident or miscalculation. Even in the absence of agreements on specific risk-avoidance actions, the very discussions would help clarify thinking among key adversaries. China, Russia, and the United States could also commit not to adopt launch-on-warning postures, in which a retaliatory nuclear strike is launched as soon as satellite warning systems detect a possible first strike from an adversary. Moscow and Washington could release a statement of intent that they will continue to abide by the numerical limits on strategic nuclear warheads and launchers in New START after the treaty’s expiration. Building on the cooling-off period, China could state that it would continue its restraint in filling new silos as long as the United States refrains from expanding its nuclear arsenal to enhance deterrence of China.

Initial agreements on more limited restraints could open the door for the five NPT nuclear weapons states to tackle even tougher issues down the road, including engaging [North Korea](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/regions/north-korea) to prevent nuclear adventurism and heading off a nuclear arms race between Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other countries in the Middle East. In the medium term, the nuclear powers’ reenergized cooperation could become a steppingstone to better managing their broader relationships with one another.

**CALCULATING RISKS**

There are some potential sticking points. As his first administration came to a close, Trump refused to agree to a simple, five-year extension of New START in favor of presenting to Moscow new conditions to continue the treaty. And some of his appointees in his second administration will prioritize taking highly visible steps to strengthen the United States’ nuclear deterrence. Trump may not want to take a chance on a major initiative that could fail to get [Putin](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/tags/vladimir-putin) and Xi on board or break down in the middle of the process. U.S. allies that rely on American nuclear protection may also be uneasy about what the two-track discussions that would occur during an extension of the cooling-off period could mean for their security interests.

Yet a dramatic initiative that would lessen existential nuclear risks to the United States would flow naturally from Trump’s repeated references to the threat of nuclear war during the 2024 campaign, as well as from his promises of bold leadership at home and abroad. And Trump could quell any concerns by launching this effort at the very start of his administration, when extending an invitation for a nuclear assessment and cooling-off period, even if it is rejected, is unlikely to be seen as a sign of weakness or timidity. Washington should also assure U.S. allies that the process is intended to reduce the nuclear risk for everyone and that those in Europe and Asia would be parties to the dialogues that affect their regions.

Securing Moscow’s and Beijing’s participation could be a challenge. But like the United States, China and [Russia](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/regions/russia) also have an existential interest in cooling proliferation, preventing a total breakdown of the NPT, and avoiding nuclear war. Japan or South Korea becoming nuclear powers, for instance, would directly threaten China. And any new national nuclear programs in Europe, or the establishment of a continental nuclear deterrence arrangement, would bring new dangers for Moscow.Even without these developments, both Putin and Xi seem to recognize the uncertainties and risks inherent in any use of nuclear weapons: Xi has urged Putin not to escalate the war in Ukraine to a nuclear level, and Putin has refrained from doing so, despite his repeated threats.

**As more and more pillars of nuclear order crack or crumble, time is of the essence.**

Both leaders also know that a refusal to engage on nuclear issueswould result in the United States intensifying its own nuclear deterrence posture in ways that could increase the dangers and uncertainties for their countries. Conservative members of the U.S. defense community have long advocated such moves, and many of them are likely to return to positions of influence in the new Trump administration. For Putin and Xi, agreeing to join the joint assessment and cooling-off period would be a way to start their renewed relationships with Trump off on the right foot. The president, after all, will be the person most able to counter their ambitions or offer compromises that balance Chinese, Russian, and U.S. interests.

Ukraine and Taiwan are wildcards. Because the United States has been providing military support to Ukraine, Russia has repeatedly refusedto engage with the United States on nuclear arms control. But Trump, during his campaign, vowed to end the war swiftly; were he to change U.S. policy on Ukraine and launch efforts for a diplomatic settlement, it would make it considerably easier for Putin to respond positively to a presidential proposal calling for nuclear cooperation. The United States and its allies’ support of Taiwan could similarly inhibit China’s willingness to engage. Xi might condition Beijing’s participation in a joint assessment on the cessation of such support, which could kill the process before it even begins. But making the proposal is the only way to find out if Xi is prepared to take the long view and separate the nuclear discussion from the confrontation over Taiwan.

If Trump were to pursue cooperative engagement and find no takers, he would likely have greater support at home and abroad to take more confrontational unilateral and multilateral actions, because he could point to Chinese and Russian rejections as indication that raising the temperature might be the only way to protect U.S. security and manage nuclear risks. These measures might include efforts that Horschig and Williams proposed, such as building coalitions to defend beleaguered norms by reaching out to the global South to muster calls for nuclear restraint. But Trump’s actions should also include even greater efforts to sustain, strengthen, and adapt the U.S. and allied capabilities that have been essential over the past several decades to reducing nuclear risk and preventing proliferation. Washington should make it known to both Beijing and Moscow that it is ready to compete in a nuclear race if its adversaries give it no alternative—that a deferral of new U.S. nuclear initiatives is tied to their restraint, as well.

The choice for Trump in his second term is clear: either try to avoid nuclear anarchy by helping to bring about needed cooperation among the five nuclear weapons states of the NPT or preside over the nuclear order’s continued unraveling and rely on expensive, politically controversial, and uncertain deterrence measures to defend the United States, its allies, and the rest of the world against the threat of nuclear conflagration. As more and more pillars of nuclear order crack or crumble, time is of the essence. The start of Trump’s presidency presents a fleeting opportunity to follow through on his campaign promise to take bold action and propose a new way forward. He should take it

Is World War III Already Here?

*The ‘Axis of Upheaval’ is on the march—and the U.S. must figure out how to respond.*

By [Jay Solomon](https://www.thefp.com/t/jay-solomon)

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If it feels like the world is on fire right now, that’s because it is. From Ukraine to Syria to the Korean Peninsula, a widening array of conflicts is raising questions among defense experts: Is it 1914 again? 1939? Has World War III already started and we’re just now figuring it out?

For retired Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster, who served as Donald Trump’s second national security adviser from 2017–2018, the answer is clear.

