



ANTICIPATING THE NEXT CHAPTER IN U.S. NUCLEAR DETERRENCE STRATEGY

Workshop Summary

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Center for Global Security Research
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Anticipating the Next Chapter in U.S. Nuclear Deterrence Strategy

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On November 1-2, 2022, the Center for Global Security Research (CGSR) at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) hosted a workshop on anticipating the next chapter in U.S. nuclear deterrence strategy. This event brought together over 100 participants drawn across the policy, military, scientific/technical, and think-tank communities, from the United States and allied countries.

Discussion was guided by the following key questions:

1. How consequential for U.S. nuclear policy and posture are recent changes in the security environment?
2. What progress have the U.S. and its allies and partners made in adapting deterrence policy and posture to new factors?
3. What further adaptations are needed? Are they evolutionary or revolutionary in character?
4. What can and should be done to accelerate adaptation?

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Key take-aways:

1. Recent changes in the security environment will prove to be as transformational for U.S. nuclear policy and posture as were the changes that came with the end of the Cold War. With the emerging two-nuclear-peer problem and growing nuclear risks created by regional challengers, the United States will soon be confronted with urgent questions and decisions on whether and how to adapt its deterrence strategy beyond its traditional fundamentals, revise its strategic and theater nuclear posture, deploy and re-set its nuclear hedge, and reformulate its approach to arms control. The chapter of US nuclear deterrence strategy that began in 1989 is closing; a new chapter is beginning.
2. Russia and China are devolving into more than rivals for the United States. They are becoming more acutely confrontational and more confident in accepting military risk to achieve their aims. President Putin's aggressive actions have been driven by deep-seated and misguided perceptions of Russia's place in the world, the assumptions about the place of the others, and miscalculations about ability to achieve his aims through military means. Chairman Xi has also chosen a more confrontational approach as China shifted to a policy of compelling the unification of Taiwan through annexation. Both Putin and Xi seek significant changes to the international system to reduce their vulnerability to the United States and the open, rules-based order. Both Russia and China have developed theories of victory in regional wars that rely on nuclear-backed coercion, limited but scalable actions in new military domains, and conventional provocations to sever the United States from its allies and to convince the United States that the costs and risks of challenging their interests outweigh any potential gains. Given their declared "friendship without limits," the United States and its allies should expect to deal with two cooperating nuclear powers.
3. At the regional level, the key development is that North Korea's nuclear ambition is well beyond the prevention curve. The goal of North Korea remains to break the U.S. alliances through nuclear coercion and create strategic divergence between the United States, South Korea, and Japan. With a small but operational nuclear force, DPRK already poses an existential threat to South Korea and Japan and an increasingly dangerous threat directly to the American homeland. Its capabilities continue to grow and improve as it continues to develop and operationalize theater warfighting nuclear capabilities. The primary constraint on such ambition is not capabilities but a peculiar "monolithic" command structure.
4. Developments in the Middle East are also worrying. Prospects for long-term nuclear restraint appear to be fading as resurrection of the JCPOA appears ever more elusive. Iranian future nuclear choices seem to be significantly impacted by the belief – also shared in Moscow, Beijing, and Pyongyang - that the world is transitioning to a multipolarity in which constraints of behavior of U.S. adversaries are fading and their options are growing. On the current trajectory, the United States and Iran are on the pathway of incremental escalation of tensions.

5. Adversary strategies for limited regional war under the nuclear shadow have already exposed a significant deterrence gap in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. They also have created an assurance gap as the U.S. allies seek new forms of reassurance. These two gaps become even more critical with the full emergence of the two-nuclear-peer problem (i.e. when the United States would have to address a threat of two nuclear peers acting simultaneously or consecutively in crisis and war). In such a strategic environment, any future crisis with China or Russia will necessarily bring questions about how to deter the other from exploiting the crisis and how to do so while conventional assets flow to the primary theater. The decade from 2027 to 2037 looks especially worrying given uncertainties about the conventional and nuclear balances in Europe and the Indo-Pacific region.
6. Two American administrations in a row have now recognized the emerging challenges in the security environment, the erosion of deterrence, and the need to get away from business as usual to accelerate military adaptation. The Trump and Biden Administrations' national security strategies, national defense strategies, and nuclear posture reviews are largely similar in these respects. But the pace of adaptation has not accelerated to meet the growing challenges. As assessed in 2018 by the National Defense Strategy Commission, the United States is not optimally prepared for regional wars against nuclear-armed adversaries. Strategy documents have not yet generated much in the way of meaningful changes to plans, capabilities, or operations. At present, the United States also has neither a two-war force posture nor a clear strategy to deal with a simultaneous conflict in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. The acceleration of strategic adaptation is needed, starting with steps aimed at translating integrated deterrence into reality and developing new division of labor between the United States and its allies.
7. NATO has made important progress since 2014 in recovering from the post Cold War atrophy of its deterrence and defense posture. With the adoption of the Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA), the Alliance has finally returned to the era of strategy. Given the erosion of Russia's capabilities in war against Ukraine and NATO's steps taken to augment its posture, the Alliance holds a strategically advantageous posture against Russia on its eastern flank. However, this should not lead to complacency. Russia's approach to regional war against NATO would be different than against Ukraine. Russia has not yet used its entire strategic weapons set. Russia will likely rebuild and adapt its military forces after the war. NATO also needs to fully implement its DDA and will face significant barriers to integrate different elements of its strategic toolkit. The slow progress in conventional-nuclear integration betrays NATO's existing gaps of understanding of the new dimensions of war.
8. U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific have also made important progress. The U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK alliances have been working for at least 15 years on comprehensively strengthening regional deterrence architectures in response to North Korea's nuclear and missile developments. With Australia, the United States has taken various steps to contend with China's growing military reach and ambition. But important challenges remain. Even more than in Europe, the strategy in the Indo-Pacific to prepare for regional

conventional war with strategic dimension requires mid-course correction and greater sense of urgency.

