

National Institute for Deterrence Studies & Peter Huessy Seminar

Peace Through Strength: Renewing America's Nuclear Deterrent

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Webinar Transcript

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Abstract

The National Institute for Deterrence Studies (NIDS) hosted a seminar titled "*Peace Through Strength: Renewing America's Nuclear Deterrent*" to present its proposed 2026 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR). This session featured insights from senior experts James Petrosky, Curtis McGiffin, and Kirk Fansher, who outlined the urgent need for a decisive course correction in U.S. nuclear strategy amid unprecedented strategic competition, Chinese and Russian modernization, and the erosion of arms control frameworks. The proposed NPR emphasizes credible, flexible, and enduring deterrence tailored to a multipolar nuclear environment, advocating modernization of the triad, expanded regional deterrence options, and strengthened extended deterrence for allies. Rejecting minimal deterrence and "no first use" policies, the doctrine calls for resilient command and control, escalation management, and revitalization of the nuclear enterprise to ensure U.S. credibility and alliance assurance. This seminar provided a roadmap for restoring deterrence as the cornerstone of peace and stability in an era of accelerating nuclear threats.

Executive Summary

The seminar introduced NIDS' proposed **2026 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR)**, a strategic blueprint designed to restore U.S. nuclear deterrence credibility in an era of multipolar threats. Speakers included **James Petrosky** (NIDS President), **Curtis McGiffin** (Vice President for Education), and **Kirk Fansher** (Senior Fellow), who collectively emphasized the urgent need for modernization and doctrinal reform.

Key Themes

- **Strategic** **Context:**
Global security has shifted dramatically since the last NPR, with China and Russia expanding nuclear arsenals, eroding arms control agreements, and adopting doctrines that exploit U.S. posture gaps.
- **Core Recommendations:**
 - Maintain and modernize the **nuclear triad** with flexible, survivable capabilities.
 - Develop **regional deterrence options** to counter adversary escalation strategies, particularly in Europe and the Indo-Pacific.
 - Strengthen **extended deterrence** to reassure allies and prevent proliferation.
 - Reject policies such as “**no first use**” and **sole purpose**, which risk signaling weakness.
 - Revitalize the **nuclear enterprise**, including industrial base and workforce, to sustain long-term resilience.
- **Doctrinal** **Shift:**
The proposed NPR advocates **credible, flexible, and enduring deterrence**, tailored to simultaneous threats from multiple nuclear peers. It underscores escalation management, proportional response options, and modernization aligned with the 2025 National Security Strategy’s principle of *peace through strength*.

Strategic Imperatives

- Close capability gaps to prevent adversary exploitation.
- Ensure deterrence remains credible, feared by adversaries, and trusted by allies.
- Prepare for a future defined by continuous nuclear competition and technological acceleration.

Next Steps

NIDS will continue engagement through upcoming seminars, including “**Strategic Perspective on Nuclear Modernization**” on December 19, and further discussions on testing, evaluation, and modernization in 2026.

Unabridged Transcript

(Note: there will invariably be some word errors in the following AI generated transcript.)

00:00:06:06 - 00:00:27:07

James Petrosky

Good morning. I'm Jim Petrosky, president and co-founder of the National Institute for Deterrence Studies. We're so glad to have you here today. Today we have a special seminar to discuss our recent NIDS research insight titled “Peace Through Strength Renewing America's Nuclear Deterrent.” And during this presentation, you'll hear from and be able to interact with the authors.

00:00:27:08 - 00:00:53:09

James Petrosky

Before we begin, I want to alert you to our upcoming seminars on December 19th. Joining us for “Strategic Perspective on Nuclear Modernization” with Dave Hoagland, Acting Deputy Administrator for the Defense programs at the Department of Energy. On January 30th, we welcome Stephen Blank and Mark Schneider for an in-depth analysis of Russia's current and projected nuclear posture and strategic forces developments.

