



## The Next Chapter in US Nuclear Policy

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# The Next Chapter in US Nuclear Policy

Three decades ago, major changes in the international system drove major changes in US nuclear policy and posture. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union brought an end to the arms race and ushered in an era focused on reducing the role and number of weapons. Today, the international system is again passing through a period of dramatic change, one likely to have a significant impact on US nuclear policy and posture. One chapter in US nuclear policy is now ending as another begins, bringing new challenges and policy choices. Alas, whereas there was good cause for celebration in the 1990s, today there is not. The policy choices now in front of us are unwelcome and resisted by many. But the consequences of failing to adapt to the new context would likely be severe.

The end of the Cold War brought plentiful and welcome implications for US nuclear policy

To better understand this new landscape, this essay begins with a review of the main features of the chapter now ending in terms of US nuclear policy and posture. It then explores how changes in the security environment over the last decade or so have affected US strategies for deterrence and strategic stability. The essay then examines the new nuclear policy challenges in this new context. It also asks whether the United States is up to these challenges. The arguments developed here closely echo those developed by the bipartisan Congressional

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Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States and found in its October 2023 report. Chartered to advise Congress on needed adaptations to US nuclear and missile defense strategy and posture, this politically diverse group came to unanimity around findings and recommendations that surprised many on both sides of the aisle. Central to their argument (and mine) are the judgments that “the United States faces a fundamentally different strategic setting” and that failures to adjust nuclear policy and posture will put US vital interests at risk.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Chapter Now Ending**

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In 1991, the international future looked bright. With the end of the Cold War and Soviet collapse, a new era in major power relations seemed within reach. President George H.W. Bush described a “new world order” akin to a concert of major powers. President Bill Clinton sought strategic partnerships with Russia and China as part of a strategy of “enlargement and engagement.” President George W. Bush argued after the 9/11 attacks that major power relations were moving onto a new footing of common interests, common responsibilities, and increasingly common values. President Barack Obama expressed cautious optimism about the long-term trajectory of relations with Russia and China, while also recognizing growing evidence that Moscow and Beijing were diverging from this vision.

The implications for US nuclear policy and posture were plentiful and welcome, and the benefits have been pursued on a largely bipartisan basis ever since. Nuclear confrontation and competition gave way to cooperation and risk reduction. Between 1991 and 1993, Presidents Bush and Clinton pursued a series of unilateral but reciprocal steps with their Soviet/Russian counterparts—known as the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs)—to stand down from nuclear confrontation, end the arms race, and put to rest fears of an Armageddon-like war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Deep reductions in nuclear forces were accomplished with the first START agreement in 1991, with subsequent agreements continuing the reduction process resulting in a total drawdown from approximately 70,000 to 10,000 or so weapons.<sup>2</sup> Under the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, Russia and the United States worked together to address the threats posed by legacy capabilities in the former Soviet Union. The nuclear test moratorium was agreed upon, followed by the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Significant changes were also made to the extended nuclear deterrent, with the United States eliminating its worldwide inventory of theater nuclear weapons (while preserving a small arsenal of air deliverable weapons in Europe).<sup>3</sup>

The end of the Cold War paid additional dividends for multilateral arms control. A comprehensive (nuclear and non-nuclear) European arms control architecture was finalized to help bring stability and predictability to the region. And strategic cooperation among the major powers helped to pave the way for agreement and entry into force of the Chemical Weapons Convention and successful extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1995.

Changes in US deterrence strategy were also significant. In addition to reducing the number of nuclear weapons, US policymakers sought to reduce their role in US defense strategy, with the hope that this would encourage others to do the same. This goal moved within reach as the US military gained dominance over any potential military adversary after the Cold War. More significantly, by counting Russia and China as strategic partners, the United States was able to shift the focus of deterrence strategy onto the problems posed by “rogue states” seeking weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the missiles to deliver them at long range. Recall that the bright future of 1991 was immediately clouded by Saddam Hussein’s aggression against Kuwait and a war with Iraq that seemed to entail a significant risk of the use of WMD. While shifting the focus, US leaders have consistently rejected a relationship of mutual assured destruction (MAD) with such states akin to what it had somewhat grudgingly come to accept with the USSR in the 1960s. Instead, they have sought to strengthen non-nuclear means (ballistic missile defenses and conventional long-range precision strike capabilities). They did so knowing that Russia and China might be concerned about such developments in the US strategic posture and thus would likely take steps to adapt their strategic postures to ensure the continued viability of their deterrents. Their adaptations generated few or no US concerns for much of this period.