9. The implications of these developments are wide-ranging. For example, the “fundamentals of deterrence” are back up for debate. On the one hand, the two-peer nuclear problem does not warrant a departure from the U.S. nuclear strategy of flexible response. The U.S. could continue to combine the deterrent effect of limited initial nuclear response with the threat that any nuclear exchange could lead to uncontrolled escalation in order to convince any adversary that a nuclear exchange with the United States is always the worst option. On the other hand, the new strategic context raises questions about whether the United States has sufficient means to execute the strategy of flexible response at the strategic and regional level. It also raises a question about whether, given the increased salience of nuclear weapons in strategies of potential adversaries, there are any unilateral and other measures that the United States might take to reduce nuclear dangers.
10. Issues persist regarding U.S. nuclear modernization. If new capabilities are necessary to address emerging deterrence and assurances challenges, the United States is late to need. The current modernization pathway relies on the simple replacement of weapons and delivery systems that are aging out with new versions.
11. There are implications for theater nuclear deterrence. The limited incrementalism that guided nuclear adaptations in Europe and the Indo-Pacific has been insufficient to make allies prepared to face the nuclear risks of today or address the growing risks of decoupling over the next decade. In both regions there is a need for practical changes in nuclear hardware and software (that is, to the military-technical means of nuclear deterrence as well as to strategy, policy, concept development, consultations, planning and exercises). This should involve steps such as making dual-capable aircraft more credible and truly globally deployable. Regional extended deterrence architecture could become more self-sustainable and credible with the addition of SLCM-N to the U.S. nuclear arsenal, more realistic nuclear exercises, and regionally-based nuclear planning that involves U.S. allies.
12. The United States should revisit how it hedges against nuclear uncertainty. The current U.S. hedge relies on the capacity to upload warheads on the delivery vehicles that were downloaded as part of New START implementation. The United States also has a limited ability to increase the number of deployed delivery vehicles. This hedge is not robust enough. If in response to China’s nuclear buildup the United States put its hedge into active force, it would give up hedging against other geopolitical, operational or technological risks. This could happen within the next decade and would require re-setting the hedge. To do so, the United States might simply replenish the hedge, or it might prepare to compete with China and Russia in a prolonged arms race. Alternatively, the United States might re-think its approach to hedging with an emphasis on qualitative rather than quantitative adjustments to the arsenal. The United States, however, can work now to prepare to re-set the hedge in a more timely fashion if such need arose in the future. The United States should rebuild an agile and responsive nuclear

infrastructure, which it failed to do over the last three decades despite of the recognition of the need to do so.

13. There are important implications for arms control strategy. Making nuclear arms control relevant for the new tripolar era requires innovative approaches; arms control either adapts to new realities or slips into irrelevance. Given the current geopolitical outlook, the United States should prepare for a world without arms control in the near term and for a future scenario in which the windows of opportunity for arms control open once again. To do so, the United States should answer basic questions on what security requirements arms control is meant to solve, why, and only then how. It should also engage in preparatory work including design and testing of new verification capabilities and protocols, training a cadre of new arms control negotiators, and engaging allies. The sooner the United States develops a concrete proposal for arms control and puts it on the table, the higher are the prospects that it would be able to set the arms control narrative for the future.

14. Remarkable over the last decade given the stark partisanship in Congress is the continuity in sustained funding for U.S. nuclear modernization. Still, the consensus has been fragile. The need to react to a deteriorating security environment will only make it more fragile by putting a new strain on the political context within which nuclear policy is made and implemented. Chinese nuclear expansion and the emerging two-nuclear-peer problem compel fresh thinking, new solutions, and open debate on U.S. nuclear strategy, policy and posture. The 2022 National Defense Strategy and Nuclear Posture Review recognize the challenge and open a process that could lead to a new consensus. The sooner a compromise is found, the better. A balanced approach, combining some modest force deployments in response to China with a plausible arms control proposal addressing the emerging two-peer environment, could serve to solidify a new consensus.

Panel 1: The Major Power Dimension: Beyond Rivalry to Confrontation

- How and to what extent have Russia and China become more confrontational?
- Why have they become more confrontational? Are they more risk acceptant? Why?
- What future behaviors should we expect?

Russia and China are devolving into more than rivals for the United States. They are becoming more acutely confrontational. President Putin is operating from deep seated and misguided perceptions of Russia's place in the world and of the place of others. In his worldview, the world order is transforming into multipolarity in which Russia is one of the global centers, spheres of influence are respected, and only great powers have sovereignty. Putin's decision to wage war on Ukraine demonstrates his risk acceptance, but it does not necessarily denote that he is reckless. Expecting that Kyiv would fall in 72 hours, Putin assumed that he was taking much smaller risks than he actually faced. Being concerned about increasing cooperation between NATO and Ukraine, Putin might also have felt the moment to act with the least political risk attached was upon him. Putin's procrastination of the decision for initial military mobilization in Russia might also indicate his reluctance to take certain risks but ultimately taking them when he perceives no better alternative.

In the nuclear realm, Russian declaratory policy is not to be relied upon; it is more pertinent to strategic nuclear weapons than non-strategic. Thus, the question about Russia's nuclear use in Ukraine is not closed yet. The guideposts that may trigger Russia's nuclear response include conventional strikes on Russia's critical infrastructure, attacks on Russia's command and control, or Russia being at a brink of losing the invasion. Putin's mobilization efforts have bought time before the next escalation, because leadership will want to wait and see if it solves any of the Russian military's manpower or structural problems before they escalate further. Russia might also prefer to wait before the escalation through winter as it will tell if Russia and Ukraine are able to sustain the war in the long term.

Even though the total collapse of Russian military forces should not be ruled out, it should not be counted upon. Russia has a history of resurgence when its military has been in dire straits. While Russia does not want a war with NATO at this point, there is a possibility that Putin may bluff such a risk to see if the West reduces its support to Ukraine. In the event of NATO-Russia war, NATO would have to contend with advanced nuclear, space, and undersea Russian assets that have yet to be used in the current conflict. It could take Russia about ten years to recover its conventional army from the damage incurred during the war in Ukraine, which is not long from a capability buildup perspective. During this period, Russia will be forced to rely more on its nuclear arsenal.

The 20th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress ended the era of multiple power centers within the Party. Xi Jinping consolidated his power and removed all remaining vestiges of reformist factions from the senior echelons of the Party. This demarcated a trend which reversed the reformist faction's work from the early 2000s. With a Maoist ideological approach to governance, Xi is moving China's politics toward the Leninist left, its economics to the Marxist left, and its foreign policy to the nationalist right.

The CCP has shifted away from its former policy focused on the peaceful unification with Taiwan, which entailed tightening economic relationships and deterring a formal declaration of Taiwanese independence. Instead, the CCP is moving toward a policy of compelling unification through annexation on the timelines set by the Party. These timelines are condition-based, on opportunities that may be created or may present themselves. For example, the Chinese response to Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan appears to reflect plans that were made ahead of time but were implemented earlier than anticipated when an appropriate circumstance arose.