00:00:53:10 - 00:01:17:13

James Petrosky

The seminar examines Moscow's long term modernization and expansion efforts, and I think you'll find it to be a really exciting seminar. And if you'd like to explore more of our work, including upcoming events, publications, reports and podcasts, please visit Thinkdeterrence.com. We're constantly adding new speakers and content, and be sure to check back often and follow us on social media to stay informed.

00:01:17:14 - 00:01:42:04

James Petrosky

If you or your colleagues would like to receive future invitations directly from us, just email our Director of Operations, who's not here today, and I'm covering for Kimberly Cherington at KCherington@Thinkdeterrence.com, and we will get you on our invite list. So, throughout today's presentation, I encourage you to submit your questions using the chat or the question and answer button at the top of your screen.

00:01:42:06 - 00:01:50:06

James Petrosky

We'll address them during the dedicated question and answer portion of the seminar. Now I'm delighted to introduce our host for today's discussion,

00:01:50:09 - 00:02:02:13

James Petrosky

our Mr. Peter Hussey, president, Senior Director of strategic deterrence studies at Geostrategic Analysis and senior fellow here at NIDS. Peter, the floor is yours.

00:02:02:14 - 00:02:31:01

Peter Huessy

Thank you very much, Jim. We have three wonderful speakers today. It is NIDS' Nuclear Posture Review that we're going to be talking about. Kirk Fansher is, senior fellow at the National Institute of Deterrence Studies. He has 30 years of experience and expertise in defense strategy and national security. He has a master's in national security studies from the US Naval War College, and he has an MBA from Yale.

00:02:31:03 - 00:02:59:01

Peter Huessy

On the other hand, we have, Curtis McGiffin, who is our a visiting professor at the School of Defense and Strategic Studies at Missouri State University. He's also a vice president or co-founder of the National Institute for Deterrence Studies and president of Clarkston Consulting, Incorporated. Our third speaker is our president, Jim Petrosky, who is the co-founder of the National, NIDS, the National Institute of Deterrence Studies.

00:02:59:02 - 00:03:29:13

Peter Huessy

His work primarily includes the looking at the importance of strategic and nuclear deterrence through effective research and education and consulting. He's responsible for organizing this organization. And he has 20 years as a graduate faculty member at a number of research institutes. And he brings a long range technical perspective, to this business. He's going to be introducing our first speakers and also speaking himself.

00:03:29:14 - 00:03:33:02

Peter Huessy

Jim, over to you, sir.

00:03:33:03 - 00:03:54:08

James Petrosky

Thank you, Peter. And again, thank you everyone, for, for joining us. So, I want to I want to frame what we're doing right now because it's important to know why we wrote this. Why we wrote this proposal. And so, so let me get started here. I'm sorry. I'm trying to do two things at once.

00:03:54:08 - 00:04:23:01

James Petrosky

Here we go. So it needs our mission is clear to bring awareness to the enduring value of sound nuclear policy. And the critical role of deterrence in safeguarding national and global security. As a nonprofit think tank, we're dedicated to providing rigorous national security analysis, policy solutions, and deterrence education. And our work is driven by a commitment to peace through strength, advocating for the responsible application of America's nuclear deterrent.

00:04:23:02 - 00:04:51:06

James Petrosky

And so, we have a unique expertise among us. You're going to hear from some of them today. And this proposal is not just an academic study. It's the result of collaboration among practitioners and policy experts. With over 850 years of combined experience in the nuclear deterrence enterprise. We've been there, we've done that, and our contributors and endorsers represent a broad spectrum of expertise, ensuring that our recommendations are both practical, forward-looking and sound.

00:04:51:08 - 00:05:16:00

James Petrosky

So why do we write it? Well, the world has changed and it's changed dramatically since the last Nuclear Posture Review. The security environment is now defined by unprecedented strategic competition, the rapid expansion of nuclear arsenals by adversaries, the erosion of arms control agreements. The previous administration's policies, while well-intentioned, are now outdated and insufficient to address today's threats.