“I think we’re on the cusp of a world war,” McMaster told *The Free Press*. “There’s an economic war going on. There are real wars going on in Europe and across the Middle East, and there’s a looming war in the Pacific. And I think the only way to prevent these wars from cascading further is to convince these adversaries they can’t accomplish their objectives through the use of force.”

That won’t be easy. Consider the facts:

* In Ukraine, [thousands of North Korean soldiers](https://www.reuters.com/world/north-korea-troops-participated-some-ukraine-war-battles-part-russian-units-2024-11-20/) have recently joined Russian ground troops to bolster President Vladimir Putin’s invasion of the country. Meanwhile, Russia has opened up a new front in the war by entering the [northeast Kharkiv region](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68813529), as it continues to assault Ukraine’s cities and block its ports.
* A U.S.-brokered ceasefire in Lebanon that forced terror group Hezbollah to retreat from Israel’s northern border is [showing signs of unraveling](https://www.cnn.com/2024/12/03/middleeast/israel-threatens-hezbollah-lebanon-ceasefire-intl/index.html). Meanwhile, the Jewish state is still fighting a war in the Gaza Strip, where around [60 Israeli and U.S. hostages](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/hamas-hostages-israel-war-gaza/) remain. And last month, Israel’s air force destroyed much of Iran’s air defense systems, leaving Tehran’s [nuclear facilities exposed](https://www.thefp.com/p/israel-iran-trump-rubio-waltz-hegseth) to future attacks.
* Rebels in Syria have recently [seized key areas of the country](https://www.newsweek.com/syrian-troops-push-back-rebels-near-strategic-hama-city-1995341) that had been controlled for years by dictator Bashar al-Assad and his Russian and Iranian backers. Now that these insurgents [have taken Aleppo](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/30/world/middleeast/syria-aleppo-rebels-control.html), they are vowing to march on Damascus.
* In the Baltic Sea, investigators suspect a Chinese ship of [sabotaging critical underwater data cables](https://www.newsweek.com/chinese-vessel-allegedly-drags-anchor-severs-undersea-cable-links-1992580) that linked NATO states. Concerns about CCP aggression are mounting amid an emerging consensus in Washington that China would defeat the U.S. in a Pacific war, largely due to [Beijing’s naval superiority](https://features.csis.org/preparing-the-US-industrial-base-to-deter-conflict-with-China/).
* And on Tuesday, South Korea’s president [briefly declared martial law](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/12/03/what-is-martial-law-south-korea/), alleging he needed to fend off a North Korean–backed coup led by the opposition party. Massive protests caused him to back down, and he is now facing impeachment proceedings.

These wars, rebellions, and spy tales may appear disconnected. But in reality, they all point to a widening global conflict that is pitting the U.S. and its allies against China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea—nations all fixated on toppling the West. Strategists have even come up with catchy nicknames for this anti-American coalition, dubbing the bloc the “Axis of Aggressors” or the “Axis of Upheaval.”

Philip Zelikow, who served as [executive director](https://www.9-11commission.gov/about/bio_zelikow.htm) of the 9/11 Commission and [counselor](https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/42745.htm) to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice from 2005 to 2007, is among those who think these conflicts are related. “I think there is a serious possibility of what I call worldwide warfare”—meaning a world war that is not as coordinated as past global conflagrations. “It’s not hard to see one of these conflicts crossing over into another.”

As Trump prepares to enter office next month, his primary foreign policy task should be to prevent an actual full-blown World War III, sources told *The Free Press*—or to stop it from metastasizing if it’s already here.

To do this, the president-elect will have to fortify alliances with NATO, South Korea, and Japan—partnerships Trump has already shown he’s skeptical of. And he will need to stare down a number of American adversaries, including Putin, Chinese president Xi Jinping, and North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un—a despot for whom Trump has expressed both [scorn](https://www.cnn.com/2017/09/18/politics/donald-trump-un-speech-iran-north-korea/index.html) and [admiration](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/wide-grins-and-historic-handshake-for-trump-kim-at-dmz).

At the same time, Trump benefits from his willingness to break from past U.S. policies and institutions that have helped foment these current conflicts. This includes [a defense industry](https://www.thefp.com/p/usa-germany-world-war-three-weapons) that doesn’t produce the right weapons to compete with China or enough munitions to arm Ukraine. Defense strategists in previous U.S. administrations have been blind to the Axis of Aggressors’ moves to expand their global power, sources told me—placing too much faith in global institutions, such as the United Nations, that were incapable of checking them.

Trump, with his nontraditional advisers such as Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy, could potentially revolutionize the way the U.S. builds and projects power, sources told me. SpaceX CEO Musk, in particular, could marry America’s military establishment with Silicon Valley’s start-up culture to produce, at scale, the types of smart airplanes, drones, and submarines needed to deter Washington’s enemies, they said.

But Trump’s desire to shake up Washington and dismantle many of its national security institutions comes with enormous risk. The disruption of the Pentagon, State Department, and FBI could make the U.S. and its allies more vulnerable if these institutions become inoperable or less efficient, current and former officials told *The Free Press*.

“What he’s gonna need is some agenda to bring the world back together after he pulls things apart,” said [David Asher](https://www.hudson.org/experts/1299-david-asher), senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, who oversaw U.S. government operations against Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran in the George W. Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations.

The threat of a widening global conflict is being driven by factors reminiscent of events before the start of World War I, sources told me. This includes the breakdown in alliances and trading systems and the arrival of disruptive technologies like airplanes, telephones, and mechanized weapons. Today, there is no longer a consensus that free trade will bring countries closer together and forestall future wars. And the Covid-19 pandemic revealed the dangers of reliance on China for medical supplies. Trump’s threats to slap high tariffs on China and other countries also raise the specter of greater conflict.

“What you learn when you study economic history is that long cycles do end and when they do, they end with war,” said Asher, who’s worked on Wall Street and said he has recently briefed financial institutions on the threat of a global conflict.