The CCP blames the United States for staging a covert color revolution in Taiwan and inspiring separatists there, and it sees itself as locked in intense strategic competition with the United States. Xi continuously refers to the global "spirit of struggle" in which he is confident that China and the Party are well positioned to succeed. Still, the CCP is suspicious that dealings with the outside world cause vulnerability and thus seeks to decouple itself from the world. For example, the CCP has been operating in "broadcast mode," one-way communication with the outside world. This makes it difficult to take external information back into the CCP system to inform or influence Xi. This could contribute to increased hostility and aggression from China. China may have to experience a major crisis with the West before it is willing to be more collaborative.

China's relationship with Russia should be considered as an entente rather than an alliance. China has a selfish perspective on the benefits of cooperation with Russia. It does not trust Russia, it is not surprised by Russia's failure in Ukraine, and it has competing interests with Russia in places such as Central Asia. A weakened Russia that is more dependent on China is in Beijing's interests. Still, Xi cannot afford for Russia to lose outright in Ukraine and become either a valueless ally or more Western oriented. For this reason, Xi would help Russia to avoid total collapse. The United States and its allies should expect to deal with two aligned nuclear powers. Unable to drive a wedge between China and Russia, the United States and its allies should push them closer together to expose their divergent interests and force them to deal with the frictions in their relationship.

Panel 2: The Regional Challengers: Beyond Prevention to Deterrence?

- How has North Korea's progress in assembling a small nuclear force affected its strategy and behavior? What uses might it make of its new nuclear capabilities?
- How has Iran's progress in developing its nuclear potential affects its strategy and behavior? What uses might it make of its new capabilities?
- Are U.S. deterrence strategy and posture adequately tailored for these challenges?

North Korea's nuclear ambition is well beyond the prevention curve, as it already has a modest nuclear arsenal that is poised to grow. DPRK already poses an existential threat to South Korea, Japan, and U.S. forces in the theater. It is an increasingly dangerous threat to the American homeland. If it conducts the 7th nuclear test, it is likely to be a low-yield weapon in line with Kim Jong Un's stated goal of acquiring credible tactical nuclear weapons.

To strengthen the credibility of its arsenal, the DPRK is investing heavily in areas to improve pre- and post- launch survivability. Recent missile launches are operational exercises rather than traditional flight tests of missiles; they simulate attacks against ports, airfields and military command centers in the South Korea and Japan. They demonstrate a growing confidence in capabilities and the ability to operate from anywhere in DPRK's territory. What will signify a dangerous shift in DPRK nuclear strategy – from a strategy focused on ensuring credible second strike to a strategy of nuclear warfighting – is the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to frontline units. As North Korea continues to develop options for ambitious regional warfighting in its nuclear strategy, the primary constraint is not capabilities. Instead it is a peculiar hierarchical command structure that guards the monolithic command of Kim Jong Un without a process for transferring nuclear use authority.

One of North Korea's primary goals is to break U.S. alliances through nuclear coercion and create strategic divergence between the United States, South Korea, and Japan. Existing regional deterrence arrangements are not adequately postured to deal with such a threat and need a significant update. There are several potential ways to do this. First, a trilateral (US/JPN/ROK) deterrence dialogue should be established. Bilateral alliances are insufficient to deter North Korea from exploiting vulnerabilities in trilateral relations. Second, there is a need for standing trilateral nuclear crisis planning capabilities. The United States, Japan and ROK need to have a common understanding of the operational implications of North Korean nuclear use and of the mitigation and response options. It is unlikely that a war on the Korean Peninsula would be geographically limited to the Peninsula and would stay non-nuclear. Third, it might be worth considering forward deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea. This might involve a phased, adaptive approach where a range of preparatory steps can occur prior to the actual deployment, and such steps alone could be used as a signal of collective resolve. Finally, the cohesion of the U.S. alliances in the region also depend on common approach to China and to a scenario of a conflict over Taiwan, something that ROK is reluctant to discuss.

The prospects for long-term nuclear restraint in the Middle East appear to be fading as resurrection of the JCPOA appears ever more elusive. The new realities of U.S.-Iran relations cannot be accommodated by returning to this agreement as it was designed in 2015. From the U.S. perspective, because of the Iranian advances in its nuclear program, the old JCPOA would not have the same non-proliferation value. From Iran's perspectives, as multiple sanctions are imposed against Iran for different reasons such as its nuclear program, support for terrorism, and human rights issues, relieving only nuclear-related sanctions would either not be possible or would not provide sufficient sanctions relief. Furthermore, Iranian leaders operate on the assumption that a future U.S. president might take the office and walk away from any deal.

A couple of factors have significant impacts on Iran's future nuclear choices. The strategic vision of hardliners in Iran is that the world is transitioning to a multipolar world in which U.S. relative influence is declining and Iranian options are growing. Lessons that Iranians are learning from Russia's war against Ukraine are that the world is moving towards multipolarity faster than anticipated and that the era in which the United States, Russia, and China were united against Iran is over. There is a growing perception in Iran that Russia and China could be more lenient towards Iran's advancement of nuclear weapons capability. Such perception, even if inaccurate, has an impact on Iranian thinking. Internal protests in Iran also play major role in Iranian cost-

benefit analysis, and the open question is whether Iran is moving in a direction in which acquisition of nuclear weapons is the only guarantee for regime survival.

On the current trajectory, the United States and Iran are on a pathway of incremental escalation of tensions. The United States is expanding the list of sanctions, and Iran continues to proliferate horizontally by increasing its nuclear stockpile while refraining from proliferating vertically by increasing the enrichment level. This pathway is likely to continue unless there is a radically new development such as the “snapback,” the reimposition of the UN sanctions against Iran that were terminated by the JCPOA in 2015. In such a scenario, Iran may resort to withdrawal from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and further expansion of its nuclear capabilities. The United States does not seem to be adequately prepared to deal with the current situation or potential radical deterioration. It needs to game out its strategy and red lines, decide what steps it is willing to take, and privately and clearly communicate them to Iran.

Iran’s emergence as a nuclear-armed revolutionary power opposed to the status quo would have broad repercussions. It would likely be a tipping point to a cascade of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. Assuming it further develops its long-range missile delivery systems, a nuclear Iran would also be a threat to Europe and perhaps even the United States.

Panel 3: The Risk Framework: Beyond Sequential to Simultaneous Wars

- What are the new risks of simultaneous wars in Europe and Asia, whether coordinated or merely opportunistic?
- How prepared is the U.S. for the two-theater challenge and what must it do to better prepare?
- What can and should U.S. allies and partners contribute to deterrence in this context?

