A Smart and Disciplined Approach to Deterrence: Modernize the Nuclear Triad

A summary of ‘Orienting the 2021 Nuclear Posture Review’ by Brad Roberts, former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear and Missile Defense Policy.

In his article for the Washington Quarterly, Brad Roberts argues that reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. defense strategies is not a sound decision. He stressed that the U.S. should embrace nuclear deterrence as part of the solution to reducing nuclear dangers rather than dismissing it as part of the problem. As such, Roberts contends that the U.S. should aim to modernize all three legs of its nuclear triad, particularly the ICBM force.

Brad Roberts currently serves as director of the Center for Global Security Research at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. He previously was co-director of the Obama administration’s Nuclear Posture Review in his capacity as deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear and Missile Defense Policy from 2009 to 2013.

The Goals

The Biden administration set forth its goals on nuclear policy in its March 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance. These goals included:

- Elevating diplomacy as a tool of first resort;
- Reinvigorating and modernizing our alliances with respect to nuclear deterrence; and
- Making smart and disciplined choices regarding our national defense.

The Threats

As it seeks to make decisions about nuclear deterrence, the Biden administration must understand the nuclear problems that exist today. While the threat that insecure nuclear materials and the possibility that such materials might find their way into the hands of proliferators or terrorists – the biggest threat facing the Obama administration in 2009 – still exists today, other problems have also risen to the forefront. These threats include:

- North Korea has significantly developed its nuclear arsenal in the past decade. As a result, we are facing a plethora of new threats, from risks to South Korea, Japan and the U.S. homeland to doubts about the credibility of the U.S.’s nuclear guarantee to its allies.
- The adversarial nature of China and Russia is now unquestionable. Nuclear weapons are a component of the regional war strategy of both countries. In Russia, nuclear weapons now hold a central place in military strategy. China, meanwhile, has accelerated the development of its nuclear forces and will soon be on the same level as the U.S.
- Confidence in U.S. leadership has declined among allies.
- Nuclear assumptions of the U.S. and its allies have the potential to be unsettled by unanticipated developments and emerging technologies. These include:
  - The rapid acceleration of China’s nuclear force;
  - Emerging technologies and unprecedented cyber capabilities of adversaries; and
  - The U.S.’s difficulties ensuring its aging class of warheads are serviceable and ready.
- U.S. threats to employ nuclear weapons may not be seen as credible among adversaries and allies alike.
- Collapse of the international nuclear order is possible.
The Smart Solution

A SMART APPROACH SHOULD EMBRACE NUCLEAR DETERRENCE AS PART OF THE SOLUTION RATHER THAN PART OF THE PROBLEM.

Based on a clear understanding of the developments in the global security environment and how they impact U.S. nuclear deterrence strategy, lessons learned from the past and the views of foreign and domestic stakeholders in U.S. nuclear policy, the Biden administration can and should embrace a smart and disciplined approach that:

- Puts international diplomacy first.
- Treats reestablishing US arms control leadership and reducing the role of nuclear weapons as means to an end, not as ends in themselves. The end is the reduction of nuclear danger.
- Embraces nuclear deterrence as part of the solution. Nuclear deterrence has a central role in risk reduction and the administration should endorse modernization of the ICBM force, given its unique value in achieving deterrence.
- Does not reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. defense strategy since doing so may generate new nuclear risks.
- Does not apply sweeping changes to the role of nuclear weapons or the practice of nuclear deterrence.

THE ADMINISTRATION SHOULD ENDORSE MODERNIZATION OF THE ICBM FORCE, GIVEN ITS UNIQUE VALUE IN RAISING THE THRESHOLD TO PREEMPTIVE ATTACK ON THE UNITED STATES, IN HEDGING AGAINST SURPRISE, AND IN CONDUCTING LIMITED STRIKES IN EXTREME CIRCUMSTANCES.

This is a summary of Brad Roberts’ article “Orienting the 2021 Nuclear Posture Review.” Read the full text here: [https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1933740](https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1933740)