A rocket launcher fires against Syrian regime forces in Hama, Syria, on December 4, 2024. (Bakr Al Kassem via Getty Images)

Both McMaster and Zelikow said that the Syrian civil war that started nearly 15 years ago should have been a major wake-up call to the U.S., Europe, and NATO. The Obama administration tried to oust al-Assad through diplomacy and talks that included Russia and Iran, the strongman’s primary patrons. But then the U.S. and Europe [were blindsided](https://www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-russian-and-iranian-cooperation-syria) in 2015 when Moscow and Tehran propped up al-Assad with both air and ground troops.

“We started talking about great power rivalry and all of that, but we didn’t really do anything to arrest these trends,” said Zelikow, who’s now a [senior fellow](https://www.hoover.org/profiles/philip-zelikow) at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution.

This Syrian playbook can now be seen in Ukraine. Iran, North Korea, and China have all been supplying weaponry or technologies to Russia, while Iranian-backed Houthi fighters [are now reported](https://www.ft.com/content/da966006-88e5-4c25-9075-7c07c4702e06) to be on the Ukrainian battlefield alongside North Korean troops.

The war in the Middle East, sparked by Hamas’s invasion of Israel on October 7, 2023, has also attracted this broader axis. The Houthis, in support of Hamas, [have been attacking](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/houthis-warn-shipowners-new-phase-red-sea-campaign-prepare-be-attacked-2024-10-03/) international ships in a [critical transit strait](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bab-El-Mandeb-Strait) of the Red Sea. And they’ve been getting guidance from both Tehran and Moscow, according to current and former U.S. officials.

On the north side of the strait, an Iranian general is “directing the Houthis using Russian intelligence,” McMaster told *The Free Press*. On the south side, “you have an Iranian surveillance ship. And you have a Chinese [naval] port, you know? I mean, that’s not by mistake.”

How will the Trump administration confront this emboldened axis? A significant divide among foreign policy strategists may prove difficult to bridge. In one corner are hawks and traditional Republican conservatives—such as incoming National Security Adviser Mike Waltz, Secretary of State nominee Marco Rubio, and UN Ambassador designee Elise Stefanik—who have called for a muscular defense of [Pax Americana](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pax_Americana). They’re expected to press Trump to continue arming Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan, and even amp up our military support to preserve the Western order.

A Ukrainian soldier fires a machine gun at Russian drones on November 29, 2024, in Chernihiv Oblast, Ukraine. (Maksym Kishka via Getty Images)

On the opposing side is an isolationist wing reflected in the public musings of Trump’s eldest son, Don Jr., who [tweeted on November 17](https://x.com/DonaldJTrumpJr/status/1858242971373637784) about the Biden administration’s decision to provide long-range missiles to Ukraine:

*The Military Industrial Complex seems to want to make sure they get World War 3 going before my father has a chance to create peace and save lives. Gotta lock in those $Trillions. Life be damned!!! Imbeciles!*

Trump’s vice president J.D. Vance, and his advisers, including Tucker Carlson to [Tulsi Gabbard](https://www.thefp.com/p/tulsi-gabbard-smears-russia-syria-putin-assad), also believe U.S. military overreach led to catastrophic U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and needless Western provocations of Putin that sparked his invasion of Ukraine. They argue that stepping back, rather than expanding, is the key to global peace.

Some Trump confidantes told *The Free Press* they’ve been studying U.S. policies that led up to the past two world worlds as guidance for today. They have concluded that Washington was too lenient on Hitler’s Germany leading into World War II, but too committed to European allies in the early 1900s ahead of World War I. And they believe Trump will need to strike a balance between these two postures.

“I think you have to learn the lessons of both wars,” Peter Thiel, the tech investor and close Trump ally, [told *The Free Press*](https://www.thefp.com/p/peter-thiel-honestly-trump-jd-vance) last month. “You can’t have excessive appeasement, and you also can’t go sleepwalking into Armageddon. In a way, they’re opposite lessons.”

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***Nuclear Modernization, Global Disarmament and America’s Security***

***By Peter Huessy***

***A History Introduction: Arms Control & Disarmament***

A push in 2007 from the “Four Horsemen”--former Senator Sam Nunn, former Secretaries of State George Schultz and Henry Kissinger, and former Secretary of Defense William Perry--- to set a goal of zero nuclear weapons galvanized the disarmament community to seek the abolition of nuclear forces. Although as Dr. Mark Schneider noted, by their own admission they had no idea how disarmament could be accomplished.

At the time American strategic nuclear forces under START I (1991) and the Moscow treaty (2002) had been reduced by nearly ninety percent. On the other hand, while Russia agreed to both treaties, its strategic nuclear forces probably while significantly reduced remained somewhere around 2500-3000, with the ability to grow significantly.

Disarmament advocates assumed US and Russian nuclear forces would continue to reduce. Once New START was ratified in 2010, US strategic nuclear forces would continue their descent to an official 1550 warheads. In the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) of the time, it was widely predicted that further START type arms agreements would be on the horizon, lowering US nuclear forces toward worldwide nuclear disarmament, joined by a reformed or reset Russia, and move all in due course to what has become known as “Global Zero.”

Progress in reducing nuclear warheads was impressive. Since the height of the Cold War, for example, there has been roughly a 90% reduction in the deployed US strategic nuclear forces, with the reductions occurring primarily from 1986-2024. And in 1991, under what was known as the PNI or Presidential nuclear initiative the President unilaterally eliminated most of the US force of theater or regional nuclear weapons, leaving a few hundred gravity bombs in Europe as a backup to NATO’s deterrent capability. Unfortunately, Russia didn’t follow suit and now has at least 1900 such weapons and probably at least 4000 under realistic assumptions.

But what is little understood is that the reductions were not easily accomplished. The Soviets had repeatedly rejected American proposals to reduce nuclear weapons.

However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and its massive distress brought about by America’s economic war against Moscow, the Russians could no longer afford to deploy the ten thousand or more strategic nuclear weapons allowed under the original SALT agreements. START’s time had come.

Ironically, the US based disarmament community enthusiastically embraced the SALT process that actually saw a five-fold increase in Soviet strategic nuclear power. And were angered and critical when the Reagan administration published Soviet Military Power in 1986 detailing the very high allowed SALT II nuclear force levels.

