

Call for Action to Reduce Nuclear Risk and Prioritize Disarmament Diplomacy

9/26/24 Special Orders Session Key Themes and Issues to Highlight

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1. Responsible Leaders Do Not Ignore the Failures of Nuclear Deterrence

The theory of nuclear deterrence has become a form of deeply embedded idolatry at a time when it should be thoroughly interrogated. U.S. Strategic Command insists publicly that “Every capability in the Department of Defense is underpinned by the fact that strategic deterrence will hold.” Until the fall of 2022, this promise was pinned on STRATCOM’s public Twitter feed, then taken down. But to a private audience at Sandia National Laboratories later that same year, STRATCOM’s deputy director Lieutenant General Thomas Bussiere, admitted the danger of deterrence:

Everything unravels itself if those things are not true.

That unraveling has occurred. The world has come very close to nuclear war on multiple occasions. This is a fact. Usually because of sensor error or a failure of intelligence, both Washington and Moscow have at various times been convinced they were under attack and began the process of launching nuclear weapons in response. On those occasions, nuclear deterrence failed. Decisions were made to launch nuclear weapons. The theory of nuclear deterrence asks us to believe that this scenario could never happen, yet it has on multiple occasions. At the last minute, Washington and Moscow called off the nuclear launches when it was discovered that they had received faulty information.

Responsible leaders do not ignore this documented history of near civilization-ending nuclear accidents, miscalculations, and technical errors. This is the failure of nuclear deterrence and the success of good luck. As former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara famously declared after the Cuban Missile Crisis, “We lucked out. It was luck that prevented nuclear war.” The policies of the nuclear weapons states are a hope that this luck will continue. But hoping for

good luck is not an acceptable security policy and, eventually, our luck will run out.

This is the Faustian bargain of nuclear deterrence. Unfortunately, every technology made by humans eventually fails. Every human being fails sometimes. When the technology is nuclear weapons, failure could mean the end of human civilization. The story of nuclear weapons will have an ending. It will either be the end of nuclear weapons or the end of human civilization.

As a corrective to the dogmatic adherence to the theory of nuclear deterrence:

- *Members of Congress should thoroughly interrogate the failures of nuclear deterrence and demonstrate leadership on this issue, making it clear that they would support bold action by the president toward achieving a world free of nuclear weapons.*
- *The unacceptable risk of nuclear deterrence failures should inform every capability decision of the Department of Defense.*

2. The U.S. Should Lead Through Disarmament Diplomacy

We have been lucky enough to avoid a catastrophic failure of nuclear deterrence for more than 70 years...but that record understates how close we came to causing our own destruction.

Several near-disastrous incidents motivated leaders to back away and undertake several treaties to reduce weapons and risks. Leaders like Reagan, JFK, Eisenhower, Carter, and Obama knew that nuclear weapons could end civilization and, with those heavy moral and ethical considerations in mind, negotiated significant safety measures and a serious reduction in nuclear weapons. These leaders demonstrated vision and commitment. They knew that war was not an option, so they had to create a vision for a safer future.

Unfortunately, too many today shrug their shoulders and say the time for negotiations is not now. Which brings us to yet another question...Why not try? Why are we willing to spend almost 2 trillion dollars on our nuclear weapons in the idealistic hope that deterrence will not catastrophically fail over the next 50 years? What if we spent just 1% of that budget on diplomatic and risk reduction efforts?

In 2023, the Biden administration offered to discuss, “without preconditions,” a new nuclear arms control framework with Russia, and separate bilateral nuclear risk reduction talks with China.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has, so far, refused to accept President Biden's offer. Recently, China's leaders have also rejected U.S. offers for follow-up talks on nuclear risk reduction and arms control issues, citing ongoing U.S. arms sales to Taiwan.

Giving up would be unwise. The president’s offer should be extended and strengthened. History teaches us that persistent diplomacy has yielded remarkable achievements. For example, on August 6, 1985, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had declared a nuclear test moratorium. Despite a lack of reciprocation from the Reagan administration, the Soviet moratorium had a substantial impact on Western public opinion, and Gorbachev extended it through 1986. In October 1991, just before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev announced another year-long testing moratorium. His successor, President Boris Yeltsin, confirmed the extension of the moratorium and called again for the United States to reciprocate. In response, Democratic and Republican members of Congress introduced legislation to halt U.S. nuclear testing for one year, which gained momentum and was approved in October 1992.

Heeding this important lesson from history, the president should double down on commonsense efforts to use diplomacy to cap and reduce the Russian and Chinese nuclear arsenals.

Before New START expires in 2026, the president, with support from Congress should:

- *Strengthen its offer to negotiate bilaterally with Russia and China by proposing the start of a series of nuclear disarmament dialogues involving all nine nuclear-armed states leading to negotiations for the elimination of all nuclear weapons globally.*

3. The Nuclear Taboo is Weakening & Calls for Nuclear Arms Racing Are Growing

In 1985, at the height of tensions between the United States and the then Soviet Union, Ronald Reagan and Gorbachev, two cold warriors at the head of the world's largest nuclear arsenals declared that nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. This declaration set in motion further dialogue, resulting in historic progress in reducing the risk of nuclear war. That declaration was regularly repeated and reaffirmed by the leaders of all five Nuclear Weapon States in 2022. This recognition should be the start and end of every conversation on nuclear weapons.

However, over the past several years, repeated Russian threats to use nuclear weapons in the war in Ukraine have dramatically weakened the “nuclear taboo.” The risk of a potentially civilization-ending nuclear war has risen to levels some experts say is at least as high as during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Rather than turning back from the brink of nuclear war, nuclear armed states are accelerating nuclear weapons spending. The US alone is estimated to spend **\$756 billion** on nuclear weapons in the next 10 years and **\$1.5 trillion** over the next three decades.

Unfortunately, some members of Congress and the nuclear weapons establishment are suggesting the United States should spend even more on nuclear weapons and build up the size of our already massive nuclear arsenal for the first time in decades.

Such a buildup is unwise, unnecessary, unaffordable and counterproductive. Such an expansion would cost taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars on top of the **\$756 billion** price tag for the current U.S. nuclear modernization program over the coming decade.

If Russia and the United States exceed the New START warhead limit of 1,550 warheads, it would destabilize their mutual balance of nuclear terror, put an enormous strain on the already costly and behind-schedule U.S. nuclear modernization program, and China would accelerate its own nuclear buildup. Such an action-reaction cycle would be madness.

Before New START expires in 2026, the president, with support from Congress should:

- *At a minimum, propose that Washington and Moscow agree that neither side shall increase the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads beyond the New START limits until such time as they can conclude a more comprehensive and durable framework to limit and reduce their deadly nuclear arsenals.*
- *Adopt measures to reduce the risk of a nuclear war.*