

A Compelling Rationale for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the Twenty-First Century

An effective rationale for U.S. nuclear weapons must answer five essential questions.

- What are the most important challenges and problems that both drive and constrain the role and importance of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security?
- Given these challenges, what is the fundamental purpose or role of U.S. nuclear weapons in its twenty-first-century national security strategy?
- How does the U.S. nuclear arsenal and its associated infrastructure and delivery systems fulfill this role?
- What capabilities and attributes must the U.S. nuclear force possess to perform these functions with confidence?
- When faced with difficult trade-offs, how willing are policymakers to make difficult choices necessary to demonstrate commitment through the allocation of time, attention, and resources?

In answering these questions, this rationale must be consistent, clear, declarative, and simply stated in terms that resonate outside of the confines of the nuclear policy community. Roundtable discussions with young officers and stakeholders across the nuclear enterprise make clear that such a rationale would be more readily absorbed across the force and allow young officers and enlisted personnel to re-communicate this narrative to peers, subordinates, family members, and communities much more effectively. This approach marks a departure from some of the language, concepts, and vocabulary of prior statements and will require patience and flexibility from the nuclear policy elite.

The following proposed rationale for U.S. nuclear forces reflects the authors' effort to capture the themes that resonated most strongly with the target audience. In developing it, the authors have sought to adhere to the following "dos" and "don'ts" that emerged from our research:

Do:

- Develop a rationale that is affirmatively, rather than negatively, framed
- Use language that is clear and direct and does not require a sophisticated understanding of nuclear policy
- Use topline messages that can be employed consistently with a wide range of audiences (the public, the Congress, the armed forces) but can also be tailored to various audiences through additional specificity
- Look to the future, not the past, as the source of challenge *and* opportunity
- Remember that words accompanied by meaningful and appropriate actions are always the most effective message

Don't:

- Use jargonistic or theoretical language
- Appear nostalgic about the Cold War or suggest the future lies in a return to the past
- Criticize the audience in terms of knowledge, education, or interest

PROPOSED RATIONALE

The following narrative articulates the essential elements of a compelling rationale for the U.S. nuclear arsenal using the themes and concepts (highlighted in bold) that resonated most strongly with roundtable participants:

Today, the United States faces a nuclear landscape of **complexity, uncertainty, and risk**. While nuclear dangers have certainly receded from the high-water mark of the Cold War, the nuclear optimism of the post–Cold War era has declined as well. Today, the United States no longer faces a single primary adversary from one region of the globe, but rather a diverse set of nuclear dangers spanning at least three geographic regions and potentially with global reach. These dangers include:

- **Nuclear attack by a nuclear-armed state**—which while relatively unlikely, remains the primary existential threat to the United States and our way of life.
- **Growing nuclear intimidation and coercion by regional powers** that hope to use their own nuclear capabilities to reshape their regions to their advantage and limit the ability of the United States to exercise power and influence in those regions.
- **Renewed and potentially expanded nuclear competition among great powers**—namely, China and Russia—as they seek to expand and improve their nuclear capabilities and increase the relative role and importance of nuclear weapons in their own national strategies, despite our efforts to do the opposite.
- **Risk of nuclear intimidation and use by nonstate actors and extremists** who continue to seek nuclear capabilities and may show little (if any) restraint in using such weapons to further their violent agendas.

- **Growing frustration regarding global disarmament** and efficacy of the NPT from increasing numbers of nonnuclear armed states that view the great powers, including the United States, not as nuclear protectors but rather as sources of nuclear danger.
- **Continued strategic uncertainty** that leaves open the prospect that the future could take an even more dangerous turn and for which we could be ill-prepared to respond quickly and effectively.

In a world with nuclear weapons, U.S. nuclear forces provide a **critical foundation for U.S. power** and influence. Faced with such a world, U.S. nuclear weapons serve as a **powerful insurance policy** by ensuring that, no matter how the threats or enemies change in an uncertain world, the United States has the freedom of action to defend itself and respond. Our nuclear arsenal **underwrites the United States' national survivability against its greatest threats**, providing the only existing credible defense against nuclear destruction and ensuring that no enemy can see benefit in attacking or holding hostage the U.S. homeland. The United States' nuclear forces therefore act as a **backstop to U.S. conventional power**, allowing their conventional brethren to carry out their responsibilities overseas without worry that the country will go unprotected. Nuclear weapons provide awesome, world-altering, destructive power and bring with them **awesome responsibilities**. As long as nuclear weapons exist in the world, the U.S. will shoulder these responsibilities and serve as the nuclear counterweight to those with malicious intentions. Failure to do so would leave the world a far more dangerous place.