The disarmament folks did support the 1972 SALT I and 1979 SALT II treaties, which as noted together allowed a huge Soviet buildup. But in 1979-80, when SALT II was rejected by the US Senate and then subsequently withdrawn from consideration by the Carter administration, the disarmament community pivoted to the Soviet supported nuclear freeze. They aggressively fought the Reagan administration’s INF and START initiatives as both unrealistic and a deceptive ruse. Decades later they even complained that the 2002 Moscow treaty that reduced strategic nuclear weapons to 1700-2100 wasn’t “real arms control.”

Reversing positions, these groups did embrace the 2010 New START treaty that brought allowable US nuclear warheads to the 1550 level from the 1700-2100 Moscow treaty (2002) warhead numbers, and considerably less than START II (3500) and START I (6000).

However, the 2010 New START agreement allowed the US to deploy 60 strategic bombers and count their gravity bombs or air launched cruise missiles as only “one” strategic nuclear delivery vehicle no matter how many weapons each strategic bomber actually carried. These gave the US considerable flexibility in deploying our nuclear and conventional strategic bombers, a key advantage in that the US is the only country in the free world with such weapons.

The New START allowed force was thus closer to 2000 than 1550 and was a rough continuation of the Moscow Treaty numbers. And did not necessarily significantly restrain the then existing Russian strategic nuclear modernization plans. Plans which Moscow says have now been 92% implemented. Which clearly indicate Russia is no fan of going to zero nuclear weapons, let alone arms control deals such as START I. On top of which for years now Moscow has suspended Treaty required reporting and inspections.

***Unilateral Cuts in US Forces?***

Now, having failed to secure disarmament or continue down a path of serial reductions, and with Russia and China markedly increasing their nuclear forces, disarmament enthusiasts in the absence of “arms control” and progress toward disarmament have long sought to have the United States unilaterally kill its own deterrent. And for years, ICBMs have been at the top of the list. With the unilateral elimination of the Sentinel ICBM program, the US would kill sixty percent of the strategic nuclear forces or SNDVs (strategic nuclear delivery vehicles) allowed under the 2010 New START agreement.

This history needs to be understood to be able to appreciate the current disarmament campaign to kill the ICBM leg of the nuclear TRIAD, or the Sentinel system of land based missiles of which 400 are to be deployed in five Midwestern and Western states—Colorado, Nebraska, North Dakota, Wyoming and Montana.

And how such efforts would seriously undermine US deterrent capability just when Russia and China are both poised to markedly increase their deployed strategic nuclear forces which Dr. Chris Yeaw of the University of Nebraska and a top nuclear expert believes will reach within the next decade a combined 8000-10,000 warhead level, hardly only a few steps away from the goal of abolition.

In fact, America’s enemies are moving exactly in the opposite direction of the seeming disarmament path urged on the United States by the “four horsemen.” And gone is the cooperative spirit envisioned by the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review. Arms control is decidedly not on the table and new options have been continually rejected by Russia and China.

In the face of such threats, it would make sense for the United States to continue its nuclear modernization effort to replace its legacy forces with advanced nuclear capabilities rather than risk going out of the nuclear business or as one expert commented “rusting to obsolescence.” As the former Commander of US Strategic Command Admiral Charles Richard warned us, we have only two choices: modernize and stay in the nuclear deterrent business or disarm.

Certainly, at this time, the disarmament community has no hope for further joint nuclear reductions by the United States and Russia or China. So, the disarmament community has chosen instead to campaign for unilateral US nuclear reductions, primarily through the deployment delay or even elimination of the entire US Sentinel ICBM force.

***Why ICBMs?***

So naturally the question arises, why should the United States keep and fully modernize our ICBM force?\*

The ICBMs are ready to deter. As USAF Maj Gen Stacy Jo Huser, the Commander of all our ICBM bases, explained at a forum earlier this year, some 398 of these 400 missiles are on alert at any one time, making the force a formidable deterrent that is fully available for the United States President to deter our enemies and assure our friends.

The disarmament groups have called for nuclear reductions but by primarily calling for the US to stop nuclear modernization much as they tried to do with the proposed 1980 nuclear freeze. They simply want to eliminate the platforms which carry warheads. That for these groups is the real goal. Kill something. And ICBMs have been one of their favorite targets.

Now the disarmers make three points about ICBMs. They complain that first, the ICBM force has grown sharply in costs, now estimated to cost $141 billion to be spent over 30 years. Too costly they say. Second, the US nuclear modernization of its ICBM force will trigger an “arms race,” a point I will deal with later. And third, they complain that being in fixed silos the missiles are on a “hair trigger” and could accidentally lead to a nuclear war.

Let us address these points, starting with the question of strategic stability.

***The Window of Vulnerability and Strategic Stability***

In theory the missiles are vulnerable to a Russian first strike should Moscow decide to take the missiles out before they can be launched. This supposed strategic instability forms the basis for Annie Jacobson’s new book. Her thesis is that any US retaliatory strike using nuclear weapons would automatically result in all out nuclear war and nuclear winter, with the resultant death of billions of people world-wide. Thus, her dismissal of nuclear deterrence strategy as “mad.”

And because ICBMs are vulnerable to attack, it is assumed an American President might be pressured to “Use ‘em or lose ‘em” and thus even by mistake initiate a nuclear war, if for example responding to what turns out to be a false warning of attack.

And thus, it is American ICBMs—not Chinese or Russian such missiles---that are the target of opponents of nuclear weapons and those seeking global zero.

The advocacy to get rid of ICBMs is not new. The global zero folks never liked US land based ICBMs. During the Clinton administration during the nuclear posture review a proposal was put forward to kill all ICBMs, an effort that was stymied by the Senate Armed Services Committee. Later that decade, a global zero founder declared a USAF launch officer could on his own initiate the launch of ICBMs. Missiles that were obvious very dangerous, and on a hair trigger, and thus had to be eliminated. .