This chapter also reflected the renewal of the disarmament aspiration. In a series of op-eds beginning in 2007, Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn, William Perry, and George Schulz waged a high-level campaign in favor of a “bold initiative” on a joint project among the major powers to create a “new deterrence framework” allowing for far deeper reductions.<sup>4</sup> This vision was embraced by President Obama in his Prague speech of April 2009 (and by his Republican opponent in the preceding presidential campaign, John McCain).<sup>5</sup> This renewal has fueled a nearly ceaseless probing of US nuclear policy for further steps to reduce the role and number of US nuclear weapons—which continues to this day. The US desire to lead by example has helped to delay programs to replace the legacy US nuclear arsenal, now long past its intended shelf life, with modernized capabilities. It has also constrained the United States from modernizing nuclear weapons in a way that might result in new military capabilities.

## The New Context

### In the strategic landscape of 2024, three factors stand out with US nuclear policy implications

Although the future looked bright in 1991, there were already storm clouds on the horizon. And more gathered. More than three decades later, the storm has burst upon us, against the backdrop of wars in Europe and the Middle East as well as rising fears of war in Asia. We face new nuclear dangers we had hoped to avoid, along with waning confidence in the utility of legacy policy approaches to turn the situation around. In the strategic landscape of 2024, three factors stand out, each with especially consequential implications for US nuclear policy.

Major power relations have taken a dramatic turn for the worse—a point that hardly needs elaboration. The post-Cold War period of growing cooperation and cautious optimism has given way to a period of competition, rivalry, and even confrontation. Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping (and Kim Jong Un) have openly declared their intent to destroy the US-led regional orders around them and to remake the global balance of power.

While US military leaders were distracted elsewhere, Russia and China went to school on the American way of war as displayed during the two Gulf Wars, and developed a set of ideas about how to deter and defeat a conventionally-superior, nuclear-armed major power and its allies. Their theories of victory are apparently centered on three judgments.<sup>6</sup> The first is that in any conflict with the United States on their own periphery, their stake will outweigh the stake of the United States. The second is that the United States can be awakened to that asymmetry of stake early in a conflict with limited acts of escalation, potentially including nuclear attacks, so long as they are “dosed” at the proper level—in the formulation of one Russian analyst—to sober but not enrage the United States.<sup>7</sup> Thus, nuclear weapons are at the center of their strategies to confront the United States with blackmail and brinkmanship. The third judgment is that there is a good chance of subduing the United States and its allies without fighting them through the aggressive use of information confrontation strategies aimed at breaking their resolve, backed by favorable shifts in the correlation of military forces.

Having done their intellectual homework in the 1990s and 2000s, Russia and China have gone on to develop the needed military doctrine and assemble the associated new military capabilities. These include theater strike systems capable of delivering both conventional and nuclear weapons as well as theater missile defenses. One Russian leader has boasted of building “a new nuclear scalpel for every military problem in Europe.”<sup>8</sup> After decades of insisting that it

seeks only the minimum means of reprisal, China is now well launched on a comprehensive nuclear modernization program that has already resulted in a larger and more diverse force, and is well on the way to a nuclear force aligned with Xi's vision of China "at the center of the world stage, in the dominant position."<sup>9</sup> One result is the increased confidence evident in Moscow and Beijing in accepting military risk. This is especially alarming at a time when Presidents Putin and Xi have made a number of significant miscalculations, and when the United States is distracted by war in the Middle East and deeply divided at home. A consequence of these developments is that in future military crises, the United States and its allies and partners will certainly face at least the risk, if not the reality, of opportunistic aggression by a second nuclear-armed rival.