00:05:16:03 - 00:05:43:08

James Petrosky

And when I say previous administrations, I'm saying both the Biden and the previous Trump administrations, as the proposal states failing to produce a new NPR at what one would call Trump speed would burden the president with the remnants of a poorly constructed 2022 nuclear posture Review and a legacy of ineffective policies embedded in government directives that require adjustment, replacement or removal.

00:05:43:09 - 00:06:15:01

James Petrosky

So that's why we did this. And so our goal with this proposed NPR is to provide a decisive course correction to restore the credibility of U.S. nuclear deterrence, to modernize our force posture and ensure that America and its allies remain secure in an era of multipolar nuclear threats. We believe that a robust, credible and adaptable nuclear deterrent is essential not only for preventing war, but for maintaining peace and stability and a rapidly changing world.

00:06:15:02 - 00:06:35:01

James Petrosky

So today, we invite you to engage with us, to ask questions and to challenge your assumptions. I will place a link to the article in the chat as well. If you haven't read it yet, and if you have, please indicate with a thumbs up to give us an idea of how many have done so. So, thank you for being a part of this vital conversation.

00:06:35:03 - 00:06:44:01

James Petrosky

And now I'll turn it over to Curtis McGiffin, vice president for education and the primary author of this document. Curtis, off to you.

00:06:44:02 - 00:07:00:07

Curtis McGiffin

Thanks, Jim. I'm not going to say that I'm the primary author. Kirk and I pretty much handle this together. But thank you all for being here this morning. And thanks for giving me a few minutes to sort of introduce what we did here and maybe sort of give you some of the philosophies behind it. So, I got some prepared remarks.

00:07:00:09 - 00:07:46:09

Curtis McGiffin

So, if you'll indulge me for a few minutes, I will sort of review and go over these prepared remarks. So in 1994, the Department of Defense's definition of deterrence emphasized not just a, the cost benefit logic, but also the creation of a state of mind shaped by fear of credible, unacceptable consequences. Building on that foundation, the NIDS proposed 2026 NPR starts with the fundamental strategic truth only credible power that is both trusted by allies and feared by adversaries can sustain deterrence in tomorrow's rapidly intensifying and coercive security landscape.

00:07:46:10 - 00:08:25:12

Curtis McGiffin

Such credible nuclear power is the most reliable barrier against great power war or some lower level nuclear conflict. Its philosophy begins with a realist understanding of international politics. Adversaries are deterred not by optimistic assumptions, asymmetric treaty aspirations, or declaratory restraint, but by the unmistakable capability demonstrated resolve of the United States to amass and impose unacceptable costs at every level of escalation.

00:08:25:13 - 00:08:58:06

Curtis McGiffin

This peace through strength ethos rejects the idea that stability can be achieved by limiting US nuclear options or reducing the role of nuclear weapons. Instead, it argues that lasting stability rests on the United States, the good guys possessing a modern, flexible and survivable nuclear deterrent that can meet the geopolitical challenges posed by China, Russia and other emerging nuclear competitors.

00:08:58:07 - 00:09:36:06

Curtis McGiffin

Collectively. Doctrinally, the proposed NPR emphasizes credible, flexible and enduring deterrence tailored to a multipolar or collaboratively adversarial nuclear environment. It acknowledges that the United States now faces two peer nuclear powers China and Russia, whose four structures regional strategies and escalation concepts differ from those of the United States and the rules based international order. It supports. But they are not so different from each other.

00:09:36:07 - 00:10:36:00

Curtis McGiffin

This geopolitical reality requires the United States to maintain a posture capable of simultaneously deterring multiple adversaries across both strategic and regional domains, as recommended by the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission report. The doctrine therefore emphasizes maintaining the full nuclear triad at all times, ensuring a diversified mix of warhead

yields and delivery systems, and preserving the ability to respond proportionally to limited nuclear use, particularly in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, by sustaining options at every rung of the escalation ladder, the proposed NPR seeks to deny adversaries any perceived gap in US capabilities that could be exploited through limited or regional nuclear coercion.