In reality, the ICBM missiles during the 1970’s were fitted with technology that enables them to be fired only by Presidential authority and also required at least two launch officers working together in at least two launch control centers to carry out such an order. Despite the hysteria about American ICBMs being just moments away from being launched, in the 38 million minutes since October 1962 during which US ICBMs have been on alert, no Presidential order to “launch” has ever been given. Some hair trigger!

During the Reagan era when the ICBM known as Peacekeeper was deployed, there were dozens of floor votes in the House of Representatives seeking to terminate all ICBM missile deployment. One was partially successful--in December 1982, the House cut funding for the basing mode but not the missile That was reversed in early March 1983 when the new defense budget was approved after receiving a unanimous report from the Scowcroft Commission supporting the Reagan nuclear modernization plan.

As for Soviet land based ICBMs, the same disarmers have long dismissed the idea that Moscow’s most powerful ICBMs were especially dangerous. In fact, the disarmers dismissed Ronald Reagan’s concern that the 300+ SS-18 Soviet missiles, a behemoth with ten, 500 kiloton warheads on each missile or more than 3000 very large and accurate warheads, did in fact threaten the US nuclear deterrent. And was not a defensive weapon but a weapon to be used to fight and win a nuclear conflict.

The original SALT I and SALT II agreements actually allowed the Soviet Union to grow its strategic long range nuclear arsenal from 2100 to over 13,000 of which Mark Schneider thinks Moscow probably deployed after its buildup roughly 10,000 warheads. Including the 300 SS-18 missiles.

At the height of the Cold War the USSR according to the Russian Atomic Energy Minister, may have deployed upwards of 45,000 nuclear weapons, the predominant number being theater or regional and shorter range, but vastly exceeding the US stockpile.

The SALT process was actually an agreement to build-up, thus Reagan’s strong opposition to the Nixon-Ford-Carter administration’s pursuit of such a fake arms “control” deal, especially when coupled with an equally unserious and dangerous policy of détente and peaceful coexistence.

As early as 1976 according to one of the creators of the 1976 Committee on the Present Danger, then candidate Reagan called for major reductions in nuclear weapons. The concern was that the USSR could hit our 1054 Minuteman and Titan ICBM missiles (with the highest accuracy in the US arsenal at the time) with an estimated 2000 of their SS-18 warheads. This would leave the Soviets with a remaining reserve of 8000 other strategic nuclear warheads with which to blackmail or coerce the US into standing down in a crisis or even during a conventional conflict in central Europe.

The issue was that our submarine leg of the TRIAD did not have the necessary accuracy (which Peacekeeper would provide) to hold at risk key hardened Soviet leadership and military targets, without with such a capability US deterrent strength would be weakened.

Thus, Reagan campaigned on closing what he termed the “window of vulnerability.” Reagan proposed to both modernize America’s nuclear forces while also cutting US and Soviet strategic nuclear forces by roughly fifty percent (START I) and then again by another forty percent (START II), coupled with a ban on multiple warhead land based missiles (START II). Reagan also proposed a zero-zero INF option for both US and Soviet medium range, nuclear warhead armed missiles deployed in Europe. At the time the Soviets were deploying one SS-20 missile each week in Europe.

Though previous administration’s had proposed a counter deployment of our own such missiles in Europe, both ground launched cruise missiles and the fast flying Pershing’s, none had actually put any funding in their proposed military budgets until President Reagan did so in early 1981.

But when the President officially proposed such a zero-zero INF missile deal in November 1981, the disarmament community went apoplectic. It was a trick they declared as the United States knew the Soviets would reject any such deal and then the United States would be free to pursue an arms race and deploy its medium range missiles in Europe. The critics had little to say about the thousand or more SS-20 warheads already deployed by Moscow.

The administration overcame the nuclear freeze and widespread opposition to the deployment of the two US medium range missiles in Europe. Reagan forced the Soviets to agree to what became known as the INF or Intermediate Forces Treaty of 1986 which got rid of all such missiles, including the Soviet SS-20s. Gorbachev’s attempt to split NATO and coerce Europe into concessions spectacularly failed, and an entire category of nuclear capable missiles was banned.

Now if the United States had adopted the nuclear freeze when proposed by Moscow in the 1979-81period and then embraced by such groups as SaneFreeze, the Soviets would have had 441 SS-20s deployed with over 1300 warheads to the US zero GLCMs and Pershing’s.

And also, a Soviet strategic nuclear arsenal largely modernized, while the US had not yet built or deployed the Ohio class submarine and D-5 missiles, the B-1 and B2 strategic bombers or the Peacekeeper ICBM.

The nuclear freeze would have eliminated the backbone of a US modernized nuclear deterrent which was thankfully deployed under Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush. And on which we still rely, even today, along with the other legacy MMIII and B52s that have been given serial life extensions.

The disarmament community not only embraced the nuclear freeze but rejected any idea that the heavy, large, multiwarhead Soviet SS-18 land based missiles were really any threat to the United States. While today a US ICBM force with only one warhead each is somehow such a strategic threat to Russia that during a crisis Moscow would risk nuclear Armageddon and pre-emptively strike the US Minuteman missiles.

The Reagan administration, like its predecessors, did try and make the new ICBMs mobile and thus more survivable. However, even so, the disarmament community continued its opposition. (The US could add missile defenses and enhance US missile survivability, as part of a nation-wide defense against nuclear blackmail and coercion.)

But with the signing of START II in January 1993 by Presidents Bush and Yeltsin, the treaties ban on multiple warhead land based missiles obviated the need for the new Peacekeeper and thus the deployment was stopped. At half its original plan.

However, the Russian Duma at the end of the decade failed to agree to START II as they insisted the United States would have to also jettison all missile defense work except for what could be done in the laboratory, a replay of what General Secretary Gorbachev sought at various summits with President Reagan.

But as Gorbachev wrote in the New York Times in 1996, the action of the Russian Duma to reject START II was not due to missile defense. The ban on multiple warhead land-based ICBMs would rip the core out of the Russian coercive nuclear strategy, with the result that Moscow would have to have only single warhead land based missiles. Given the cost of putting the bulk of their forces on land based missiles with only one warhead, the Soviets would be forced to sea, where alert rates were usually lower and such weapons were not usually thought of as first strike systems. Adopting START II while the Soviet empire also collapsed would have slammed shut the window of vulnerability. Russian opposition implicitly proved President Reagan’s right.