The challenge of deterring and fighting two regional wars simultaneously is not a new problem in U.S. defense strategy. What adds significant new risks is that the United States for the first time in its history may face two nuclear-armed near peers that are strategic partners with one another. Any future crisis or conflict with one will necessarily bring questions about how to deter the other from exploiting the situation by acting simultaneously or consecutively, opportunistically or in coordination, and about how to deter while resources flow globally to the primary theater. This would be especially challenging if both adversaries are capable of mobilizing power on a global scale and inflicting damage in any domain.

In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the risk of simultaneous conflict in Europe and Asia seems low. So far, China has not been seen seeking to make opportunistic moves as a result of the United States involvement in Ukraine. Still, this should not lead to complacency, especially given warnings that China is shortening its timeline for forcing unification with Taiwan. The decade from 2027 to 2037 looks especially worrying given the uncertainties about conventional and nuclear balance between the United States and its near peers. For these reasons, the United States should begin preparations for a spectrum of risks that range from uncoordinated actions of Russia and China to their combined aggression. Within this spectrum, an alliance between

China and Russia and a scenario of a “world breaking apart” with the engagement of North Korea and Iran cannot be excluded. However, the most likely scenarios are the risks in the middle of the spectrum, namely coordinated, loosely coordinated, or opportunistic actions.

The United States is not prepared for a simultaneous conflict with two nuclear peers. Presently, it has neither a two-front war force posture, nor a clear national strategy to deal with this problem. Strategy discussions tend to focus on the separate regional requirements for Asia and Europe, and potential contradictions between the two. The tendency to look at U.S. engagement in Europe and Asia as a zero-sum game is reinforced by the inherent scarcity of U.S. military resources, including ammunition, key platforms such as air and sea lift, attack submarines, heavy bombers, and the defense industrial base.

The United States needs to grapple with the problem of simultaneity, not hope that it can be avoided. One solution is to turn integrated deterrence from a “bumper sticker” into reality. This requires diagnosing operational problems from a military perspective and then designing specific solutions to solve them. Significantly more also needs to be done on integrating the plans of different Combatant Commands at the front end rather than the back end once initial plans are already made. There is also a need for whole-of-government action aimed at delaying efforts by adversaries to upgrade or replenish their military capabilities by making them more costly and difficult. There are historical precedents that demonstrate the United States’ ability to turn integration into reality. During the 1970-80s, for instance, the maritime strategy to counter the Soviet threat brought together a U.S. whole of government approach to deny critical technology to the USSR, allies’ contributions, and capabilities from different domains including conventional, nuclear, electronic warfare, space and counter-space.

While desirable and worth pursuing, greater efficiency against two regional adversaries simply through better integration may not be enough. An alternative solution is to shape the U.S. force to deal with the simultaneity issue through greater defense spending. This solution, however, may be elusive as the United States may not be able to keep up with China. High budget increases may also not be accepted by American society. Relying on nuclear weapons in tackling the two-war problem also does not seem to be the answer. Nuclear weapons are not highly credible for deterrence below a certain level of escalation, and reliance on them to deter opportunistic aggression might not be seen as credible. The value of nuclear weapons in the two-war scenario is undermined by the emerging two-nuclear-peer problem and growing recognition that the current U.S. nuclear modernization program designed in 2010 must be quantitatively or qualitatively adjusted to ensure effective deterrence against two nuclear peers.

The limits of individual U.S. solutions to the simultaneous wars problem puts the spotlight on the United States’ allies. There are two models in which they could contribute to addressing the two war problem. The first model is the “one for all, all for one” model in which U.S. allies from different regions act together to strengthen deterrence against both Russia and China. The limit of this model is that U.S. allies have limited capabilities to engage militarily outside of their regions. There are also uncertainties about how much economic costs they are willing to bear in support of allies in another region. For example, it is debatable whether European allies would be ready to engage in economic warfare against China in a scenario of a war over Taiwan. The second model is the model of a regional “division of labor” in which allies focus exclusively on

conventional deterrence in their own regions, and the United States focuses on plugging the gaps.

The two models can be complementary. In both cases, the preparation for simultaneous war requires changes in the division of labor between the United States and its allies. A fundamental challenge at the regional level is strengthening deterrence by denial capabilities and ensuring that the allies can hold the line when the United States is preoccupied elsewhere. This, for instance, could involve greater contribution from Japan to defense along the first island chain, greater responsibility for South Korea for its conventional defense against the DPRK, and greater conventional responsibility for Europeans to defend against Russia. To do so, allies can invest in high demand capabilities, including integrated air and missile defense, long-range precision strike, electronic warfare, cyber, and space capabilities for ISR and communication. At the global level, space and cyber capabilities could allow allies to overcome the tyranny of distance and impose operational problems on adversaries in distant geographic regions. European and Asian allies could also play an important role in denying access to critical technologies to potential U.S. adversaries.

Changing the division of labor, however, requires the United States to be frank with allies about the challenges and requirements of confronting a two-front war. Taking allies' support for granted risks severe crises in alliance relationships and unpreparedness to act if the worst-case scenario happens. To expect allies to take greater burdens, the United States needs to be more specific and open with allies about its deterrence ends, ways, and means. This involves overcoming challenges related to information sharing and classification. If the United States is serious about the burden sharing with allies, it should also be ready to draw on allies' defense industrial bases and eliminate existing barriers that hamper the ability to do so. The starting point to these efforts should be a holistic review by the United States of all barriers to allies' participation in different forms of cooperation and burden sharing.

Panel 4: Regional Wars: Beyond Conventional Dominance

- How have potential adversaries prepared for regional war against the United States and its allies? How do they understand the strategic dimensions of such wars?
- How has the erosion of the U.S. conventional deterrence affected the potential dynamics of such wars?
- How should the United States and its allies understand the strategic dimensions such wars? Are they adequately prepared?

The 1990s was a wake-up call for Russia, China, and other potential adversaries. They watched American military power unleashed on the battlefield and an ability given time to mobilize a large international coalition to achieve U.S. goals. In response, they have used last three decades to develop their own theories of victory against the United States. Exploiting perceived American weaknesses and playing to their own strengths, these Red theories of victory largely rely on their ability to threaten the United States and its allies to incentivize their retreat in a way that would not enrage them to retaliate. This perceived gray area pushed adversaries to supplement

traditional elements of military power with new regional strategic weapon sets, including cyber and counter-space capabilities, non-nuclear long-range precision strike, and non-strategic nuclear weapons.