00:10:36:01 - 00:11:20:09

Curtis McGiffin

Equally central to the doctrine is the doctrine of escalation management. The proposed NPR argues that deterrence is not simply about preventing nuclear use, but about shaping adversary decision making throughout crises. This requires credible regional nuclear options, resilient nuclear command and control systems, and a clear willingness to respond decisively if deterrence fails. The document rejects nuclear minimization, sole purpose, and no first use policies because they could undermine deterrence by signaling self-imposed constraints that adversaries may view as weak and exploitable.

00:11:20:10 - 00:12:20:11

Curtis McGiffin

Instead, the NPR favors a posture of maximum nuclear deterrence that warns adversaries and reassures allies of U.S. resolve, resilience, and timely responses, including before detonation, confirmation. Although this NPR calls for stronger, more credible nuclear deterrence across the board, it stops short of advocating nuclear arsenal dominance, coercive first strike interventionism, or a massive parallel conventional arms buildup. It calls for the adoption of a more assertive, resilient and survivable nuclear posture, not a superior one, but one that no adversary or adversaries can consider vulnerable to a disarming first strike, attack, or susceptible to national or nuclear blackmail.

00:12:20:12 - 00:12:57:01

Curtis McGiffin

The proposed NPR offers three grand messages. First, it seeks to reestablish the credibility of U.S. nuclear deterrence as directed by the Secretary of War in the face of rapid structural shifts in the global nuclear balance. China, of course, is moving towards a significantly expanded triad-based arsenal. Russia continues to emphasize limited nuclear first use concepts in its strategies, and North Korea is demonstrating a growing capability and doctrinal clarity.

00:12:57:02 - 00:13:39:03

Curtis McGiffin

Together, these trends erode the deterrence assumptions of the post-Cold War era. The NPR, therefore, argues that credibility must be rebuilt through the force posture, readiness, and an unambiguous ability to respond decisively to any nuclear coercion or attack. Second, it seeks to reinforce nuclear assurance for U.S. allies, particularly in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, by demonstrating that the United States has the capability, capacity and resolve to extend its nuclear deterrent, whether in 2027, 2035 or beyond.

00:13:39:04 - 00:14:11:14

Curtis McGiffin

The documents discussion is shared above. Shared regional deterrence is central to alliance stability and empowerment. It prevents allied proliferation by giving partners confidence that U.S. guarantees are real, durable and inseparable. If the United States fails to uphold credible extended deterrence, it does not merely risk allied hedging, it effectively, effectively invites allied denuclearization, undermining proliferation efforts and eroding U.S. leadership.

00:14:12:00 - 00:14:58:12

Curtis McGiffin

Third, the NPR provides a roadmap for preserving the legacy arsenal while expanding and uploading forces as necessary to strengthen deterrence in the near and midterm. This includes maintaining aging systems long enough to bridge modernization timelines and delays. As well as ensuring surge capacity where required and closing gaps created by simultaneous adversary expansion. Beyond immediate force adjustments, the NPR also offers guidance on developing additional capabilities and capacity outside the existing modernization program of record.

00:14:58:13 - 00:15:40:12

Curtis McGiffin

Its goal is long term resilience, a force sized, structured, and postured to meet a future in which nuclear competition is continuous, dynamic, treaty free, and technologically accelerated. I will remind you that the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission found that the current U.S. strategic posture won't meet future defense objectives due to the rapid threat escalation, especially the nuclear threats from two peer adversaries, and that urgent, significant change is required in the U.S. overall strategic nuclear posture.