Those miscalculations raise a question about whether Presidents Putin and Xi might do so in the fundamental way that Hitler, Mussolini, and the military government in Tokyo did in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Surveying the pattern of disarray, anti-militarism, and disengagement evident at that time, they miscalculated that the democracies would not defend themselves if attacked. As Robert Kagan has argued, "In the critical years of [Hitler's] rise to power, the consolidation of his rule, and then his first moves against the Versailles order, the democratic powers were passive and accommodating ... In those early years, Hitler feared and expected the democracies would come after him during what he called that 'perilous interval.' When they did not ... he grew overconfident. When Roosevelt took power ... both Hitler and the Japanese were so far down the road that they could not be deterred by anything short of a genuine threat of war, and perhaps not even that."<sup>10</sup>

In 2024, we must question how far down that road Putin and Xi might be. The same potential for miscalculation and the same uncertain risk of war arise with Kim Jong Un. We can hope that the strong Western response to Russian aggression against Ukraine has dispelled misperceptions about the resolve of democracies to defend their interests. We must also recognize that this hope may no longer be valid if Putin proves successful in Ukraine in the medium to long term.

The chief implication of the return of major power rivalry for US nuclear policy is to restore Russia and China as objects of US nuclear deterrence strategy. As then-Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter argued in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, "we need a new game plan."<sup>11</sup> That game plan must address the adaptations to strategy and posture that are appropriate to the new context. On strategy, the adaptations must address the more multipolar context, China's emergence as a second nuclear peer, the assurance requirements of increasingly anxious allies and partners, and the evolving requirements of extended deterrence in three different regions. On posture, the adaptations must begin with a determination of whether the much-reduced US nuclear arsenal is sufficient, both quantitatively and qualitatively, for the new, more

multipolar security environment. This question attaches to both the triad of strategic weapon systems and the theater nuclear force. In addition, the potential that adversary leaders might again miscalculate US resolve brings with it a question about what can be done now to address their misperception. This points to the value of actions that might challenge existing beliefs in Moscow, Beijing, and Pyongyang about US strategic intentions and resolve. Game theory points to the potential value of “costly signals”<sup>12</sup>—moves by one player that cause the other to reassess its judgments of the first player’s resolve because they involve costs and risks beyond the expected. A politically unpopular decision to expand the US nuclear force would be one such signal.

With adversarial major power relations as the first factor in the new context, the second is the failure of the effort to prevent nuclear proliferation by North Korea or to achieve rollback. Kim Jong Un has described two missions for North Korea’s emerging nuclear force: deterrence of aggression by the United States and “an unexpected second mission” associated with redressing its concerns about the regional political order.<sup>13</sup> In support of the latter, he is committed to a rapid and large-scale build-up of tactical nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, Iran’s continued progress in developing the elements of a nuclear force serve as an important reminder that North Korea may not long remain as the only nuclear-armed challenger at the regional level. Moreover, a decision by Tehran to cross the nuclear threshold could serve as a tipping point, precipitating the long-feared cascade of nuclear proliferation within and perhaps beyond the Middle East. The fact that the five permanent members of the UN Security Council have shown themselves to be largely ineffective in preventing North Korea from deploying a small but growing nuclear force bodes ill for future efforts.

Along with the concerns above, the chief implication of these developments for

**Developments have placed significant new burdens on extended deterrence for US nuclear policy**

US nuclear policy is to place significant new burdens on extended deterrence. US allies in Europe and Asia have grown steadily more anxious about the credibility of US security guarantees, largely because of the potential decoupling they fear if and when the United States faces nuclear dangers that it would not otherwise face when protecting them. This has generated additional demands from allies for stronger deterrence and assurance. The chief implication of these developments for the US nuclear posture is to raise more questions about whether the much smaller and

less capable posture that took shape in the early 1990s, and which remains little changed today, is fit for purpose in today’s very different world.