Russia has specifically prepared for a scenario of a regional war, distinguishing it from local and global wars. Over the last 15 years, it sought to establish five strategic conditions in the European theater: the internal destabilization of NATO, conventional dominance over its neighbors, missile coverage of the entire continent, theater nuclear advantage, and force deployment options enabling 360-degree operations in the entire theater. Seeking to establish these five conditions has been instrumental for Russia in its pursuit of path-to-power and path-to-war models for re-arranging the post-World War II security order. The path-to-power model has envisaged achieving systemic change short of war through the destabilization of the Euro-Atlantic region. The path-to-war model has stipulated doing so in short war through strategic operations that are consistent in peace, crisis, and war, and coherent from tactical to strategic and from conventional to nuclear levels.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine demonstrated the discrepancy between Russian strategic operations and reality. Russia failed to achieve its initial political and military objectives; its approach to planning and actual performance were shockingly bad, so it had to regroup, reorganize, and mobilize. As a result of the erosion of Russia's capabilities and NATO's steps taken in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the Alliance holds a strategically advantageous position against Russia on its eastern flank. This contributes to deterrence against Russia escalating the war into NATO territory, influences how Russia behaves in conflict against Ukraine, and influences how Russia's military will look after the war. NATO has returned to the era of strategy by adopting the Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA), which is its first strategy since 1967. DDA defines the Alliance's objectives at the grand strategy and operational levels, the approach to denying Russia's ability to prosecute effective strategic operations, and how the Alliance will contest in peace to prevent transition from peace to crisis or from crisis to war. DDA led to the single largest transformation of NATO plans since the end of the Cold War with a new family of collective defense plans. It also sets the organization for deterrence and defense in the entire SACEUR area of responsibility (AOR) by recognizing strategic interdependence between actions inside and outside AOR, interdependence between tactical and operational depth, the necessity for multi-domain and highly ready forces supported by modern C2, a new force model, the concept of reinforcement by fire, and a new exercise plan.

NATO's progress and Russia's exposed weaknesses, however, should not lead to complacency. During the war against Ukraine, Russia did not apply its doctrine and the basic elements of its definition of strategic operations. Expecting a swift conflict that would end in 72 hours, Russia did not pursue the destruction of an adversary through indirect fires. Not applying its military doctrine also exposed manpower weaknesses that the doctrine was designed to hide. Even though some of Russia's military capability has eroded, Russia has not used its entire strategic weapon set yet. Planning a long-term campaign against the unacceptable conditions of the Euro-Atlantic order, Russia holds some capabilities in reserve. NATO also needs to fully implement its DDA, which will be an iterative process that will take years. While doing so, it may face barriers to the integration of different elements of its strategic toolkit. The slow progress in

conventional-nuclear integration is an example of such barriers, and it betrays existing gaps of understanding of the strategic dimension of war within the Alliance.

In the Indo-Pacific, the perception of U.S. allies is that they have less time to prepare for a regional war and its strategic dimension. In their view, the indirect approach that the United States is taking in supporting non-allied Ukraine against Russia would not work against China in the Taiwan scenario. These allies are concerned about whether they and the United States will have sufficient advance warning of such a conflict and assume that coercive attempts may happen at any time. They express concerns about whether China can be deterred by economic means given China's status as the world largest economy and a key trading partner. They are worried about deteriorating conventional and nuclear balance in the region and do not see the United States as adequately prepared to fight a regional multi-domain war against Beijing. They doubt that a strategy of punishment would work against China, which enjoys conventional overmatch. Allies see that collective regional strategy of denial with resilient and distributed posture is not yet developed and that progress is slow. While the allies see the value in contributing to countering potential Chinese escalation through their own long-range strike, this remains aspirational. Even more than in Europe, the strategy in the Indo-Pacific to prepare for regional conventional war with a strategic dimension requires mid-course correction and greater sense of urgency.

Panel 5: Adapting Deterrence Strategy: Beyond the Traditional "Fundamentals?"

- What are those traditional fundamentals?
- Are changes warranted? If so, why? If not, why not?

There are several traditional fundamentals of nuclear strategy as a subset of deterrence strategy writ large. First is the focus on shaping an adversary's calculus by influencing perception of the benefits of a certain action, the costs of taking the action, and the consequences of not acting (i.e., demonstrating continued restraint). Second is identifying the ends, in other words what must be deterred, and getting insights about the calculus of action and inaction that is made by an adversary. Third is devising the ways to affect the perceived value of certain action to an adversary and identifying means to deter this action. These fundamentals are rooted in incomparable destructive potential of nuclear weapons with which even the losing side in a conflict could ensure that the other side will lose as well.

While mutual assured destruction (MAD) shapes U.S. nuclear strategy, it is a condition rather than a strategy. U.S. nuclear strategy can be best described as one of flexible response. In essence, this strategy is designed to convince an adversary that the United States has broad options of nuclear response to a scenario in which the United States and its allies vital interest are at stake. Building on what Thomas Schelling called "the threat that leaves something to chance," this strategy combines the deterrent effect of limited initial nuclear response with a threat that any nuclear exchange could lead into uncontrolled escalation. The effectiveness of this strategy also relies on creating a strategic context in which continued restraint is not the

adversary's worst option. The risk of the collapse of deterrence is high if an adversary believes that conflict is unavoidable or that it faces catastrophic defeat.

A change of the U.S. nuclear strategy does not seem warranted in the context of the problem of two nuclear peers. The strategy of flexible response remains viable either against one or two adversaries. Escalation dominance does not provide a viable alternative, as it only leads to the condition of MAD at the highest level of expenditure of national treasure. Relying solely on conventional options against nuclear-armed adversaries is also not viable. While conventional response options should be given full consideration, a conventional response to nuclear use by an adversary who is losing a conventional conflict might lead only to more robust adversary attempts to coerce through nuclear means or widespread warfighting use of nuclear weapons to defeat U.S. and allied conventional forces. Then, the question is whether the United States has available means to achieve credible and effective flexible response. At the current stage, U.S. theater nuclear capability is insufficient to provide credible and effective theater options and to engage in competition in risk-taking to deter adversaries. Strategic forces are also insufficient to fill this gap as they may not be operationally relevant for a theater conflict. Whether the changes at a strategic level are necessary is to be determined.

Any viable nuclear deterrence strategy, including flexible response, deserves continuous examination of its fundamentals and the avoidance of group thinking. It also requires grappling with important moral and legal questions. Failing to do so could impact the credibility of the strategy in the eyes of adversaries and allies. An example of a dilemma that the U.S. nuclear strategy faces is whether it is possible to make the nuclear deterrence strategy credible while seeking to eliminate any collateral damage that a nuclear strike against adversary could have on urban areas. Even if the U.S. is explicit in non-targeting civilian targets, how restrictive should the measures be to eliminate the risk of collateral damage? Could the belligerent's reprisal be acceptable? On the one hand, being too restrictive with avoiding any collateral damage may be seen as weakening deterrence against adversary strikes on American urban areas. On the other hand, when the collateral damage is used as deterrence, the collateral damage is no longer collateral but deliberate. Personalist dictators may also not be deterred by the prospects of harm done to the population under their rule. Perhaps, one way of avoiding this dilemma is for the United States to more clearly emphasize its long-standing policy of targeting adversary's leadership responsible for nuclear decisions.