00:15:40:13 - 00:16:16:09

Curtis McGiffin

This needs proposed. NPR identifies several bold and achievable remedies. Taken together, these messages position the proposed MPR as a blueprint for restoring credible, feared and reliable US nuclear power before a close. I'm sorry. Before I close, allow me a moment to comment on the connection to this NPR to the just released National Security Strategy, obviously published weeks ahead of the 2025, national Security Strategy.

00:16:16:09 - 00:16:56:02

Curtis McGiffin

The NIDS proposed 2026 Nuclear Posture Review gives substance to the NSS intent, capturing its spirit even where the text is yet to follow. At its core is a familiar axiom peace rests on strength, while the NSS provides some high-level direction on sovereignty, deterrence, modernization, and great power rivalry. The NIDS NPR converts these themes into specific nuclear strategy, force posture, and doctrinal framework aligned with America's global

responsibilities and the president's America First agenda.

00:16:56:04 - 00:17:27:03

Curtis McGiffin

First, the proposed NPR advances the NSS's core idea of peace through strength, asserting credible military power and the fear it projects as the best safeguard against conflict amid geopolitical turbulence and great power competition. The NSS clearly states on page three, quote, "We want the world's most robust, credible and modern nuclear deterrent" unquote. This NPR aims to deliver.

00:17:27:04 - 00:18:03:05

Curtis McGiffin

It recommends for structure upgrades to ensure nuclear abundances and survivability, including modernization, modernizing the nuclear triad, and rejecting minimal deterrence limits. This, NPR emphasizes, the U.S. strength must be real, demonstrated, and unmistakable for deterrence to succeed. Next, the NSS emphasizes that deterrence depends on maintaining U.S. military overmatch. This strong, modernized nuclear posture, advocated in our 2026 NPR, directly supports that objective.

00:18:03:06 - 00:18:40:08

Curtis McGiffin

The 2025 NSS also stresses economic vitality. One of President Trump's central goals, and that requires sustained focus on deterrence to prevent war in the Indo-Pacific by creating the strategic space for economic expansion. Successful deterrence enables investment in the very capabilities that sustain it. This dynamic not only offers a long-term sustainment pathway for the nuclear deterrent force, but also reinforces deterrence as the essential buffer between competition and conflict.

00:18:40:09 - 00:19:24:03

Curtis McGiffin

And finally, the proposed NPR provides the nuclear force modernization agenda required by the 2025 NSS is broader national power renewal effort, the NSF states. Quote, "In the long term, maintaining American economic and technological preeminence is the surest way to deter and prevent a large-scale military conflict" close quote. The 2026 NPR calls for the revitalization of the nuclear industrial base to develop new nuclear capabilities, convert existing systems where appropriate, expand investment and acquisition priorities, and rebuild the nuclear deterrence workforce.

00:19:24:04 - 00:20:13:02

Curtis McGiffin

Again, the 2025 NSS declares a desire to recruit, train, equip and field the world's most powerful, lethal and technologically advanced military to protect our interests and deter wars. Ultimately,

the NIDS proposed 2026 NPR offers a clear and unapologetic blueprint for restoring the credible nuclear power needed to decisively deter in a world shaped by two nuclear peer adversaries and a growing number of regional challenges. It recognizes the fundamental truth long reflected in U.S. strategy and reaffirmed in the 2025 NSS, that peace rests on strength, not wishful thinking or self-imposed limits.

00:20:13:04 - 00:20:53:09

Curtis McGiffin

By maintaining a modern, flexible and resilient triad, denying adversaries any exploitable gaps and escalation, reinforcing extended deterrence to prevent allied nuclearization, and rebuilding the industrial and human capital foundations of the enterprise, the NPR meets the moment with a strategy that matches the threat. Its message is clear the United States must remain a nation whose power allies trust, adversaries fear and that is fully capable of averting the conflicts others might try to impose this decade and the next.

00:20:53:10 - 00:20:57:03

Curtis McGiffin

Thank you very much. Over to you, Kirk.

