

Remarks by Senior Director Pranay Vaddi at Strategic Weapons in the 21st Century

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Thank you to Lawrence Livermore and Los Alamos for inviting me to what is a premier gathering of nuclear experts across multiple disciplines.

Your work ensures we have a safe, secure and effective nuclear deterrent and are a global leader in arms control and nonproliferation—it empowers deliberations and decision-flexibility in a field that depends on technical analysis, perhaps more so than any other area of government.

Following the National Security Advisor’s remarks in Washington last summer, I’m looking forward to providing an update on how the Biden-Harris administration is thinking about nuclear policy and arms control, and the steps we’ve taken over the President’s first term.

This administration is committed to a balanced, responsible, and pragmatic approach to nuclear policy, arms control, and nonproliferation.

We are clear-eyed about the worsening state of the security environment, and the increasing nuclear threat to U.S. interests.

We are also realistic about what can be achieved.

We remain committed to certain strategic tenets, such as reducing the global salience of nuclear weapons, minimizing the number of nuclear weapons needed to achieve U.S. objectives, and advancing the goal of a world without nuclear weapons—all while maintaining stable deterrence of our adversaries.

But we acknowledge the challenges we face regarding adversary actions and our own nuclear modernization, and the reality that arms control requires willing partners.

We are continually reexamining how discrete policy actions can advance these strategic tenets, in keeping with longstanding, bipartisan efforts to reduce nuclear risks around the world.

There can be no doubt that the nuclear landscape today is even more challenging than even when we conducted the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review.

The level of nuclear threat is increasing in three respects: changes to adversaries’ postures, coordination among adversaries, and disengagement from arms control.

In the first respect, Russia, the PRC, and DPRK, are all expanding and diversifying their nuclear arsenals.

Russia is frequently brandishing nuclear threats while assaulting Ukraine, even announcing the placement of nuclear weapons in Belarus.

Putin's desperation has also led Russia to use riot control agents and possibly even more toxic chemicals, contravening longstanding international norms and treaty obligations.

And Moscow is also pursuing novel systems with questionable deterrent utility, including a highly destabilizing anti-satellite capability.

The PRC's increasingly aggressive effort to refashion the Indo-Pacific region and the international system creates a pacing challenge for the United States.

Its conventional military buildup is backed by a breakneck nuclear expansion.

Again and again, this expansion has proceeded faster than we previously anticipated.

The DPRK also continues to advance its nuclear and missile programs—and has been more frequently issuing direct nuclear threats.

Second, Russia, the PRC, the DPRK, and Iran are cooperating and coordinating to a greater degree—and weakening the nonproliferation regime developed at the end of the Cold War.

Russia has turned to the PRC to prop up its defense industrial base, the DPRK to provide artillery and missiles, and Iran to provide missiles and drones.

Russia is increasing its defense cooperation with all three, creating concerns as to what capabilities and know-how Russia may share as payment for the armaments it is receiving.

The PRC is irresponsibly weakening the nonproliferation regime, supporting the development of Pakistan's long-range ballistic missile program.

Russia and the PRC are also coordinating their positions and acting at common purpose to counter global nonproliferation efforts.

A recent example is Russia's veto and the PRC's abstention on the extension of the UN Panel of Experts on DPRK sanctions.

This cooperation and coordination is unprecedented—and it may continue to expand in even more destabilizing directions.

Third, our adversaries have shown little to no interest in practical engagement on arms control and strategic risk, which we have proposed to both Russia and the PRC.

Russia's outright rejection of dialogue casts doubt on its willingness to return to implementation of its existing obligations or negotiate a successor to New START before its expiration in February 2026.

Russia also recently rejected a proposal to discuss space security, which was disappointing but not surprising.

As a result, there is an increased likelihood New START may expire without replacement—and we must be prepared for that possibility.

With the PRC, the United States offered a number of specific proposals focused on managing strategic risks, such as a ballistic missile launch notification agreement, during a bilateral consultation in November 2023.

