

“Apologetics”

Excerpts from “Defending the Record on US Nuclear Deterrence” by Gen Kevin P. Chilton (ret), Former Commander, US Strategic Command, Strategic Studies Quarterly, Spring 2018

Today, misinformation, falsehoods, and often deliberate distortions concerning nuclear deterrence continue to be repeated in public forums. Left unchallenged, these statements run the risk of becoming accepted as factual by the American public. [The following are] 11 of the more common fallacies.

“We Are Never Going to Use Nuclear Weapons”

The argument presented is this: if we are never going to use nuclear weapons, why are we wasting so much money sustaining them? Our adversaries see our 24/7 alert postures and consequently assess an attack on the US or its allies to be an unthinkable choice.

“Prompt Conventional Global Strike Can Replace a Portion of the Nuclear Deterrent Force”

Another fallacy is the notion that the deterrence mission can be adequately accomplished by substituting conventional warheads, because of their great accuracy, for nuclear warheads atop our ICBMs. This argument does not appreciate the “long, dark shadow” cast by the destructive power of nuclear weapons and the deterrent effect that “shadow” enables. A nuclear warhead is terribly frightening; a 2,000-pound conventional warhead is not.

“Conventional Weapon Overmatch Eliminates the Need for a Nuclear Deterrent”

Another argument presented to reduce or eliminate the US nuclear deterrent is the notion that our conventional overmatch in quality and size is adequate for the deterrence mission. There is simply no conventional weapon equivalency to the power and deterrent effects of nuclear weapons. So where should the US spend its first dollar on defense? On the triad.

“We Do Not Need a Triad”

The critical question to ask in response to the claim that we do not need a triad is, so which leg do you want to eliminate? The submarine leg provides the only stealth force we have—in essence, our assured response. The bombers are the flexible force that can signal our adversaries and assure our allies while encouraging them not to build their own nuclear deterrent. The ICBM is the most stabilizing leg of the triad. Stability, in this context, is defined as a state in which adversaries are never tempted to strike first. The value in the triad is that it complicates the adversary decision calculus. This is the definition of strategic stability: when an adversary understands that no day is a good day to go to war with the United States—nor is he ever tempted to launch first.

“Nuclear Forces Are on Hair-Trigger Alert”

Critics of our ICBM alert posture use this terminology as a scare tactic. Nuclear forces are not on hair-trigger alert. They certainly are on alert and at the ready, and this is necessary to provide the strategic stability.

“LRSO Is Destabilizing”

Another fallacious argument is that the long-range standoff weapon (LRSO), or cruise missile, is destabilizing. The fact is LRSO is not destabilizing in the sense of weakening strategic stability, as it does not invite a first strike—indeed it helps to prevent one. The United States and Russia have had these weapons for decades and employed them in regional conflicts, and neither country has considered striking first as a result. Today’s ALCM, which will age out in the next decade, must be replaced on schedule by the follow-on LRSO.

“We Cannot Afford Modernization”

Arguing against recapitalizing the nuclear triad because of sustainment costs is patently unfair. In today’s world and for the foreseeable future the US will need a nuclear deterrent in the form of a triad. So, including sustainment costs when discussing the cost of recapitalization is simply another attempt to convince the public not to invest in something that remains necessary for national security. So if nuclear deterrence is the

number-one priority and every other defense investment depends on it, the cost spread over the lifetime of the programs is most certainly affordable. We should be rebuilding and exercising the infrastructure necessary to sustain our deterrent and, more importantly, developing the human capital required to design and build nuclear weapons for an uncertain future. The cost to do this is modest.

“If We Reduce, Others Will Reduce”

We reduced our nuclear arsenal when we signed verifiable treaties with Russia. How effective has this leading by example been? How is showing constraint working? History does not support the proposition that if we reduce, others will follow our lead. The effectiveness of the leading-by-reducing approach to inspire others to show restraint is simply not supported by reality.

“Global Zero Is a Desirable Goal”

Many talk about global zero as a desirable goal. After all, if we could “put the genie back in the bottle” wouldn’t it be better to have a world without nuclear weapons? Of course, the “genie,” that is, the knowledge of how to build nuclear weapons, cannot be unlearned and put back in the bottle of ignorance. Alternatively, some suggest we should continue to strive to get all nations to agree to reduce their inventories to zero, eliminate their weapon production capabilities, and submit to a near omniscient oversight authority that could compel compliance and ensure that no one was cheating. Human beings for centuries upon centuries, in war after war, found better and better ways to kill each other—more efficiently, more lethally. Do we want to go back to a world without nuclear weapons? There is a reason why great powers that own ever more lethal conventional weapons have elected not to fight each other: they have been deterred by nuclear weapons.

“Nuclear Deterrence is Cold War Think”

Some argue the US nuclear deterrent should be eliminated because its existence represents Cold War think. The reality is nuclear deterrence underpins the national security of the United States and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. It remains relevant and necessary today to deter the existential threats to our nation. It also helps to deter nonnuclear attacks that could have catastrophic consequences, such as attacks involving biological weapons. The term Cold War think is a pejorative typically proffered by those who have never thought seriously about, let alone studied, deterrence theory or by those who have run out of ways to defend their position.

“No One Would Ever Use a Nuclear Weapon against the United States”

Those who would use this argument seem willing to risk the very existence of the nation on the basis of their speculation and without forethought. The US military must ensure national survival through deterrence provided by a safe, secure, capable, reliable, flexible, and vigilant nuclear posture. It is our duty to assume the worst and then take steps to ensure it never happens. Additionally, we must deter attacks on our friends, allies, and fielded US military forces deployed abroad.

Summary

These 11 statements are a few of the false arguments and positions directed toward the US nuclear deterrent, often by those who would wish to see this deterrent weakened or eliminated for purely ideological reasons. However, other serious scholars and students of deterrence theory present thoughtful and debatable positions that address issues pertaining to the size, capability, and posture requirements needed to provide the United States with a deterrent that will ensure no one would ever consider a nuclear attack on the United States, our military forces, or our friends or allies. It is the responsibility of members of the profession of arms to truthfully defend the record when false arguments are espoused and seriously consider those that are truly worthy of consideration. Only then can an informed debate begin on the subjects surrounding the US nuclear deterrent.

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