U.S. nuclear weapons perform these essential roles by forcing any adversary to consider that **the benefits of attacking the United States are far outweighed by the costs**. The U.S. arsenal provides an **assured nuclear retaliatory force** against any enemy state, ensuring that, should an adversary seek to disarm the United States through nuclear first strike, the United States will always have the option of responding in kind. The possibility of such a devastating response factors into every adversary state's calculus in deciding whether launching a military attack on the United States. It **"raises the bar" for that state, creating risks and costs** so much greater than any gains to be achieved that **restraint becomes a better option than aggression**.

The United States' extension of its **nuclear protection to its allies strengthens those ties and forms the basis of the underlying security relationships**, making the United States an essential provider of global security and stability in the world. U.S. nuclear weapons help bind the United States together with its closest allies based on shared interests and values as well as risks and threats. It provides those friendly states that might otherwise feel compelled to acquire their own nuclear weapons **the option to instead trust in the United States' nuclear guarantees**, empowering them to go without nuclear capabilities while also feeling secure and supported. The U.S. nuclear arsenal thus enables the U.S. alliance system, allowing it to serve as a cornerstone in the overall non-proliferation framework.

Finally, the United States holds itself to the highest possible standard for **responsible nuclear stewardship**. U.S. nuclear weapons are entirely defensive in character, **designed to prevent attacks, not to initiate them**. The United States will never brandish its nuclear weapons, use them as a source of coercion or intimidation, or seek to further regional aggression through their use. The United States maintains the **highest expectations** for the safety, security, and command and

control of its nuclear weapons and seeks at every step to demonstrate what it means to be a responsible nuclear power. The United States **sets an example** by leading in international efforts to establish and enforce norms in protecting nuclear materials and working to reduce the dangers that existing nuclear arsenals pose to the world.

The value and reliability of nuclear weapons in shaping the decisions of potential adversaries depends on their perception that the **capability is credible and their use in response to a threat is plausible**. Similarly, U.S. decisionmakers must feel confident that nuclear weapons provide the president with a range of suitable **options that meet the needs of the situation and discourage, rather than encourage, continued aggression**. Our nuclear weapons must inspire confidence in our leaders and allies and fear in our adversaries. To do this, U.S. nuclear forces must, in aggregate, possess a number of essential attributes. The U.S. nuclear force must possess the necessary capabilities to be **credible** (i.e., inspire confidence that these weapons can and will be used if necessary), **flexible** (i.e., able to produce a variety of plausible options and alternative responses appropriate to and commensurate with the threat at hand), and **survivable** (i.e., fully capable against the full spectrum of first-strike attacks so that no adversary can believe a disarming strike is possible). In addition, the U.S. nuclear arsenal must be **permanent and persistent** so that no adversary believes that windows of opportunity to attack the United States will open. These capabilities must also be **visible and demonstrable** so that when a potential adversary questions U.S. intentions in defending itself and its allies, the United States can signal its resolve and remind potential adversaries of the risks involved. Finally, these capabilities must be **responsive**. They must be able to adapt and adjust to new threats, emerging technological surprises, or potential opportunities in ways that cannot be fully anticipated today.

The United States has given our nuclear forces profound responsibilities and in turn has set the highest possible expectations. These responsibilities and expectations cannot be met on the cheap. Our forces cannot perform their mission without the **investment of time, resources, and attention by leadership** at all levels. At times, this calls for difficult trade-offs and sacrifice to ensure that the nuclear enterprise receives the priority it needs to succeed. Facing long-delayed modernization requirements across the force, the United States today faces just such a challenge of trade-off and sacrifice. But these sacrifices can and will be made when the nation's fundamental security hangs in the balance. Modernization and recapitalization of our nuclear infrastructure and delivery systems is essential but insufficient for building the nuclear force of the future. The **nuclear force of the future** depends fundamentally on our commitment to and investment in the human capital of the enterprise—the men and women who develop, maintain, operate, and support our nuclear arsenal. Sustaining a highly motivated and highly skilled workforce requires meaningful dialogue; appropriate training, education, and exercising across the force; sufficient opportunity for career and professional development; and a climate that fosters personal responsibility, accountability, and innovation. This is our commitment to our force and our pact with the American people. We can do no less.