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**United States Strategic Command 2024 Deterrence Symposium Remarks –  
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In 1985, 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. 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.

Nevertheless, nuclear powers, since the advent of the Cold War, instead seem to have concluded that deterrence requires more nuclear weapons of every kind than the adversary. Today, because of this logic, we find ourselves engaged in a three-way nuclear arms race with Russia, China, and the US, each blaming the other for starting it and continuing it. Each nation, fearing an adversary may outflank them, continues to build nuclear infrastructure: nuclear silos in China's western deserts, nuclear weapons on satellites, and replacement ICBMs... each nation seeks to strengthen its own hand. On and on it goes... a constant buildup where a country asks, "How can we build faster?" or "What can we target?" but ignores the most important question: **WHY?**

Leadership requires the rigorous use of that three-letter word, **Why**. We must avoid blind adherence to yesterday's decisions. In today's discussion, that means asking what is sufficient for nuclear deterrence. Looking at past strategies and relying on past assumptions isn't enough. Old cold-war mentalities will create unacceptable costs, rob us of alternatives, and place us in even greater danger. Instead, we must think boldly and not repeat the problems of our history.

With this in mind, I bring this question of "**why**" to you all, an assembly of men and women who have been engaged in these critical nuclear arms issues for years.

I know full well that we face a hostile world with numerous aggressive adversaries. We also know that we are now engaged in a nuclear arms race with China and Russia. Other nations, Pakistan, India, North Korea, and Israel, are also known to have nuclear weapons, and others seek them... In this dangerous environment, deterrence must consider far more than just a great-power nuclear exchange.

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We have also seen the threat to use nuclear weapons to deter non-nuclear aggression. Putin has used irresponsible nuclear threats to try and prevent our support for the Ukrainian people in the defense of their country.

Of course, no one has yet used these weapons, a fact that I know we are all grateful for, but with every threat comes the risk of use. No matter who has them, the prevalence of nuclear weapons places the world at risk. As leaders, we must think not just in terms of the threat but also in terms of the future.

So, let us ask a foundational question: **Why** does America need nuclear weapons? If it does, how many and what kind? Proponents often justify nuclear weapons for two reasons: 1) to deter and fight a strategic nuclear exchange between major powers, and 2) to deter non-nuclear aggression.

Focusing on the first category, deterring an opponent from using strategic and tactical nuclear weapons, history would indicate that the strategy has worked 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?** Over the next 30 years, we will spend almost 2 trillion dollars on our nuclear weapons... what if we spent just 1% on diplomatic and risk reduction efforts?

The second category of limiting non-nuclear aggression carries its own risks. Proponents of using nuclear weapons suggest that we could use "tactical weapons" in some limited way. However, once a nuclear option starts, when and how does a tactical exchange proceed? In the chaos and fog of war, would this tactical nuclear option just open the way to full-scale devastation? Many "think tanks" have studied this, and to this day, the result is "do not open Pandora's Box."

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Despite their limitations, both categories are also how we continue to justify our spending on our massive nuclear arsenal. Some even use them to justify larger and larger expenses. But this brings us to another why question: Why have we chosen to spend our defense dollars on modernizing every element in the current nuclear systems?

This question will become increasingly important as timelines slip and costs grow in our nuclear modernization programs. For example, fresh off its first Nunn-McCurdy review, the Sentinel Program will now cost at least \$140 billion, not including a new bomb for another \$30 billion or the unknown costs of plutonium pit production.

As leaders, we have an obligation to ask **why**. Not only '**why** the extraordinary cost increases', but far more importantly, **why** are we doing the Sentinel program at all? Is there **no** alternative that would deter adversaries more effectively?

History is an important guide in this matter. In the 1950s and 1960s, our nuclear enterprise developed ground-based ICBMs, and we have continued them through the years. Today, members of Congress, without scrutiny, repeat a mantra that 400 ground-based ICBMs are necessary. But 40 years after the advent of the SSBNs and 20 years after stealth bombers, why are these ground-based ICBMs necessary? These missiles sit in their silos, not too far from you, in the heart of America, whose locations are known to cow hands, shepherders, and targeting personnel in the bunkers of our adversaries.

If, in a nuclear crisis, China and Russia choose to deploy a counter-force strategy, they will launch early to destroy those missiles whose locations are known. Thus, the MMIII and the Sentinel create an extraordinarily dangerous situation. In the event of a perceived attack, there would be immense pressure on the President to make the decision to launch within minutes or risk losing the missiles.

With all this in mind, **why** spend such a massive amount of money on a system that is so vulnerable and so extraordinarily dangerous? In defense policy, nothing should be sacred or untouchable, and everything should require frequent re-evaluation. So, let us not be afraid to ask yet another question... **Why a triad?**

Strategy cannot afford to be stagnant. It cannot afford to complacently accept the assumptions of the past. We must ask why we need the ground leg of the Triad. If

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the nuclear program is for deterrence, is the firepower of the submarines, airplanes, and their missiles sufficient to dissuade an adversary? These systems have the benefit of stealth, and the President has the time to gather all information and then decide whether to use the nuclear response. If that were not enough, we also have conventional weapons that can deter adversaries.

But even if we do retain each leg, we must reevaluate what's truly necessary within each. We do not have infinite resources and must make difficult choices about where we allocate our national resources. As we rethink whether we can achieve deterrence with different mixes, let's prioritize safety and effectiveness over fulfilling antiquated assumptions or requirements. Remember, this is not just a matter of matching our capability to their capability; this is about what will ensure our future survival.

Too often, debates on deterrence do not consider the rapidly changing security environment; cyber warfare, uncertainty, confusion, and misunderstanding could be greater risks than aggression. We are heavily dependent on our space observation and communication systems, and now we know that space war is real and routinely discussed. How do we weigh those risks when we decide to continue to keep 400 Sentinel or MMIII missiles, each prepared to kill millions, on constant alert, ready for immediate launch in just a few moments when there will certainly be chaos and uncertainty?

Surely, more destructive capability is not always better. So **why** do we need so many? Considering how many weapons will deter conflict is not *just* a military problem of tit-for-tat calculations. What national victory could we, or just as important our adversaries, ever hope to achieve at the end of a nuclear war that inevitably kills hundreds of millions of people, including tens of millions of Americans, destroys entire cities, and endangers the environment of the planet?

As we think about deterrence in the modern era, it is clear from rising costs and the existential dangers that we cannot afford a new arms race. Of course, we must grapple with hard questions about how to deter dangerous adversaries. Still, we have to answer an even harder question: how do we deter in a way that ensures there is a tomorrow worth protecting? Must we continue a 50-year-old triad strategy without considering the alternatives? **Why, why** are we stuck in a logic silo with the blast door closed?

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I want to end this with a discussion I had with the captain of a United Kingdom nuclear-armed submarine. After touring his ship, I stopped at the foot of the ladder to thank him for the discussion. I said 'I appreciate the enormous responsibility and difficult task that you have. If you receive a message to launch your missiles, and you do, what do you do next? Go home?' I'll never forget to look on his face. I don't know if he had ever contemplated that question, but that's a question for you and me today.

Thank you.