The PRC has shown no interest in engaging on these proposals.

Instead, they have suggested that the United States and other nations adopt a no-first-use treaty.

It's hard to see how such an agreement would be verifiable, enforceable, or implementable.

This appears to be a transparent attempt to obfuscate the PRC's own record and influence third countries, rather than substantively engage with the United States.

With the DPRK too, our attempts to engage have been answered only by more missile tests and greater hostility to us and our close allies.

In addition to an incredibly dynamic international security environment, we also face increasing challenges at home with our own nuclear modernization program.

The across-the-board, just-in-time transition from legacy to modern that is occurring across the triad leaves little to no margin.

With the announcement that Sentinel and Columbia are likely to be delayed, we need to adjust our expectations for deployment timelines—creating challenges even to maintain current levels of strategic forces.

We need to find ways to deliver faster, and be prepared to make necessary adjustments to our posture to compensate if further delays occur.

These challenges demand action. We are pursuing pragmatic adjustments to ensure that we meet our deterrence and assurance objectives through the 2030s and beyond, in line with our core national security goals.

I'll highlight three key areas of focus.

First, we have been updating our strategy and planning to account for the PRC's build-up and the increased hostility of multiple nuclear-armed adversaries.

Last month, the President approved updated Nuclear Weapons Employment Planning Guidance that places this challenge front and center.

In this review, we wrestled with several questions. For example:

What conventional and nuclear forces and posture are required to deter multiple adversaries simultaneously now and in the future?

How should we think about the selective generation of nuclear forces to ensure that we can deter in an extended crisis or conflict, including one that may involve multiple adversaries?

How can we strengthen deterrence by improving the integration of non-nuclear capabilities into U.S. planning?

How should we consider allied capabilities, consultations, and coordination in scenarios where U.S. nuclear employment may be considered?

What role can arms control designed to limit adversary nuclear forces play in relieving the burden on U.S. nuclear forces in a multiple nuclear adversary environment?

These are hard questions that we will continue addressing as we implement the Employment Guidance.

Second, we have been taking a fresh look at the modernization program of record in this new strategic landscape.

We're fully committed the recapitalizing the triad, sustaining legacy capabilities for as long as they're needed, and developing a responsive and adaptable nuclear enterprise.

We remain confident in our current forces and posture today.

And we do not think we need to match or outnumber the combined total of our adversaries to successfully deter them.

But without a change in the trajectory that Russia, the PRC, and the DPRK are on—the United States will need to adjust our posture and capabilities to ensure our ability to deter and meet other objectives going forward.

We have already taken prudent steps in this regard. We decided to pursue the B61-13 and investigate additional end-of-life-margin for certain Ohio-class SSBNs.

The B61-13 is an example of a creative, qualitative improvement to our arsenal—enhancing deterrence without increasing overall numbers, breaking the existing program of record, or requiring substantial new resources.

As the National Security Advisor said last year, we're focused on a "better" approach, not necessarily a "more" approach—this will require creativity and agility in our nuclear and defense enterprise.

The Strategic Posture Commission report made numerous recommendations for posture and capability adjustments—we are evaluating those alongside others in an interagency process.

As we consider additional adjustments, we will account for the implications for strategic stability; the capacity of the defense industrial base and the nuclear enterprise; cost and competing priorities; and potential countervailing adversary responses.

We must also be cognizant of risk prioritization.

For example, a decision to increase deployed weapons immediately after New START expires would leave us with fewer options and less capacity for dealing with transition risk if Sentinel or Columbia is further delayed.

We have to balance these trade-offs as we consider options.

I want to be clear: we may end up determining that changing current deployed numbers is required in the future—and we need to be fully prepared for that possibility.

If such an adjustment occurs, it will be driven by a determination of what is necessary to deter, and careful consideration of how adversaries are likely to respond—not a simplistic calculation that more for them requires more for us.

Third, we have fully invested in strengthening our alliance system.