The value of calculated ambiguity in nuclear deterrence strategy also deserves further examination. For example, does explicit renunciation of a nuclear response to a nuclear strike by an adversary – as done by the French President in the context of potential use of Russia's nuclear weapons against non-allied Ukraine – always weaken deterrence? Or it can contribute to strengthening it? More theoretical and empirical work is needed on the value of the calculated ambiguity in deterrence.

Panel 6: Adapting the Strategic Deterrent: Beyond “No New” Modernization?

- Is the current modernization pathway adequate to meet plausible future requirements?
- What new factors might generate different requirements? How likely are they?
- What might be required that is new or different?

To best construct a modernization pathway, the threat must be considered first. Policy, posture, and strategy follow, the means by which a force structure can be constructed to precisely target the threat. In all of these areas, small details matter and could have significant implications.

The U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal must address requirements resulting from geopolitical changes. This includes China's rapid and seemingly indefinite nuclear expansion and the closer collaboration between China and Russia (the so-called two peer problem). Future conflict scenarios range from single to sequential to simultaneous wars, with adversaries in varying degrees of cooperation with one another. Even though the most likely scenario to plan for would be a conflict with two adversaries acting in an uncoordinated or loosely coordinated way, the United States should hedge against a scenario in which two adversaries form an alliance. The evolution of the DPRK into a de facto nuclear weapon state with credible nuclear capabilities is also a geopolitical shift which must be contended with. There is also an emerging situation in the Middle East as Pakistan moves closer to China and Iran. Geopolitical shifts could also affect the perceptions U.S. allies have, thus changing U.S. requirements for successful assurance. This may contribute to a growing "deterrence and assurance gap" at the regional level. Such gaps seem most likely to result from limited U.S. conventional capacity to deal with a conflict in a region that is a lesser priority for the United States, and from insufficient nuclear capabilities at the regional level.

Technological risks that change the requirements of modernization also have to be taken into account, and could include advancements in anti-submarine warfare or a revolution in defensive integrated air and missile defense impacting the future of combat aviation. The offense-defense competitive cycle may decisively affect strategic nuclear balance over the next decade.

From a force employment and deterrence perspective, U.S. nuclear policy needs to have counter-force capability to the extent practical, an ability to inflict unacceptable costs on adversaries by holding at risk what they value most, and the flexibility for tailored responses to a variety of unforeseen scenarios. Against two nuclear peers, the United States would probably not have the luxury to do all of these things at once against both adversaries. This particularly applies to counterforce capability against two adversaries, which might require different strategic forces than the United States has today. Yet, such capability might also not be needed. From a deterrence perspective, until the United States engages in large scale nuclear exchange with an adversary, the U.S. strategic forces would pose a threat to both adversaries separately which makes deterrence threats credible to both. Once the United States engages in a large-scale exchange with one, the credibility of the nuclear threat against the second would also increase, thus reducing the need for counter-force.

The important geopolitical consideration in the context of two nuclear peers is whether parity in strategic nuclear forces matters. Some argue that strategic parity should not be a goal in and of

itself because the United States only needs sufficient forces to achieve its objectives. However, parity becomes important if an adversary thinks it is, because having or not having parity could influence an adversary's calculus of aggression or coercion. If the United States loses parity and cannot mobilize to compete, adversaries may feel emboldened to act in a way they might not have otherwise despite the United States still being able to meet its objectives with a smaller nuclear force. Allies may also lose confidence in U.S. strategic forces. As perception determines the value of parity, if the United States refrains from building up its forces for parity's sake, it would have to convincingly communicate to allies and adversaries alike that it can achieve its goals without parity. This would not be easy. The debate about whether the United States should accept mutual vulnerability with China demonstrate how sensitive the allies in the Indo-Pacific region are about any indication that the United States may be losing supremacy or is ceding nuclear superiority to China.

If the adaptation of the current strategic modernization pathway is necessary, the United States is late to need. 2030 and 2035 are not far away from a defense modernization perspective. The current modernization pathway is a pathway of replacement of U.S. forces designed under New START Treaty limits. It entails the simple replacement of weapons and delivery systems that are aging out with refurbished versions. If any changes in U.S. nuclear posture are necessary, the United States would have to rely on strengthening the effectiveness of the currently projected U.S. strategic forces by enhancing their survivability and durability. This might require an increase in their size by uploading warheads to existing platforms, production of mobile versions of ICBMs or dispersal of strategic bombers. The only new capabilities that could be added in this timeframe are those that would rely on variations of existing warheads such as SLCM-N. If over the next decade there arises a requirement for alternative delivery modes of strategic forces, such as hypersonic nuclear weapons, the U.S. nuclear weapons complex will struggle to meet this need.

Panel 7: Adapting the Theater Deterrent: Beyond Limited Incrementalism?

- Is the current modernization pathway adequate to meet plausible future requirements?
- What new factors might generate different requirements? How likely are they?
- What might be required that is new or different?

The current modernization pathway of limited incrementalism is not suited to the requirements of NATO and U.S. extended deterrence in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. This is because incremental adaptation assumes that the threat changes incrementally, but challenges in Europe and the Indo-Pacific have changed rapidly. Over the next decade, regional nuclear balance in these regions is poised to further shift in favor of Russia and China. This shift will manifest as the continued expansion of the Chinese nuclear arsenal paired with Beijing's growing conventional capability, Russia's increasing reliance on nuclear options and the more flexible theater nuclear capabilities of North Korea. Uncertainties at the strategic level are also likely to increase as a result of further Chinese nuclear buildup, as well as Russian strategic force posture decisions following the end of the New START Treaty. All these challenges will be compounded by emergence of the two-nuclear-peer problem, which is likely to stress extended deterrence and assurance in both regions and lead to renewed concerns of the U.S. allies about being decoupled

from the American security guarantees. Asian and European regional allies already perceive of being the 'secondary' allies – the Europeans because of the U.S. strategic priority given to Asia, the Allies in Asia because of insufficient U.S. military engagement in their region.

