

**STATEMENT OF GENERAL C. ROBERT KEHLER, USAF (RETIRED)**  
**FORMER COMMANDER, UNITED STATES STRATEGIC COMMAND**  
**SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE**  
**STRATEGIC FORCES SUBCOMMITTEE**  
**28 APRIL 2021**

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman, Senator Fischer, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. I'm pleased to bring the perspective of almost 4 decades of military service and senior military command to the conversation today—much of that in nuclear-related duty. I'll be presenting my views; not those of the Department of Defense, United States Strategic Command, or the United States Air Force.

Mr. Chairman, we face more complex security problems and greater uncertainty than we did during the decades of the Cold War. Twenty-first Century deterrence and extended deterrence policy and doctrine must now account for a wide variety of potential adversaries with differing motivations and objectives posing different strategic threats. New threats from long-range conventional and hypersonic weapons, cyber weapons, and anti-satellite weapons are growing. Many of these can arrive at our doorstep quietly and quickly; today a strategic attack against the U.S. or our allies may begin covertly via cyberspace instead of overtly via ICBMs over the pole.

In such an environment it's tempting to question the continued role of our nuclear weapons and the need for major investment in our nuclear forces. I think the answers are clear—yes, deterrence based on nuclear weapons remains as fundamentally important today as it was during the Cold War; and, yes, it's critically important that we modernize the nuclear deterrent force and support the men and women who operate, secure, and maintain it. Here are some points for you to consider:

- **Nuclear weapons are not gone from world affairs, and they are not going to be gone anytime soon.** Russia and China seek to change the international order and are aggressively modernizing their nuclear arsenals as the foundation of strategies designed to diminish our power and prestige, coerce our allies, and reduce our global influence. North Korea has acquired nuclear weapons. Iran remains a country of interest and India and Pakistan present their own challenges. Nuclear weapons continue to pose the gravest of threats—it bears remembering that Russia

has the capability to destroy the U.S. with nuclear weapons over the length of time it takes to conduct this hearing. China appears to be on a pathway to do the same.

- **Nuclear deterrence remains foundational to our security and that of our allies.**

Today's nuclear force is far smaller, postured less aggressively, and is less prominent in our defense strategy than it was during the Cold War; but the principles of deterrence remain the same (i.e., deny benefits, impose costs, or both). Our nuclear weapons prevent the actual or coercive use of these weapons against us and our allies (their primary purpose); but they also constrain the scope and scale of conventional conflict, they compel adversary leaders to ponder the consequences of their actions before they act and, because we extend our nuclear umbrella over them, they obviate the need for additional allies to acquire their own. Nuclear weapons are but one tool we must bring to bear to sustain deterrence today; but no other weapon creates the same deterrent effect and we must be very careful that efforts to reduce their role, further limit their numbers, or restrict their use do not encourage or incentivize adversaries to do the very things we are trying to prevent.

- **The nuclear triad remains the most effective way to meet our fundamental deterrence objectives.** Since the early 1960s, our strategic deterrence has been based on the familiar triad of ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), land-based ICBMs, and long-range heavy bombers. As you know, each leg contributes a primary attribute to deterrence: submarines at sea contribute survivability (about 2/3 of our operationally deployed weapons are assigned to them); ICBMs contribute responsiveness; long-range bombers contribute flexibility. Together, the three legs present an enemy with insurmountable attack and defense problems. As seven other former commanders of U.S. Strategic Command and I said in 2017, "the combined capabilities of the triad provide the president with the mixture of systems and weapons necessary to hold an adversary's most valuable targets at risk, with the credibility of an assured response if needed—the essence of deterrence."<sup>i</sup>

- We rely on a dyad of at-sea submarines and ICBMs to provide daily deterrence.** Bombers and supporting tankers were removed from immediate nuclear alert in 1992. We still have a triad with all its benefits, but only if the president orders the bombers readied for nuclear use. Submarines and ICBMs together have allowed the bombers to be released for use in a wide variety of conventional missions—with great effect. Removing bombers from daily alert validated the importance of the SSBNs; it also *raised* the importance of ICBMs as a mainstay of deterrence, as a hedge against unforeseen technical problems in the subs or advancements in anti-submarine warfare, and as an enabler for adjustments in the number of subs we routinely put to sea. Retiring ICBMs would create unprecedented and unacceptable risks as we go into an uncertain future—and, in my view, would require returning bombers and tankers to nuclear alert.
- It is time to proceed with the bi-partisan commitment to modernize the triad; the nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3) system; and the nuclear weapon industrial complex.** Russia and China watch our nuclear forces and track our modernization efforts very carefully. The credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent is based on demonstrated capabilities and the willpower to use nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances when vital national interests are at stake; and that capability and willpower must be clearly communicated to any potential adversary. Triad platforms are well beyond their design and service lives—modernization of two legs has begun. Completing the comprehensive modernization program is the most important step Congress can take to ensure our deterrent remains credible and our nation secure.
- I urge caution as you consider changes to nuclear authorities or the nuclear decision process.** The legal and procedural implications of certain changes that have been proposed are significant with unknown impact on deterrence. Based on my experience, I believe the current chain of command is clear, and the decision

process strikes the right balance between our security needs, safeguards, and the highest level of civilian control over the use of nuclear weapons.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for inviting me and I look forward to your questions.

---

<sup>i</sup> Gen. C. Robert Kehler, Gen. Larry D. Welch, Adm. James O. Ellis, Gen. Kevin P. Chilton, Adm. Cecil D. Haney, Adm. Henry G. Chiles, Gen. Eugene E. Habiger, Adm. Richard W. Mies, Open Letter, “The U. S. Nuclear Triad Needs an Upgrade,” The Wall Street Journal, 12 January 2017, A17