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Nuclear Fallback

Budget cuts and administration indifference may harm our nuclear deterrent.

Political turmoil in the Middle East, Iran's drive for nuclear weapons, and the buildup of China's military are only a few of the worrisome trends that point to a prolonged period of global instability. Against this backdrop, the U.S. defense budget and the military capabilities it buys are being dramatically reduced in ways that will hinder our ability to shape or respond to these developments.

Over the next decade, defense spending will drop by anywhere from \$450 billion to more than \$1 trillion. The full extent of the cuts, and the national-security implications they foreshadow, are now in the hands of a congressional "supercommittee" charged with slashing overall federal spending. But cuts of this magnitude will translate into less military capability, a likely "dumbing down" of U.S. military strategy, a more problematic margin of military advantage over potential adversaries, and greater strategic risk. They are also likely to diminish America's ability to advance U.S. policy objectives and secure a stable world order.

Not surprisingly, long-overdue investments in our aging and deteriorating nuclear capabilities and infrastructure — essential to

maintaining a reliable and effective nuclear deterrent — are now on the chopping block as the military services seek to protect “usable” non-nuclear systems at the expense of “unusable” nuclear ones.

But the world remains a dangerous place, with nations and groups seeking nuclear weapons as a counter to U.S. military preponderance, a deterrent to U.S. action in regions vital to American national-security interests, a bargaining chip for political leverage, or a counter to regional threats. Nuclear weapons remain the great equalizer in world affairs, granting those that possess them greater influence over American policies and actions. Consequently, an effective and robust U.S. nuclear deterrent remains as important as ever.

The Obama administration committed to revitalizing the nuclear enterprise as the price of obtaining Senate support for the New START treaty and further nuclear-arms reductions. It pledged last year to add an extra \$7 billion in new investments to ensure the safety, security, and effectiveness of our existing nuclear arsenal and a further \$5 billion over the next five years. In a report to Congress last November, the administration stated: “Given the extremely tight budget environment facing the federal government, these requests to the Congress demonstrate the priority the Administration’s [sic] places on maintaining the safety, security and effectiveness of the [nuclear] deterrent.” In a letter to senators last December, President Obama reiterated that “my Administration will pursue these programs and capabilities for as long as I am President.”

While the nuclear reductions mandated by New START have been codified in law, the same cannot be said for the administration’s

commitment to fully fund essential nuclear modernization. On the contrary, this promise now appears increasingly hollow, with necessary modernization and sustainment activities increasingly at risk. There is less appetite to spend billions of dollars on nuclear weapons in an era of severe budget austerity and scarce resources.

Recently, Deputy Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter told the Senate Armed Services Committee during his confirmation process that full funding of the administration's plan for modernizing the nuclear-weapons complex must be "balanced with the realities of the current fiscal environment." This suggests the administration is laying the groundwork to walk away from the president's commitment. Doing so would confirm for skeptics that the administration's pledge was nothing more than a political gambit to win ratification of New START.

Sadly, while the administration may be retreating from its earlier commitment, even the additional funding it originally proposed will not fully offset the overall decline in nuclear skills, competencies, and capabilities that has occurred over the past two decades. Scientific and technical expertise in the nuclear complex has atrophied, and the lack of attention to nuclear matters has left every leg of our strategic nuclear "triad" in need of modernization:

- Our land-based Minuteman intercontinental ballistic missiles were first deployed in the 1970s, and no replacement system has yet been identified; a recent test flight of this aging system failed; and numerous studies have highlighted the deteriorating state of the industrial base that supports ballistic-missile design and development.

- Without near-term funding to support development of the next generation of ballistic-missile submarines, our current fleet of *Ohio*-class submarines will begin retiring before they can be replaced; the Navy is already planning for a smaller number of follow-on submarines with fewer missiles than those currently in the fleet; and the cost of this program may top \$300 billion — an investment that must compete for funding with other Navy shipbuilding priorities.
- Our B-52 bombers are older than the pilots who fly them, and their numbers continue to shrink; a new nuclear-capable bomber is years away; and the estimated cost of a next-generation bomber program (more than \$550 million a plane) will likely mean fewer (if any) of them ever being built.

New weapons systems take many years to develop and deploy. Without timely and adequate investment in modern replacement systems, we will reach a point where the triad itself — on which peace, security, and stability have rested for more than six decades — will be unsustainable.

Some in Congress also appear to be retreating from support for the administration's nuclear modernization plans. Both House and Senate appropriators have proposed significant cuts in these areas for the upcoming fiscal year, adding to concerns that despite executive- and legislative-branch statements about the importance of nuclear modernization, the promised improvements will not be realized.

Is the administration willing to fight for the hundreds of billions of dollars necessary to ensure the continued viability of the triad for the foreseeable future? Given the president's belief that nuclear weapons

are “the most dangerous legacy of the Cold War” and his desire to work toward their complete elimination, a healthy degree of skepticism may be warranted.

Despite the fact that every American administration has reaffirmed the value and importance of the nuclear triad and the complementary role that land-, sea-, and air-based systems contribute to nuclear deterrence, the triad’s future now appears problematic. Administration arms controllers are seeking additional reductions in the level of U.S. nuclear weapons, through either follow-on arms-control treaties or unilateral cuts. As one official reportedly stated, further nuclear cuts “will raise questions about whether we retain the triad, or whether we go to a system that is only a dyad.”

Qualitatively, the administration’s approach to modernization is to maintain a nuclear stockpile that was designed over a generation ago. The development of any “new” nuclear-weapons capabilities has been prohibited, leaving us to deter tomorrow’s threats with yesterday’s arsenal. Sustaining Cold War–era capabilities may be appropriate to deterring major nuclear adversaries, but may prove inadequate to deter the new types of nuclear threats we are likely to face in the future.

Nuclear weapons have kept the peace for more than 65 years. They remain necessary in a world where nuclear know-how is increasingly widespread and countries like Iran and North Korea pose serious threats to American security interests. Unfortunately, these countries do not share the American belief in the declining utility of nuclear weapons. Moreover, Russia and China are both continuing to invest in modern, more sophisticated nuclear delivery systems, with Russia

placing greater emphasis on nuclear capabilities in its own military doctrine.

Because of this, ensuring a viable, robust, flexible, resilient, and credible U.S. nuclear arsenal is essential. Without such efforts, the continued drive to cut the U.S. nuclear-weapons stockpile may undermine the credibility of the U.S. extended-deterrence commitment and lead U.S. allies to consider developing their own nuclear capabilities. This would be a major setback to U.S. nonproliferation policy.

Despite the end of the Cold War, there is no substitute for effective nuclear deterrence. One can only hope that the decision makers who must wrestle with the consequences of the congressional supercommittee's actions will also recognize this.

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