The incremental changes in U.S. extended deterrence over the last decade have not led to satisfactory results, leading instead to deterrence and assurance gaps in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. Even though NATO has been adapting its nuclear posture and made important progress since 2014, the Alliance could have done more to be more optimally prepared to deal with all nuclear escalation risks that are related to ongoing Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Even though the Alliance has means to respond to Russia's nuclear threats or use but its range of options would be more credible with a modern and resilient force of dual-capable aircraft or greater coherence between nuclear and conventional capabilities and concepts. The nuclear balance, in this sense, favors Russia in that Russia is better prepared to compete in nuclear-risk-taking than NATO. The progress in adapting extended nuclear deterrence to new requirements has been also inadequate in Asia. Limited incrementalism can be partially to blame, being that both China and North Korea make rapid nuclear progress yet the U.S. extended deterrence posture in Asia has remained largely unchanged.

Despite the deterioration of the security environment in the region, the steps to strengthen extended deterrence in the region proposed by the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) are no different than those proposed in 2010 NPR. U.S. extended-deterrence-related policy has also been inconsistent: for example, the Trump administration's decision to revive the nuclear sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) that addressed Japanese concerns about U.S. theater capabilities was reversed by the Biden administration. From an operational perspective, conventional-nuclear integration in the Indo-Pacific is also insufficient. These deficiencies are exacerbated by command structure design in the region that hamper coordinated and streamlined regional response in the event of conflicts on the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has also raised concerns for Asian allies that the U.S. fear of WWII might undermine the U.S. readiness to confront nuclear-armed rivals in Asia. For all these reasons, some U.S. allies in the region express disappointment and frustration. They see the need for going beyond limited incrementalism and declarations to making the alliances prepared for scenarios of conflict with nuclear-armed adversaries through robust, concrete, in-theater capabilities backed by exercises and planning.

There are, however, opportunities for the United States and its allies to effectively address future challenge. This can be achieved by upgrading regional hardware, that is nuclear deterrence capabilities and posture. This should involve steps such as making dual-capable aircraft more credible and truly globally deployable. Regional extended deterrence architecture would become more self-sustainable and credible with addition of SLCM-N to the U.S. nuclear arsenal. The changes in regional nuclear software are also necessary. These changes should include steps such as upgrading consultation processes, establishing regionally based nuclear planning, making regional nuclear exercises more realistic, and engagement of the U.S. and allies in regional nuclear campaigning. Most of these measures seem to reflect what NATO allies have agreed to do but not yet implemented, and what Japan and South Korea experts advocated for over the last decade. While incrementalism is somewhat unavoidable, as changes cannot be

done overnight, incremental steps must reflect a sense of urgency and be driven by a long-term vision to ensure extended nuclear deterrence remains fit for purpose up to 2030 and beyond.

Panel 8: Adapting the Hedge: Beyond Upload?

- What kinds of risks should the United States hedge against in an eroded and eroding deterrence environment?
- How well hedged is the United States?
- If some part of the hedge is deployed in response to China's growing force, how should the hedge be re-set?

It takes years for the United States to develop nuclear and other capabilities. This requires policymakers to make informed predictions about the security environment, the evolution of military technology, and the reliability of U.S. systems over time to determine which capabilities are needed and in what quantity. This also requires hedging against unforeseen developments. There are four risks that the United States should hedge against. First, the geopolitical risks associated with the number of nuclear adversaries, their nuclear capabilities, their increased alignment with each other, or the emergence of a new adversary. This risk is already materializing with increasing Sino-Russian alignment and the strategic breakout of China. Second are the operational risks associated with changes in the military capabilities of adversaries and their effect on U.S. nuclear posture. These include improvement in the adversary's missile defense or anti-submarine warfare capabilities that could put into question the credibility of U.S. ICBM force and ballistic missile submarines. Thirdly, there are technical risks associated with the performance of U.S. nuclear capabilities, such as plutonium aging. Fourth, there are programmatic risks of delays in the current nuclear modernization program.

The current U.S. hedge relies on the capacity to upload warheads on the delivery vehicles that were downloaded as part of New START implementation. The United States also has a limited ability to increase the number of deployed delivery vehicles. This hedge is sufficient to address near term geopolitical risks from the increase in China's ICBM force and the two nuclear-near-peer problem. For instance, in the short term, the United States can increase the number of nuclear weapons deployed via strategic bombers. After the New START Treaty expires, it can increase the number of warheads deployed via ICBMs and on ballistic missile submarines.

However, the U.S. hedge is not robust enough. If in response to China's nuclear buildup the United States deployed its hedge into the active force, it would give up hedging against other geopolitical, operational, or technological risks. This could happen within the next decade and would require re-setting the hedge. To do so, the United States could replenish the hedge, make preparations for engagement in a long-term nuclear arms race with China and Russia, or it could change its approach to hedging with an emphasis on rapid qualitative rather than quantitative adjustments to the arsenal. For example, in future the United States might have to deploy a limited number of new types of warheads on delivery vehicles capable of penetrating missile defense systems. Re-setting the hedge could take years, during which the United States would have to accept more risks.

One way of making the U.S. better prepared to re-set the hedge when the need arises is through building an agile and responsive nuclear infrastructure; this is something that the United States failed to do over the last three decades, despite the recognition of the need. Even though the 2022 NPR eliminates the formal role of nuclear weapons as a hedge against an uncertain future, it pledges to deliver a modern, adapted, new nuclear enterprise. A sense of urgency is needed to execute this. There are also steps that can be taken before getting to this ideal. One method could be using the U.S. nuclear arsenal in a more efficient way by taking advantage of emerging and disruptive technologies such as AI, or complicating adversaries' targeting of U.S. non-strategic nuclear weapons by deploying more dual capable aircraft than actual warheads. The national laboratories can also play an important role in making the U.S. better prepared to hedge. They should think ahead about potential requirements that are not yet defined, so the means to address them will be available expeditiously if they become necessary. The labs need to be proactive rather than reactive to actions taken by adversaries. This requires lifting existing political barriers and to strongly promote creative research and development. It also necessitates a change in oversight culture. Instead of demanding no risks, the demand for the laboratories should be to accept acceptable risks. Moving forward also requires being specific about the obstacles that exist within the nuclear complex and the concrete steps needed to overcome them.

Panel 9: Adapting Arms Control: Beyond Reductions?

- How have legacy approaches adapted to new challenges?
- What further adaptations are necessary and plausible?
- What are the prospects for arms control in 2030?