The third major new factor in the 2024 strategic landscape is that arms control is no longer available as a tool for managing strategic competition. The robust bilateral regime that was in place as the Cold War ended has given way to a regime of a single element—the New START Treaty, the latest in a string of agreements between Washington and Moscow since the mid-1980s to cooperatively monitor and reduce strategic nuclear arsenals. Due to expire in 2026, the treaty is no longer deemed binding by Moscow, which suspended its participation in early 2023. The comprehensive European architecture that was in place in 1991 has entirely disappeared. The global multilateral disarmament regimes are struggling with concerns about Russia’s compliance and with its assistance to Iran and North Korea in a manner that runs afoul of its commitments as a member of the UN Security Council.

This crisis of arms control has many sources. Presidents Putin and Xi have placed their bets on strategic competition rather than cooperative restraint and apparently judge that there are new strategic advantages to be gained in that direction. Both reject arms control of the kind the United States has long preferred—that is, an approach that continues nuclear reductions and transparency but does not constrain defenses or conventional strategic systems. This follows President Putin’s judgment that the legacy agreements he inherited had been imposed on Russia in its moment of weakness as part of a US strategy to encircle and contain Russia, keeping it weak.<sup>14</sup> But rather than withdraw from the treaties, he chose to cheat from the inside and gain whatever benefits there might be in continued compliance by others, including the United States.<sup>15</sup> China’s continued rejection of participation in the arms control process is also a factor. The US decision to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty played a role as well, coming at a time when US defense planners were proclaiming the virtues of “full spectrum dominance.”<sup>16</sup> A key additional factor is the challenge presented by competition in the military applications of emerging technologies in cyber space, outer space, and elsewhere; neither Moscow, Beijing nor Washington appears to have reached a point where it believes it has nothing more to gain from continued competition in these new domains.

Additionally, thinking among US arms control experts became heavily influenced by those who value it primarily as a stepping stone to disarmament (rather than as a tool for stabilizing dangerous forms of deterrence competition). In part, this is a legacy of the optimism of the 1990s, reinforced over time by the embrace of the goal of nuclear abolition as a means to ensure support for the NPT and given the dangers of nuclear weapons. The advent of the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and the global advocacy of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons have reinforced the shift of the debate in this direction, rendering much of the global expert community debate irrelevant to the management of the urgent new problems in the deterrence landscape.



The chief implication of these arms control developments for US nuclear policy is to call into question the longstanding US strategy for stability. That strategy emphasizes dialogue and cooperation. The role of dialogue is to enable adversaries to discover shared interests in avoiding common nuclear dangers. The role of cooperation is to turn shared interests into both informal and formal mechanisms that can build mutual trust, confidence and security. But Presidents Putin, Xi and Kim are having none of it. They have all rejected the efforts of the United States to address nuclear dangers through dialogue, diplomacy and arms control. Russian leaders have overtly deprioritized such cooperation in order to address their more significant concerns about the European security order. China's leaders apparently perceive no such common interest and have rejected the entreaties of five US presidents in a row to join in a strategic dialogue that is substantive, sustained and high-level. Presidents Putin, Xi and Kim also appear to feel no pressure to emulate the strategic restraint shown by the United States in the development of its nuclear forces and missile defenses. In fact, they sometimes appear to interpret unilateral US restraint not as a form of strategic reassurance but as a signal of appeasement and of American decline and retreat.

These developments in arms control also compel us to accept that we are not on "a glidepath to disarmament," as suggested in 2014 by a British advisory group. The conditions that would allow the nuclear powers to safely disarm are even less proximate than it seemed in April 2009 when President Obama gave his famous speech in Prague recommitting the United States to the long-term disarmament project.<sup>17</sup>

In sum, changes in the security environment call into question some of the main premises of longstanding US nuclear policy. They also cast doubt on some of the main planning assumptions that have guided the design of the US nuclear posture for three decades. It is hardly surprising that the Strategic Posture Commission (SPC) came to the conclusions it did.