00:20:57:04 - 00:21:23:07

Kirk Fansher

Hello. Well, first, thank you, Peter, for hosting, Jim and Curtis, thank you for allowing me to kind of jumpstart this effort and, collaborate on it. For a little bit of background, I, bring a lens shaped in the 2010 NPR, and the New Start treaty where I worked on, Air Force structure.

00:21:23:08 - 00:21:49:08

Kirk Fansher

And some of the consequences of the New Start negotiation. So, I'm going to approach this from the standpoint, what did we get right? What did we get wrong? And what does that mean for our strategy today and going forward. And I'd say that there's in hindsight, there's certainly two lessons to be learned from, what we did wrong in, the 2010 NPR.

00:21:49:09 - 00:22:24:14

Kirk Fansher

And primarily, my view is that we created a force structure, in a posture that's very much ill-suited to, the world at that time, and as it exists currently. So, I'm going to talk a little bit about our strategic deterrence forces and what needs to be done with regards to those. And then talk about regional shared deterrence and why that is central, an essential shift in our required strategy.

00:22:24:15 - 00:23:07:08

Kirk Fansher

So as we stand today, we deter all nuclear threats using our strategic deterrence capabilities

primarily, We have a force that is sized against, Russian strategic nuclear forces and ignores the Chinese breakout and the fact that our adversaries maintain about a 50/50 split between their strategic forces and their regional forces. So, we deter 10% of the problem with 90% of our forces in the strategic forces.

00:23:07:09 - 00:23:57:00

Kirk Fansher

And ignore the fact that regional escalation is the principal risk, of nuclear use. Our adversaries are postured for regional escalation, and their doctrine reflects their ability and willingness to fight at a regional level on the battlefield with nuclear weapons. Okay, so the first thing I'll address is our strategic deterrence. With the emergence of China in particular, but even, sans China, we've developed a posture that is overly reliant on our sea-based deterrent as our source of a second-strike capability.

00:23:57:01 - 00:24:31:10

Kirk Fansher

Our sea-based deterrence is robust. It's very effective. But we need to be able to hedge against technological development. And by putting so many eggs in that basket, we've incentivized our adversaries to invest heavily. To counter that capability. We've drawn down our bomber force and our ICBM forces, and one could argue that our bomber force is not really focused on the nuclear mission to the degree that it should be, in large part because the bomber force is just too small.

00:24:31:11 - 00:25:26:11

Kirk Fansher

So as far as recommendations for the other two legs of the triad, I would endorse the Strategic Posture Commission's, suggestion that we need, to look at road mobile deployment of the Sentinel system, which could effectively be based out of WSA and bomber bases, building the basket a little bit bigger that way. But the most cost effective and immediate opportunity to change our force posture is by leveraging the flexibility of the bomber force, expanding its alert capability, expanding its ability to disperse and do alert at bases other than our very limited number of bomber bases, basically rebuilding the way that we did, alert early in the nuclear era, the 1957 where we dispersed our bomber force around the world with the ability to, put up to a half of the bombers on alert at a given time. This is not to say that we need to have the bombers on alert 24/7, but we need to demonstrate the ability to both disperse the bomber force and ratchet up its posture.

00:25:46:10 - 00:26:23:08

Kirk Fansher

And we need to practice doing it for that to be credible and effective. The second leg of the problem is the mismatch with the regional threat, regional deterrence through strategic means lacks credibility. It brings up the question, would we trade Seattle for Seoul or Boston for Berlin? It's caused friction and credibility on our...with our allies and with adversaries alike.

00:26:23:09 - 00:26:58:15

Kirk Fansher

So, we need to address that by having a credible regional deterrent. From my experience in wargaming scenarios. The worst problem that you can face is a mismatch in terms of asymmetry of capabilities and perceptions. What I mean by this is in a scenario where an adversary might use a small battlefield nuclear weapon, let's say in an EMP attack against U.S. forces or U.S. territory such as Guam.