The legacy arms control has not adapted to new challenges particularly well. Given the geopolitical challenges of the last two decades, success for arms control has been seen in its ability to adapt or die. Agreements and approaches that did not evolve have disappeared entirely. There are a number of reasons of why some arms control agreements slipped into irrelevance and why innovation has been difficult. One of them is a loss of focus. Once a treaty is signed, the work on any arms control agreement is considered as being done. As with failing to tend the garden, the problems that are initially small grow because they are not addressed when there is still time to do so. There is also a problem of a political consensus on the value of arms control, and of scapegoating arms control for problems whose root cause is elsewhere. Also, as experienced executive and legislative branch officials have left the field, there are barriers to passing their knowledge to the younger generation which lacks experience with real-world negotiations and understanding of historical precedents. There is also a mismatch between policy and technology communities, as policy communities are asking for technological solutions without specifying the problems these solutions should be solving. The allies also very often emphasize the value of arms control without knowing what they want specifically, and leave some problems to be solved by the United States alone.

Many further adaptations of arms control are necessary. However, it remains unclear what these adaptations should be. For this reason, basic questions must be asked, analyzed, and

answered in terms of what security requirements arms control is meant to solve and why. For instance, it remains unclear what efforts in arms control with Russia and China should focus on, or what the United States could limit or give up in exchange for concessions made by potential adversaries. Also, how the United States should pursue nuclear arms control with two nuclear near-peers has yet to be defined. Should the United States pursue arms control separately with Russia and China through bilateral agreements, or should it attempt to create a trilateral deal? Should it seek formal or informal agreements? If the United States' ability to cooperate with one adversary should not be held hostage by the other, how can the United States ensure this in practice in a way that leads to sustainable agreement? An additional challenge is to adapt arms control to adversaries that do not share the United States' interest in reducing nuclear risks, and who instead prefer to take advantage by manipulating these risks. This calls into question the behavior-based approach to arms control focused on risk reduction and norms, which potential adversaries are not interested in.

Even though many arms control adaptations are needed, not many are plausible. The prospects for new nuclear arms control agreements over the next decade are bleak. China is an unwilling arms control partner. A replacement of the New START Treaty with Russia is not likely to be put into place before the treaty expires in 2026. Among other factors, Russia's war against Ukraine could significantly impact prospects for a new treaty. Depending on how long the war lasts and given the atrocities and crimes committed by Russia, it is unclear what the United States' willingness to negotiate with Russia would be, what Russia's preferences would be, what U.S. allies and partners would prefer. The wild card development that could negatively impact the prospects for arms control is a hypothetical scenario in which arms control further erodes and even seemingly untouchable agreements like the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) go away. This would lead to the collapse of the entire nonproliferation and arms control system.

Despite the pessimistic outlook, opportunities for arms control might arise as geopolitics and domestic politics shift. In the United States, the Chinese nuclear buildup over the next decade could lead to blame game about who let the "warhead gap" happen, similar to the Cold War "bomber gap" or "missile gap," and could eventually translate into a greater push for arms control solutions to a China nuclear peer problem. Russia might also have incentives to engage in strategic arms control if it felt the need for post-Ukraine war breather to rebuild its shattered conventional forces. Approaching or outgrowing the current New START warhead limits, China might demand a new type of major power relationship with an arms control agreement on its own terms. U.S. allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific might also push the United States to seek strategic arms control.

The United States should be prepared for a scenario in which the windows of opportunity for arms control open. Such windows can open and close quickly, and taking advantage of them requires years of painstaking preparatory work. This requires the United States getting its own house in order by engaging in conceptual work on what the United States wants to achieve through arms control and how. If the United States is serious about arms control, it should put something on the table that would interest Russia and China before either adversary makes its own proposal. This requires investment in capacity-building for people who do arms control, including future negotiators and inspectors. Investment is also needed in developing new verification capabilities and protocols that are tailored to solve concrete policy problems. To

these ends, the United States should engage with allies and the private sector. It should also avoid the tendency to focus on fast solutions or on novelty ventures which do not address real issues.

Panel 10: Anticipating the Politics of Life Outside the Comfort Zone

- As the policy context becomes more dynamic and the choices more difficult, how will the domestic politics of nuclear policy be affected?
- Can a bipartisan consensus in support of strategy and posture be sustained in a three-peer environment?
- What can and should be done to lay the foundations for policy continuity?

While nuclear issues matter for the U.S. public, people are generally not interested in the minute details and do not vote based off specific nuclear decisions. Thus, what primarily defines nuclear programming is congressional support. Practical considerations impact individual congressional votes, and members of Congress tend to focus on the big picture impressions of the security environment rather than details about individual programs. Despite partisanship in Congress, there has been continuity in sustained funding for nuclear modernization. This congressional agreement, however, is not resultant of unanimity. It reflects that about 80% of members of Congress agree with 80% of nuclear policies about 80% of the time. Debates take place on the margins of the core concepts with noise from outliers on both sides of the policy spectrum but with little effect on the policy core.

This bipartisan consensus, where most of congress supports most of the nuclear policy core most of the time, is fragile. The need to react to a deteriorating security environment will only put new strain on nuclear policy proceedings. Chinese nuclear expansion and the emerging two-nuclear-peer problem require new solutions and debates on U.S. nuclear strategy, policy and posture. The United States will need to adapt fundamentally its policies on modernization, extended deterrence, hedging, and arms control. This will require moving from the comfort zones these policies have rested within throughout the post-cold-war period. New bipartisan consensus will require agreement on issues that are likely to be divisive: how to address regional deterrence gaps and whether SLCM-N is an agreeable solution; how to enhance survivability of the U.S. strategic forces in the two-peer environment; whether and under what conditions increase the size of the U.S. arsenal through uploading ICBMs, bombers and SLBMs with additional nuclear warheads; and if/how to pursue a follow-on agreement to the New START Treaty. On one hand, fear and uncertainty drives polarization; those skeptical of doing more will be driven by fears of perpetual arms racing, while others will fear that the United States is not doing enough. On the other hand, the international security environment may favor policy continuity in support of sustained and strengthened U.S. nuclear programming. If the international security environment remains somewhere between unstable and scary, people may be more likely vote for the continue bolstering of nuclear programs.

Amongst the Biden administration, the National Defense Strategy and NPR cite the two-nuclear-peer problem as something to be reckoned with even though the documents are unclear on what to do with this problem. Yet, this is a historic recognition as it opens a process that could lead to a new policy consensus. Either such consensus on new policy parameters will be found, or nuclear policy decisions will be taken in a deeply divided and gridlocked political process. The faster the nuclear community can sketch out an outline for compromise the better. To lay the foundations for domestic consensus, there is a need for the bipartisan recognition that both arms control and credible nuclear deterrence are important, and that there are linkages between them. A balanced approach, combining some modest force deployments in response to China with a plausible arms control proposal addressing the emerging two-peer environment, could serve to solidify a new consensus.



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