## **New Policy Challenges**

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As the post-Cold War chapter closes, a new chapter in US nuclear policy has begun, one which will contain many new challenges. Three stand out as particularly significant and vexing.

The first challenge is to adapt US strategic forces to the deterrence challenges of a more multipolar world, and to the particular risks of the more multi-domain character of potential strategic conflict. The Biden administration's 2022 Nuclear Posture Review continued the bipartisan commitment to the modernization Program of Record (PoR) that is replacing the aging

nuclear triad with modernized variants. But this is a replacement program, not a program to adapt the force to a different world. US leaders have judged that deterrence requires the ability to put at risk what enemy leaders most value—a calculus that varies by leader and country. Thus, it must be possible to tailor deterrence to different adversaries. In today’s more multipolar and more adversarial environment, the requirement to tailor puts new burdens on US nuclear forces. The planned replacement program will not deliver a force with the necessary flexibility to allow the needed tailoring to multiple actors and circumstances. As the Strategic Posture Commission concluded, “the PoR is necessary but not sufficient ... Something more and/or different is needed.”<sup>18</sup>

**T**ailoring  
deterrence to  
different  
adversaries puts  
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nuclear forces

A strong body of opinion within the United States opposes such adaptation. For some, any decision to reverse the nuclear reductions process is simply anathema given their overriding concerns about the dangers of nuclear weapons. For others, any decision to build something new or different would inevitably start an arms race that would only further degrade US and allied security. For still others, even replacing the aging nuclear triad is a waste of resources given their deep skepticism that any US adversary would ever use nuclear weapons.

The second challenge is to strengthen extended nuclear deterrence. Here too, the United States is pursuing a replacement program. For more than a decade, it has been working with NATO allies to modernize the so-called nuclear sharing arrangements. This is NATO’s unique arrangement to share nuclear roles and responsibilities, in which a few key allies acquire and operate fighter-bombers capable of delivering both conventional and nuclear weapons, while hosting US nuclear weapons on their own territory. The replacement program involves modernizing a 60-year-old nuclear gravity bomb (the B61) so that it can be mated to the advanced F35 now entering allied fleets. The United States also promises to make forward-deployable nuclear forces available to allies globally in time of crisis and war—a commitment aimed at deterrence and assurance in Northeast Asia. In addition to replacing nuclear hardware, the United States and its allies have been pursuing non-nuclear supplements to regional deterrence architectures, including theater missile defenses and deep precision-strike capabilities. They have also been upgrading the software of extended deterrence—in NATO, with efforts to raise the alliance’s nuclear IQ; and in Northeast Asia, with new nuclear consultative mechanisms.

But this replacement program falls short. It is essentially replicating a posture that first took shape with the PNIs in the 1990s to withdraw and dismantle theater nuclear weapons and rely primarily on US strategic systems for extended deterrence in a more cooperative international environment. This posture is increasingly troubling to frontline allies, who worry about the credibility of US threats to employ their strategic forces when doing so would expose the United States to the risk of a nuclear response on its homeland. But the posture seems untroubling to leaders in Moscow, Beijing and Pyongyang, whose leaders apparently judge that there is some advantage to be gained through continued competition for theater nuclear advantage. To ensure that it remains fit for purpose over the long term, NATO's nuclear modernization must continue after conclusion of the B61 program and result in a more flexible posture with improved stand-off capabilities and an operational footprint better aligned with the alliance's new geography. As the Strategic Posture Commission concluded, "Additional U.S. theater nuclear capabilities will be necessary in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific to deter adversary nuclear use and offset local conventional superiority. These additional theater capabilities will need to be deployable, survivable, and variable in their available yield options."<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, in the new multipolar security environment, the United States needs a new division of deterrence labor with and among its allies and partners. Their role in strengthening the deterrence provided by general purpose military forces is already well-established. Less well understood are their roles in strengthening deterrence at the strategic level of war with a toolkit of missile defenses, deep precision strike, resilience in cyber space, and support to US nuclear deterrence operations. In a world where opportunistic aggression by a second nuclear-armed adversary is a real possibility, allies must be able to compensate when US focus and forces are drawn elsewhere.

