



Four Myths About Nuclear Deterrence

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Opponents of U.S. nuclear modernization are operating under a slew of false assumptions. That is the message of Major General Garrett Harencak, the top nuclear advisor to the U.S. Air Force's Chief of Staff, who spoke recently to a hundred top military and civilian experts at a seminar in Washington. And it is one that is worth heeding.

Since the end of the Cold War, successive administrations in Washington have wrestled with maintaining, sustaining and modernizing our nuclear deterrent. But, in effect, the country has gone on an extended procurement and intellectual holiday. We have put off modernization of every element of the strategic nuclear triad (although we did do an important service life extension of the country's 500 land-based Minuteman missiles).

We also stopped thinking seriously about nuclear deterrence. In the posture statements and national security strategy documents of the U.S. government, nuclear deterrence was mentioned in the margins, old doctrine was not updated and the proverbial "nuclear policy can was kicked down the road" repeatedly. As a result, the general points out, at least four prevailing myths about nuclear deterrence have become mainstream.

Nuclear weapons are no longer needed. Totally wrong. Although such weapons have not been used since August 1945, they play an important strategic role nonetheless. Just a few weeks ago, the United States deployed "nuclear capable bomber aircraft" to the Korean Peninsula to deter any aggressive moves by the North Korean regime, which had recently tested both a long range ballistic missile and a nuclear weapon. Indeed, for nearly 70 years now, nuclear deterrent forces have been on alert daily. They are used to send deterrent signals to our adversaries that the U.S. will defend itself. In other words, nuclear weapons are used every day to keep the peace.

Nuclear weapons are not affordable. On the contrary, the general says, they're "a great bargain." The total USAF budget for strategic bombers and ICBMs was \$5.1 billion in the fiscal year that ended last September. That is roughly 1 percent of the overall U.S. defense budget and approximately 0.14 percent of the federal budget. When the submarine element of the U.S. Triad is added, the sum rises to roughly \$10 billion – what ordinary Americans spend on movie tickets annually and \$5 billion less than what the U.S. Postal Service lost last year alone!

Nuclear weapons are old-fashioned. Again, incorrect. Although we are no longer concerned about deterring the Soviet Union, we face numerous nuclear armed states, many of them potential adversaries. Arms control agreements, meanwhile, have cut our deployed forces from over 12,000 nuclear weapons to the current level of 1,550. That is a huge change. But the forces that remain have to be ready and strong in order to preserve their deterrent value. This formula is working: since the advent of the nuclear age, there has been a dramatic reduction in the casualties of war – a decline of some 95 percent, when compared to annual fatalities due to conflict prior to 1945.

Nuclear weapons are a thing of the past. Hardly. Speaking in the Czech Republic back in 2009, President Obama called for the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons worldwide. That's certainly a future we can all aspire to, but as long as nuclear weapons remain, the U.S. will need to maintain a strong deterrent. And today, our adversaries are modernizing and increasing their nuclear arsenals with road mobile and fixed ICBMs, new submarines and bombers with cruise missiles. They have not joined us in calling for the elimination of such weapons. As such, the United States can hardly eliminate its nuclear deterrent on the unsubstantiated belief that our adversaries will follow suit.

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