

The U.S. Nuclear Deterrent: An International Perspective

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Keeping the U.S. nuclear weapons enterprise going requires huge political and financial commitment. So as with all major investments, regular questioning of not only *what* to invest, but *why*, would seem prudent. Debate over the role of the U.S. nuclear deterrent has been shifting over the past two decades, triggered largely by the end of the Cold War. But broader changes to the global geo-political landscape have played an equally significant role: threats have changed; technology has developed; inter-state relations have shifted; and the international security architecture has edged forward.

Realistically, today, the United States has a full range of far more credible conventional capabilities that will deal with almost all but the most extreme (and highly unlikely) scenarios. While terrorist threats tend to top the headlines, the United States still does not face a *strategic* competitor that genuinely threatens its existence, and there is no real risk of great power war. So exactly how much the United States is investing in its nuclear deterrent, where and for what reasons, are all questions which rightly need to be explored.

The Fifth Annual Nuclear Deterrence Summit, which took place near Washington, D.C. this week, brought together industry experts and

officials to discuss “Maintaining a Credible Deterrent Amidst Funding Constraints”. Participants were mainly private nuclear weapons contractors, nuclear lab experts and officials from relevant agencies within the U.S. government.

While some speakers did touch on the strategic rationale for maintaining and upgrading the U.S. nuclear deterrent, pointing to the modernisation of arsenals in other states, as well as the emergence of new threats in North Korea and Iran, this was not the focus of the conference, and they did so with a light touch. Reflecting the make-up of the audience – the technicians of the nuclear weapons complex – panellists focused largely on the need and ways to improve performance of the complex.

But as the U.S. public spending debate continues in advance of the likely sequester on March 1 – broadly translating into across-the-board spending cuts, including on defense - there is a clear concern that the nuclear weapons complex will need to survive on less money. As belts tighten, there is arguably a greater need now than ever to ensure that the technical and strategic discussions around the nuclear complex are fully interlinked.

One message coming out of the Deterrence Summit was that a major - perhaps *the* major - reason for the United States to maintain a large nuclear arsenal is to fulfill its extended deterrence responsibility to adequately

reassure allies. Former Assistant Secretary of State, Ellen Tauscher, reflected the U.S. government position in her remarks to the Summit, highlighting the twin need to fully-fund the nuclear infrastructure and the human capital associated with maintaining the U.S. nuclear arsenal, and at the same time to progress the arms control agenda by moving beyond New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) in talks with Russia and ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (she said the United States would need to have a pretty good excuse in the 2015 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference if it does not).

When nuclear weapon decisions are so strongly based upon assumptions about what allies and others think about extended deterrence, it is important to properly interrogate those assumptions. One of the many interesting propositions coming out of the Deterrence Summit was the idea that perceptions of U.S. assurance in some parts of the world may be wearing thin. In East Asia, for example, the apparent impunity with which North Korea is able to develop its nuclear weapon capability is reportedly impacting perceptions on the credibility of deterrence. Dr. Shmuel Bar, from the Israeli Institute for Policy and Strategy, told the Summit that states within the Middle East already had lost whatever confidence they once had in the U.S. nuclear umbrella. He assessed that the direct result of such waning confidence would be further proliferation when emerging regional threats – namely Iran – proved undeterrable by other means. And he believed that a multipolar nuclear competition in a highly unstable region would likely end in the use of nuclear weapons, a dilemma to which he offered no solution.

General Larry Welch, former USAF Chief of Staff, reminded us that extended deterrence and its related reassurance was not so much about numbers or deployments, but rather about signalling and resolve. This was later confirmed by Lukasz Kulesa, from the Polish Institute of International Affairs, who assessed

that Central and Eastern European states were intensely interested in ensuring U.S. commitment to their security, but that this was only vaguely connected to the size and location of nuclear capabilities: it had more to do with U.S. political will to defend them if and when it became necessary. Kulesa believed that conventional capabilities on the ground had far more relevance to reassurance, not least because people on the ground had more confidence that these assets would be used at a time of crisis.

In other words – for reassurance to be meaningful, it needs to be credible. And seeking to provide assurance to U.S. allies – whether that be by continued extended nuclear deterrence, or through other means – requires a clear picture of allies’ perceptions of what credible reassurance looks like.

BASIC’s panel at the Deterrence Summit attempted to step up to this challenge by bringing Europeans together to discuss evolving perspectives on nuclear deterrence within the NATO Alliance: a critical piece of the jigsaw in the U.S. nuclear weapons debate, given the anticipated \$10 billion life extension program for the B61 bombs, many of which are currently stationed in Europe.

The panel spoke in the context of growing debate on the European side of the Atlantic over nuclear posture, and an extended process within NATO which resulted in its latest Strategic Concept and Deterrence and Defense Posture Review. All four speakers in the panel spoke of diverse European views around the concept of deterrence.

Des Browne, former UK Defence Secretary, highlighted continuing reductions in numbers and readiness of the UK nuclear force, and the impact these changes had on British conceptions around minimum deterrence. He said that cynics might conclude that minimum deterrence could essentially be defined as whatever Britain possessed at any given

moment – given that each stage of reductions has been classed as “minimum deterrence”.

Severe public spending constraints and a fresh focus on the threats for which nuclear deterrence remains relevant were starting to trigger questions about the operation of the NATO nuclear deterrent - such as whether the Alliance really requires a continuous force of five nuclear submarines out on patrol at any one moment, when none of its members face a strategic threat.

The French position, outlined by François Delmas of the French Embassy, remains largely unchanged under the new Hollande Administration: strategic deterrence continues to enjoy strong bipartisan consensus in France. President Hollande has committed to maintaining financial investment in the French deterrent whatever the budget situation, on the basis of a French threat assessment that places priority in an aggressive non-proliferation approach.

Simon Lunn, former Secretary General to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and Senior Fellow at the European Leadership Network, highlighted divisions amongst NATO allies over the future of extended deterrence. Some within NATO favour maintaining the status quo, arguing that no security case exists for reducing readiness and capabilities. Others are looking for change, driven by a commitment to reducing dependency on nuclear weapons in the light of the Prague agenda. Where both sides have agreed is on the need to seek reciprocal moves from Russia before taking any actions within NATO.

Lukasz Kulesa, from the Polish Institute of International Affairs, highlighted how perspectives from Central and Eastern Europe have been shaped by a historic fear of abandonment and suspicion of Russia. These states are deeply attached to Article V in the NATO charter and continue to see a U.S. presence in the region as the best guarantee of

security. However, he argued that the deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe, rather than being of practical security advantage, is largely symbolic of the glue that keeps the Alliance together: and he observed that states in the region suffer no costs from these nuclear deployments.

Lord Browne reminded participants of the wide variety of European perspectives, and to be cautious when receiving anyone claiming to speak for “the Europeans”. The tendency in Europe to bow to U.S. leadership on these matters is as strong as ever. But in coming debates in Washington over future nuclear posture, doctrine and investments in certain weapon systems, in particular the plan to spend \$10bn on the B61 life extension program, legislators would do well to consider whether there remains consistent support in Europe for its deployment, rather than simply assuming it.



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