Here too, there is a strong body of opinion opposing change. Anything that suggests a possible increased role for nuclear weapons is anathema to some. There is also resistance to the idea that allies should have independent non-nuclear strike capabilities of their own, as this might enable them to start wars or escalate them in ways the United States would not prefer.

The third challenge is to build a new strategy for stability that doesn't depend on dialogue, cooperation and arms control for success. We should not allow our agenda for stability to be held hostage by leaders that choose not to join us in this endeavor. Instead, the United States should partner with its allies to advance collective action to adapt and strengthen deterrence and define the elements of unilateral, non-reciprocated restraint that are necessary for strategic stability. For the time being, we must accept that our

focus must be on managing instability, not eliminating it. Here yet again, a strong body opposes change. The strategy for stability built on dialogue to generate trust is deeply engrained in our open, democratic culture. The disarmament ambition is also deep and abiding.

To contribute meaningfully, arms control must make itself relevant to the new sources of deterrence instability in a multipolar world marked by competition and potentially conflict in multiple domains. This requires first understanding those new sources. It does not require setting aside our long-term aspirations to restore arms control cooperation among the major powers.

How might this new chapter end? If we are successful in addressing these new challenges, it could end well, with lessened instabilities and an eventual return to strategic cooperation among the major powers with a dampening of proliferation pressures. But it might also end badly, ushering in an end to the nuclear taboo. Or it could end catastrophically, with a cataclysmic nuclear war. Our stake is clear.

**The US needs a new strategy for stability that doesn't depend on dialogue, cooperation and arms control**

## **Is the United States Up to These Challenges?**

The early evidence is mixed. On one hand, an understanding of the new context has been well-reflected in the national security strategies, national defense strategies, and nuclear posture reviews of recent presidential administrations. Some important progress has been made in understanding the new ways of war of potential US adversaries, in developing our own theories of victory in the kinds of wars for which they are preparing, and in improving the ability of the United States and its allies and partners to constructively influence the calculi of those adversaries as to the potential benefits, costs and risks of different courses of action. Also, modernization of the triad and of the forward-deployable assets underwrites all US policy objectives.

To its credit, the Biden administration has set down some important markers signifying that it has moved out onto this new terrain. In summer 2023, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan described the “cracks in the foundation” of the strategy for nuclear security and stability “that we have depended on for decades” as “substantial and deep.”<sup>20</sup> He described a “new strategy” for strategic stability encompassing “updates” to deterrence capabilities and plans and efforts to advance new arms control and risk reduction measures—“two sides of the same proverbial nuclear coin,” and expressed a commitment to “responsibly enhance

deterrence and assurance capabilities.” But these markers have not so far been followed by specific proposals.

On the other hand, looking back over a decade, the American record of coming to terms with new challenges is disappointing, even alarming. To be sure, when the storm clouds began to gather a decade and more ago, the United States was preoccupied with other significant security challenges in the form of counter-insurgency wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. It also enjoyed a surfeit of military power and soft power assets which insulated it from the need to change. Thus, faced with the need to recognize the challenges from Russia and China, it bought time and hoped for the best. Faced with the need to strengthen extended deterrence and assurance, it put the emphasis on low-hanging fruit (such as improved consultative mechanisms). Faced with the need to adjust its strategy for stability and revitalize arms control, it clung to legacy approaches. Messages of resolve likely got lost in this clutter.