The US however did stop deployment of its new land based missile, the Peacekeeper, under the assumption START II would be adopted, as it was by the US Senate. But given the Russian later rejection of START II the US opted for its only available option, to keep our 400 Minuteman III missiles with their one warhead each, numbers that would fit within the restrictions of the Moscow and New START agreements.

Now to keep the Minuteman missiles viable, having first been deployed in 1970, the United States successfully gave two life extensions for the guidance and propulsion for the Minuteman III force with the initial phase costing some $8 billion from 1997-2007.

But without the ability to extend the life of the MMIII once again, a new missile was needed. The new Sentinel (originally the ground based strategic deterrent or GBSD), was approved by each of the past four administration’s and will continue under President-Trump.

There has been considerable cost growth in the program since its first cost estimates. But it is not the missile that has seen cost growth. It is the silos in which the missile rests. They cover thousands of acres and varying terrain. And the silos are also in need of repair and even replacement, and early assessments of the status of the silos proved to be considerably optimistic, especially the status of the silos at Malmstrom, USAF and Minot, USAF in Montana and North Dakota, respectively.

The disarmament community has repeatedly called for killing all ICBMs. Stopping the Sentinel program would leave a US nuclear deterrent of only a dozen or fewer targets that if destroyed would put the United States out of the nuclear business. As opposed to the 500+ targets in the current US nuclear arsenal of submarines, bombers and ICBMs.

Without 400-450 ICBM silos, and 50 additional launch control centers, the United Stats at least through 2042 would only have 12 submarines and 60 bombers based at two submarine bases at Kings Bay, Georgia and Kitsap or Bangor in Washington and three USAF bomber bases at Minot, Barksdale and Whiteman.

The submarines are highly survivable and carrying two-thirds of the US nuclear warheads, they are a formidable deterrent. But they need a complimentary ICBM insurance leg of the Triad to sustain deterrence, especially to avoid being caught by a technical surprise breakthrough in anti-submarine warfare.

Bombers are also a formidable deterrent but the US does not now deploy them on alert and thus the bomber bases are currently vulnerable to a pre-emptive strike. However, although lacking the prompt capability of ICBMs, they can during a crisis be placed on alert .This allows the bomber component of the Triad to take part in a retaliatory strike with multiple hundreds of gravity bombers or air-launched cruise missiles. Such flexibility gives the bombers their unique capability as a diplomatic and military tool to signal resolve.

But a force of submarines and bombers only is a force that markedly simplifies any targeting strategy by our enemies. Combined the number of US nuclear targets would be as low as twelve---the five bases on the CONUS and an estimated 6-8 submarines at sea.

And here the ironies mount. At the center of the disarmament communities opposition to Sentinel is that they believe that in a crisis, Moscow will suddenly attack all 400-450 US missile silos.

But for some reason not attack our five highly vulnerable submarine (2) and bomber bases (3) where some roughly 1200 warheads are deployed, which could be destroyed using only a handful of either conventional or nuclear weapons. And which contain three-fold the warheads in our entire ICBM force.

As a retired USAF General officer told me when the 2010 nuclear posture review was reported discussing whether to kill the US land based ICBMS or not, “What is the point of making it easy for our enemies to disarm us?”

What ICBM opponents are claiming is that the Russians would actually choose the most reckless of possible options. And attack only our ICBMs. But to do so would require the Russians to use two warheads for each US ICBM silos, and thus launch upwards of 900-1000 highly accurate warheads, primarily using their land based missile warheads of which the official START reported number is 1,032.

The Russians would obviously be inviting a massive retaliatory attack where the US could respond with some multiple hundreds of seas based warheads. Plus, hundreds of additional bomber weapons to the extent in a crisis or conventional conflict the United States would have put its bombers on alert. And whatever number of ICBM managed to survive.

Eliminating the ICBM force doesn’t change the retaliatory capability of the United States but only under some highly unrealistic assumptions. That is if you assume no ICBM warheads of any kind would be available for retaliation---you have recklessly, as argued earlier, however, made it far easier to attack the nuclear forces of the United States in a potentially disarming attack.

In addition, any attack by our adversaries other than an all-out attack against our ICBM force, world leave the ICBM force available for use. And configured with one warhead on some Sentinel missiles, such an available force gives the President an entire range of flexible options not available with a nuclear deterrent with only multiple warhead platforms such as submarines and bombers.

Given the assumption of the ICBM opponents is that under either an ICBM included force or one without such ICBMs, the Russians would still be risking a retaliatory strike made up of bombers and submarines, why then would the United States be more secure by eliminating the ICBMs? ?

Apparently, the disarmament community thinks the Russians are so reckless that even when facing a retaliatory strike of over 1000 nuclear weapons, Moscow would attack the heartland of the United States with nearly 1000 warheads of its own.

As for the fairy tale that the US ICBM force could be launched if the President mistakenly believed the US was under attack, the US system of missile launch warning is highly redundant and requires confirmation of any missile launch. Plus, contrary to popular narratives, to ensure deterrence there is no requirement for the US to launch prior to confirming an enemy nuclear warhead has detonated on US soil. A technical glitch in 1979 and 1980 did put out false warnings of a missile attack, and one was during a training exercise. According to a 1980 report of the Senate Armed Services Committee these two false alert problems were corrected, and no such glitches have occurred since.

***The Cost of Nuclear Deterrence***

Now there is the matter of cost. The current nuclear platforms----submarines, ICBMs and bombers—along with the air launched missile for the bombers and the D-5 missile for the submarines, comes to around $17 billion annually, according to Senate Defense Subcommittee and full Appropriations Committee member Senator John Hoeven (R-ND). The Senator noted the Sentinel annual cost is this year under $5 billion, and for the life of the missile through 2080 would average around $3.1 billion annually.

