



# AFPC Capitol Hill briefing: “Understanding Implications of Russia and China’s Strategic Threat: Arms Control and Nuclear Weapons Modernization”

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**Related Categories:** Arms Control and Proliferation; Military Innovation; Science and Technology; China; North Korea; Russia

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On July 8th, the American Foreign Policy Council sponsored a Capitol Hill briefing on *Understanding Implications of Russia and China’s Strategic Threat: Arms Control and Nuclear Weapons Modernization*. The briefing examined the threat posed by adversary strategic nuclear weapons and the need for the United States to modernize its nuclear deterrent systems in response. AFPC Vice President of Operations and Director of Defense Technology Programs Richard Harrison moderated the briefing, whose panelists included AFPC Junior Fellow Margot van Loon; Dr. Mark A. Bucknam of the National War College; and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear and Missile Defense Policy Robert Soofer. A summary of their remarks follow.

## Harrison

Since 9/11, the U.S. military has primarily focused on countering insurgent threats and defending against attacks from rogue nation states. However, Russia’s annexation of Crimea and abrogation of the INF treaty, Chinese aggression in the South and East China Seas, and the massive military modernization programs of both countries have necessitated a change in U.S. defense posture. The threat posed by our adversaries’ strategic nuclear weapons necessitates that the United States modernize its nuclear deterrent systems, which have begun to atrophy.

## van Loon

Pragmatism is needed in a world of great power conflict, requiring a greater role for nuclear weapons in national security strategy. Russia has demonstrated an increased willingness to undermine the U.S.-led international order, particularly through hybrid warfare. Its aggressive nuclear weapon modernization program is planned through 2027 and has seen defense budget increases (on the order of 17% in some years) to accommodate new strategic systems with larger payloads and greater precision. China, meanwhile, is seeking global primacy and increasing the use of its military in order to demonstrate Chinese national power. The PRC’s modernization has emphasized “quality over quantity,” and is designed to guarantee a secure second-strike capability. Accordingly, the current Chinese stockpile of close to 300 nuclear warheads is expected to double by 2030. Additionally, both countries have focused on advanced delivery systems through the development of hypersonic weapons platforms. Today, the United States faces a more diverse and advanced nuclear threat than ever before, and the international arms control architecture is insufficient to guarantee U.S. security. The U.S. must demonstrate the will and ability to respond and take the necessary steps to plan for arms control failure.

## Bucknam

The end of the Cold War and the resulting (and comparatively less threatening) security environment permitted the safe elimination of more than 85 percent of all U.S. nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, Russian and Chinese actions in recent years have ushered in a new age of great power competition, and left the United States without followers in its effort to lead the world in reducing the role and numbers of nuclear weapons. Washington is forced to change course and recapitalize America’s aging nuclear weapons delivery systems, nuclear weapons and their associated infrastructure, and nuclear command, control and communications (NC3).

This U.S. modernization effort is necessary, modest in scope, eminently affordable, and comes not a moment too soon. Without dedicated funding for the sea-based leg of the nuclear triad, there may be gaps in patrols in late 2020s. The land-based leg consists of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) that were designed a half-a-century ago and need to be upgraded. The air-based leg of bombers and associated cruise missiles must be modernized if they are to penetrate modern adversary air defenses. Finally, NC3 needs to be able to reliably communicate with the president, command posts, and delivery systems. The peak for spending on the nuclear deterrence mission—for new systems and for operating and maintaining existing systems—will occur in the late 2020s, and is currently estimated at 6.4 percent of the U.S. defense budget, or less than one percent of the entire federal budget. That price tag is eminently affordable for the Defense Department's highest priority mission: deterring a nuclear attack against the United States and its allies.

## **Soofer**

Today's central challenge to American security is the reemergence of long-term strategic competition with Russia and China. Given the strategic environment, nuclear deterrence is more important now than at any time since the end of the Cold War. We must recognize the reality that foreign nuclear threats are growing and our deterrent must be modernized to remain credible. The U.S. has no intention of engaging in an arms race with other nations. Nuclear weapons modernization is simply a necessity to replace aging, Cold War-era systems with modern systems—largely on a one for one basis. The U.S. has eliminated many types of nuclear weapons entirely, and spends less than 3% of the Defense Department's budget on sustaining its nuclear forces. As a foundation of our nation's security, our nuclear forces are affordable and must be modernized for DoD to fulfill its number one priority mission of nuclear deterrence.