From a strictly military perspective, the situation is not reassuring. In a 2018 analysis, the bipartisan National Defense Strategy Commission came to a stark conclusion. In their review of US defense strategy and posture, commissioners concluded that while the strategy was sound, “the United States could lose” the next war.<sup>21</sup> They faulted not capabilities but concepts. That is, they judged that the United States had failed to understand how to manage the escalation dynamics of a regional war against a nuclear-armed rival. They concluded that: “The country’s margin for strategic error has become distressingly small. Doubts about America’s ability to deter and, if necessary, defeat opponents and honor its global commitments have proliferated. Previous congressional mandated reports ... warned that this crisis was coming. The crisis has now arrived ... a crisis of American power.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission reported that it “has not seen the U.S. government demonstrate the urgency and creativity required to meet the challenge.”<sup>23</sup>

The lethargy of the defense enterprise in responding to new nuclear challenges has many sources. The desire for a peace dividend in the 1990s led to the demise of many institutions that had been created early in the Cold War to help develop strategic thought—a decision with repercussions today in the form of very limited human capital. Some of the new problems were deceptively familiar, leading to many false starts. Until recently, few policymakers have felt a sense of urgency about nuclear deterrence or cared about arguments that it was eroding; indeed, many were incredulous that an adversary would ever dare fire upon the world’s only superpower. The nuclear policy community hasn’t much helped itself, as it seems to be locked in an echo chamber where people battle over long-held positions with insults and innuendo.

How the United States deals with these new challenges will certainly be affected by the choice Americans make next November about the presidency.

Donald Trump's return to the White House could be hugely consequential for US nuclear strategy. After all, he has voiced many opinions well outside the policy mainstream.<sup>24</sup> He might terminate US alliances in Europe and Asia, effectively putting an end to the extended deterrence mission. He has signaled that he might welcome nuclear acquisition by US allies and past allies. He has also hinted at a broader deal with Putin, essentially giving him what he wants in Europe. If this is the plausible worst case, there is also a plausible best case. He might again embrace the policy mainstream, as he did in his first term, contrasting rhetoric notwithstanding. He might turn to the veterans of his administration who served on the Strategic Posture Commission for counsel and nuclear policy leadership. He might also find a deal with Putin too politically toxic. But even in this plausible best case, Trump's return would reinforce uncertainty about the US leadership role and about its resolve in crisis and war to defend its allies and partners.

The public's view of nuclear issues will also play a role in determining future US nuclear policies. Public interest has increased as a result of nuclear saber-rattling by the leaders of Russia, China and North Korea, and with the success of the film *Oppenheimer*. Elites are more directly engaged in nuclear policy discourse than in decades. The American public values nuclear deterrence but has not joined Dr. Strangelove in learning to love the bomb. Anti-nuclear non-governmental organizations are well mobilized in an active campaign for disarmament. The nuclear deterrence community operates largely within its own echo chamber, isolated from the public. The sharp emotions that usually attach to nuclear weapons inevitably seep into the policy debate. In fact, there is little actual debate and a great deal of acrimony. The dangers of the moment require something better of each of us.

Despite these reasons for concern, there are at least three good reasons to be optimistic that US nuclear policymakers will come to terms with these challenges. First, the Strategic Posture Commission was able to overcome a great diversity of political views to reach consensus on a large set of recommendations aimed at strengthening both strategic and extended deterrence. Their success attests to the possibility of rising to the occasion.

Second, America's allies are not standing by idly. Indeed, they are becoming the demandeurs. Those on the frontlines are especially motivated by the desire for stronger extended deterrence and improved assurance, have put their best people on top of these challenges, and are ready to help lead the process of adaptation.<sup>25</sup>

Third, as Alexis de Tocqueville observed nearly 200 years ago, democracies are slow to rouse, but once roused are capable of "sudden effort of remarkable

**The policy questions in front of us lie largely outside our political comfort zone**

vigor.”<sup>26</sup> They have now been roused, thanks to Putin’s nuclear-backed aggression, Xi Jinping’s sprint to nuclear parity, and Kim Jung Un’s embrace of nuclear war-fighting.

Chapters in history don’t write themselves. The Strategic Posture Commission has provided the first draft of the next chapter. Unlike in the 1990s, the policy questions in front of us lie largely outside our political comfort zone. Reluctant though many may be to let go of legacy approaches, we cannot afford to lose sight of our stake in finding the right answers for the new times.

## Notes

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