One way to look at the cost of the US nuclear deterrent is to estimate how much it requires to keep on alert ICBM or SLBM warhead on alert with a force of uploaded warheads given the buildup projected in China and Russia. The cost for the land based and sea-based missile systems is $4.3 and $4.4 million a year per each alert warhead over the lifetime of both systems. It is of course on-alert warheads that provides the day-to-day deterrent for the United States and its allies. Such costs are a bargain compared to any comparable costs of a nuclear conflict.

You can add $3 billion more for the warheads being refurbished by the National Nuclear Security Administration, a task that would have to continue even without ICBMs. Warheads not for the Sentinel would still need to be deployed, but on the sea-launched D-5 ballistic missiles should the United States add more SLBM warheads to at least maintain currently allowed New START warhead levels.

The wild fuzzy math cost estimates used by abolitionists for the cost of all modernization needs to be reworked. Only 20 of the 100 B-21 bombers will be nuclear capable. That reduces the nuclear bomber, ALCM and warheads costs by upwards of $100 billion over three decades. In addition, the entire strategic bomber O&M and personnel cost estimates cannot all be placed into the nuclear bucket.

Second, forty percent of the annual cost of the nuclear deterrent of $52 billon is the NNSA or the National Nuclear Security Administration. The warhead refurbishment and laboratory upgrading are required whether the United States keeps Sentinel or does not, modernizes or not.

Third, the current cost of operating the legacy nuclear deterrent is included in most estimated “modernization” costs. But these operating costs are not for the modernized force and would not be eliminated if modernization were stopped. In addition, the aging and legacy force costs are also growing. Age has its cost. The modernized forces will actually save on annua operational costs--no reactor work for the submarines and no silo door removal necessary for maintenance work on the ICBM force, for example.

Fourth, the TRIAD platform modernization costs should peak around 2031-2 under the current program of record and largely under current plans be completed by 2042. And over the next 20 years average around $22-25 billion annually.

***Arms Racing & The Hedge***

The US strategic modernization effort is entirely consistent with the New START treaty. The deterrent force was designed to reflect the terms of the treaty. And at 1550 warheads the US as some 85% lower than at the Cold War peak.

But it should be pointed out that the strategic nuclear balance is not set in stone. The 2010 New START treaty ends in February 2026. And even though the US is abiding by the terms of the agreement, Russia is not. And China was never a party to the agreement in the first place.

The real challenge the US faces is whether to add deterrent forces or not given international security conditions. By killing Sentinel, the United States would be putting all its nuclear fast flying missile eggs in one submarine technology basket. Taking 400 Minuteman/Sentinel warheads out of the deterrent business and placing such a number of warheads on the submarine launched missiles would require each of the 16 D-5 missiles on each of the 12 Columbia class submarines to all have 8 warheads. Which is the maximum they can carry.

That would total only 1535 warheads or a whopping 45 more ICBM and SLBM warheads than New START allows. This would essentially eliminate any serious hedge to build up that the United States would want to maintain. And it would significantly reduce the day to day alert warheads the US has, as the country would be trading ICBM warheads on alert 98% of the time for sea-based warheads alert roughly 50% of the time.

As for the idea that the United States modernization program is spurring an arms face, nothing is farther from the truth. The entire program of record for nuclear modernization is completely consistent with the 2010 New START arms control agreement. Our planned modernized force is limited to the 1550 strategic warheads allowed by New START, which is precisely what we are building to, (although the actual number is higher given the special bomber counting rules.) Unless the disarmament community is convinced the New START agreement actually spurred an arms race, here is no basis for describing the current US nuclear modernization program as such.

However, with New START expiring in 2026, and China according to Chris Yeaw building toward a force of 3600 strategic and theater warheads by mid-next decade, and with the US only with shipyards capable off building one additional submarine per year after 2042, there will be no hedge beyond New START warhead levels available for at least two more decades if ICBMs are eliminated. With ICBMs available, the currently available hedge reaches just short of 1000 fast flying missile delivered warheads, assuming the US keeps the current nuclear deterrent platforms.

What happens if the United States decides not to build the 800 warheads that could be made available with Sentinel, of which 98% would be on alert? If the United States built an equivalent force at sea on submarines, the United States would have to build an additional nine submarines and associated missiles, at a cost of nearly $100 billion for the submarines, missiles and warheads. And would not be achieved until 2050, hardly a timely hedge implementation. That is true even assuming the entire planned force of an initial 12 Columbia class submarines is deployed with a maximum capable force of eight warheads per each of 16 missiles.

In short, given the breathtaking buildup of Russian and Chinese nuclear forces, the United States may wish to add warheads to its current deterrent arsenal. Not going forward with the Sentinel makes that impossible for at least the next two to three decades, during which the bad guys get to vote and challenge the US militarily. (The US could temporarily deploy---if such warheads were available--840 additional warheads on the Ohio class submarines and their 20 missiles prior to the submarines going out of service [2031-42] when replaced by the Columbia class submarine fleet.)

***Now what about the cost of Sentinel?***

The current $52 billion for nuclear deterrence comes to 1.8% of the $28 trillion in United States GDP. For our nuclear platforms, the $17 billion Senator John Hoeven (R-ND) explained the US will spend this year on the nuclear platforms undergoing modernization also comes to 1.8% of the defense budget, hardly excessive.

The Sentinel cost growth has been centered on refurbishing the silos, which sit on tens of thousands of acres of widely varying terrain.

For comparison purposes the US spent 23% of the defense budget of $293 billion and 8% the US GDP of $4.399 trillion during the height of the Cold War (1985) on all nuclear deterrent requirements.

According to most estimates, $308 billion or more than half of the nuclear costs for the next decade will be for the operations and maintenance of US legacy forces, (2023-2032), not modernization.

Another $108 billion will be for maintaining the current nuclear arsenal through the work of our nuclear laboratories and NNSA assets which has to be spent even if we maintain legacy forces only.

For the next decade of nuclear modernization including the RDT&E and Procurement, the cost is projected at $250 billion for platform modernization, and NC3.