The President reaffirmed the critical importance of coordination and planning with allies and partners in the recently signed Employment Guidance.

The Washington Declaration is an example of our efforts to jointly approach nuclear scenarios with our allies, as equal partners.

NATO is also taking steps to improve posture, exercises, and planning. This is work we are advancing ahead of the Washington Summit to account for Russia's actions in Europe, including in the nuclear domain.

In both Asia and Europe, we are looking for ways that allies can contribute to nuclear deterrence, whether by easing the burden on U.S. conventional or dual-capable forces or stepping up their conventional support to U.S. nuclear operations.

We are also encouraging our allies and partners to beef up their own modern conventional strike and other capabilities.

We're observing the high demand for precision munitions, ISR, and other capabilities in multiple crises.

We're looking to create new opportunities for exports and co-production that have been challenging because of export controls and licensing requirements—not only within AUKUS but amongst a broader set of allies and partners.

At a time when Russia, the PRC, Iran, and the DPRK are freely proliferating advanced missile technology, we need increased flexibility in the U.S. system.

These steps to strengthen deterrence are fully supportive of the administration's approach to arms control—which remains a core element of our strategy to improve international security.

Enhancing our capabilities demonstrates to adversaries that managing competition through arms control is preferable to unrestrained competition across domains—and thus allows us to negotiate from a position of strength.

This will incentivize Russia and the PRC to engage in arms control, provide the United States with leverage in those engagements, and prepare us for an environment in which they continue to refuse engagement.

We are offering our competitors a choice—work with us to address security challenges to mutual benefit, or face a security situation that you may perceive as far worse for your interests.

Another way we are supporting arms control is through accountability.

Together with our NATO allies, the United States suspended the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe in response to Russia's withdrawal—while signaling to Moscow that suspension will provide us greater freedom in planning, deployments, and exercises.

We enacted lawful countermeasures in response to Russia's suspension of New START that ensure Moscow would garner no advantage.

And, together with other States Parties, we ousted Russia from the OPCW Executive Council—fitting given their behavior in Ukraine and obstruction of the Organization's investigation of Syria.

We are also vigorously pursuing those arms control opportunities that do exist—and ensuring we're prepared when future opportunities arise.

We will not allow Russia, the PRC, and the DPRK to have veto power over our arms control and nonproliferation policy.

Instead, we are thinking creatively about the content and mechanisms of arms control and pursuing advantageous opportunities that are available.

We've committed to not conduct destructive, direct-ascent anti-satellite missile testing—and are working to globalize that norm.

We've put forth proposals for responsible behavior in space and principles for the responsible military use of artificial intelligence—that we're actively promoting in international fora.

Together with Japan, we are pursuing a Security Council Resolution that would reaffirm the Outer Space Treaty and call on all Member States to not develop any nuclear weapons, or other kinds of weapons of mass destruction, that are specifically designed to be placed in orbit around Earth.

Continued U.S. leadership on arms control makes tangible contributions to global security—but also builds U.S. credibility with close allies and partners and non-aligned countries alike.

Finally, we are doing our homework to ensure we are ready when the arms control winds begin to shift.

We are thinking through what a future arms control agreement with Russia after New START might look like—accounting for the fact that the type of limits we will be able to agree to with Russia will be impacted by the size and scale of the PRC's nuclear buildup and any change to U.S. deterrence needs vis-à-vis Beijing.

We are also investing in new monitoring and verification technologies and approaches, both to solidify existing agreements and set the stage for the future.

This includes developing approaches for verifying warheads—and investing in capabilities for space situational awareness to support the Outer Space Treaty.

We are also ensuring there is a next generation of arms control experts with the policy and technical acumen to continue U.S. leadership far into the future.

Let me close with this.

We should be under no illusions about the urgent challenges in front of us.

But we also have a tremendous opportunity to lay a new foundation for deterrence and arms control.

I look forward to continuing this work with all of you.

Thank you very much for the time.