All annual nuclear spending of an estimated $52 billion in FY2025 is roughly 5.7% of the defense budget which many estimate may be around $925 billion, a defense budget that has been proposed by Senator Wicker (R-MS) the new incoming Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

***Conclusion and Summary***

In proposing that the US get out of the ICBM business, advocates are making it certain that the US would suffer the following:

1. Dramatically lessen our deterrent capability;
2. Undermine the cohesion of our alliances and allies;
3. End any full hedge option to build up the US strategic nuclear arsenal for at least another 25 years;
4. Make it easier for an adversary to disarm the United States;
5. Save ***relatively*** little funding as the loss of ICBM deterrence and rebuilding elsewhere within the Triad would cancel out at about 75% of the assumed budget savings; and
6. Lessen US diplomatic and negotiating leverage in any future crises or arms control negotiations.

The Minuteman missiles were initially deployed in Montana on the very October day in 1962 when US intelligence determined Soviet missiles were in Cuba aimed at the United States. Days later, President John Kennedy, successfully faced down the Soviets, forced Moscow to remove the missiles from Cuba and saved the world from Armageddon. He gave credit to the US nuclear deterrent explaining, “Minuteman was my ace in the hole.” \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

***Keep Minuteman III, Delay Sentinel***

***Appendix***

\*One option being proposed by the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) for example is to redo Minuteman III for the third time, but then delay Sentinel sometime into the future when the defense budget will not be so stretched. Such a proposal was previously put forward in the House of Representatives by Representative Garamendi (D-CA) and defeated 309-118 in 2022, even though the House was then under Democrat party control.

Critically important is that Minuteman III cannot be technically extended again, especially re the propulsion systems for the missile. As Senator Shaheen (D-NH) has correctly warned, continuing to maintain US legacy systems beyond their service life runs the very high risk that technical failures emerge suddenly and unexpectedly lead to the take down of key elements of the Triad.

And in proposing to keep the Minuteman III ICBM leg of the Triad, apparently all the hysteria about ICBMs being on hair trigger, being strategically dangerous, and initiating an arms race was untrue. Which goes back four decades to the nuclear freeze. And the lesson that the disarmament racket has never been about strategic stability but about lessening American power.

Given that this new clever FAS dog won’t hunt and is simply a back door means of killing the ICBM leg of the Triad, what would be the cost impact of replacing the 800 lost on-alert Sentinel warheads? The planned force of 12 Columbia submarines, each carrying 16 missiles, and each carrying 8 warheads gets you 1536 warheads or just 46 above the New START allowed level for fast flyer warheads.

If we deploy an additional nine Columbia-class submarines after 2042 when the initial 12 buy is completed, the cost is $9 billion per submarine plus 144 D-5 missiles or $86 billion, plus whatever assumed operations and maintenance costs are required. But such a hedge would not be in the nuclear force until 2050, hardly a timely addition to our deterrent which is what a hedge is designed to provide.

Since New START won’t be in force after Feb 2026, and as the Posture Commission recommended, the US should be thinking about how many additional warheads we need to deploy to deter Russia and China. Maybe the number isn’t any bigger than what we have today, but I seriously doubt that will be sufficient when China and Russia combined are approaching 8000 strategic and regional warheads. Chris Yeaw’s NIDS presentation on December 6th projected China in 2035 with 3600 strategic and theater warheads. Killing ICBMS eliminates any hedge the US might wish to implement in the face of such breathtaking enemy threats.

***Huessy/NIDS Nuclear Deterrent Seminar Schedule for 2025 for First Five events***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1/10/2025 | 10:00 | The Case for Homeland Missile Defense with Robert Soofer and Mark Massa |
| 1/31/2025 | 10:00 | Middle East Update and the Iranian Nuclear Threat with Shoshana Bryen and Ilan Berman |
| 2/14/2028 | 10:00 | Russian intentions with its Growing Nuclear Forces with Stephen Blank and Mark Schneider |
| 2/28/2025 | 10:00 | Assessment and Update of the Posture Commission with Madelyn Creedon and Frank Miller |
| 3/14/2024 | 10:00 | The Chinese Nuclear Threat & Implications for US Security with Gordon Chang and Rick Fisher |

***Remember Pearl Harbor, December 3, 2024 by Lawrence Kadish***

This December 7th marks the 83rd anniversary of the Japanese attack on the American fleet berthed at Pearl Harbor on a quiet Sunday morning.

It devastated our naval fleet, [killing](https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/p/the-pearl-harbor-attack-7-december-1941.html) 2,403 Americans, and left a nation in shock.

The Japanese military warlords, however, had miscalculated. Amidst the smoking ruin of our Pacific fleet came an anger and desire for justice that would not stop until a Japanese delegation, directed by Emperor Hirohito, surrendered on the deck of the *USS Missouri* in Tokyo Bay four years later.

The Japanese attack on December 7th united an America that until that morning was seriously divided over its role in a world that was in the midst of searing combat in Europe and China. Nazi Germany continued to win repeated victories, and the Japanese were conquering China at will.

The political rancor between American isolationists and interveners was proof positive for the Axis powers that our democracy was incapable of defending itself, much less our allies. Our enemies saw the spirited opposition in Washington to instituting a peacetime draft. and assumed our nation would not have the will to fight.

They assumed wrong.

Pearl Harbor was the defining moment when America would rise up and, in the [words](https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc1986022.afc1986022_ms2201/?st=text) of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory."

This author believes the lessons of Pearl Harbor are not being adequately taught in our nation's classrooms. Far too often, curriculum time is reduced, and World War II is relegated to an afterthought. That is a tragedy, as it has lessons not only for the next generation of Americans, but also for those who seek to do us harm.

Our enemies need to know that our next president has the ability to harness the power of a united people when confronted by a foe whose intent is to reduce America as a world power. The next attack may not come in the form of bombs on a sleeping fleet. It may be a cyber-attack on our nation's electrical grid or banking system. However it comes, our enemy will find that we will, in fact, remember Pearl Harbor and respond in "their righteous might..."

*Lawrence Kadish serves on the Board of Governors of Gatestone Institute.*