00:26:59:00 - 00:27:27:14

Kirk Fansher

We need to have an ability to replicate that attack in our response. Instead, the United States has postured itself to rely on conventional response, which creates two problems giving us the worst of both by going down the escalatory ladder and responding with conventional, weapons. We look weak. Our resolve is questioned in order to offset that.

00:27:27:15 - 00:28:05:09

Kirk Fansher

We normally go, at least in war games, up the escalatory ladder in terms of target selection, perhaps a key to node in the sovereign territory of an adversary. So, on one hand, we're escalating. On the other hand, we're looking weak and we create uncertainty amongst the adversaries. And we see escalation spin out of control. Another part of that resolution, in order to have a more credible deterrent, we have to bring our allies more robustly into the solution set.

00:28:05:10 - 00:28:49:09

Kirk Fansher

That means replicating and enhancing burden sharing as we do it in NATO in the Pacific. One of the things that I would like to see happen is the inclusion of B21s into AUKUS, which would give us a, forward presence in the theaters without driving a large deployment bill. The fielding of long-range strike in a slick, end surface launch cruise missile configuration, compatible with SSP, ends with attack submarines with surface vessels, or even ground deployment.

00:28:49:10 - 00:29:29:03

Kirk Fansher

Is a cost effective option. Deploying that with allied countries. Is also an option we need to explore basically replicating the DCA mission across a mini triad in each region. Doing this not only shows resolve in the regions and provides a capability that matches more closely to threat, but it adds the credibility of our allies having skin in the game and having a vote on whether or not the U.S. will deploy nuclear weapons in support of our commitments to our allies.

00:29:29:04 - 00:29:40:00

Kirk Fansher

So, I look forward to the comment section and the question and answering. And, Peter, I'll turn it back to you at that point.

00:29:40:01 - 00:30:01:00

James Petrosky

Okay. Thanks, Peter. Yeah. We've got some questions here that, that I'm definitely, interested in, in responding to. I'm going to highlight Curtis and I so thanks. Thanks, Peter. And thanks everyone for, for, for putting questions in here again. Add more as you say. We have a first question from Dave Trachtenberg.

00:30:01:00 - 00:30:43:01

James Petrosky

Thanks, Dave. Nice seeing you again. Yeah. And thanks for your congratulations on the report. He his opening question is why did we not address nuclear testing? Question given relevance to nuclear deterrence and effectiveness of U.S. nuclear stockpile. So, first of all, you know, I'll start out in the discussion because, nuclear testing, sort of a, a sweet spot of mine is, well, I know nuclear testing has gotten into the vernacular very quickly with President Trump's, declaration of, well, we're going to, you know, return to nuclear testing and a lot you you've seen a lot of documents talking about what that means and how what and how that would go about.

00:30:43:01 - 00:31:03:00

James Petrosky

So, I'm going to I'm going to put a different spin on this, at least from, from our perspective. And the way this was written and how I read this, because when I say modernization to me, modernization is testing. We have to test when we modernize, when we develop new nuclear weapons, as you know, we do science-based testing.

00:31:03:00 - 00:31:30:02

James Petrosky

And I've been involved in that for many, many years with the national labs and looking at testing and evaluation. And so everywhere, I think 65 or so times throughout this document, we mentioned modernization. What does that entail? What entails evaluation, upgrading, reassessing the strategic imperative of the adversary, looking at the threat space, looking our capabilities and then modernizing that to do that.

00:31:30:02 - 00:31:57:04

James Petrosky

And you can't do that without any kind of testing. Now, if we talk about explosive testing, to be honest, I never really when I, when I was reading through this, never thought that would be put on the table. And you'll probably hear differences of opinion even among the folks at the at the, at NIDS as well as I know some of the people on this, on this, seminar that would say we shouldn't do nuclear testing unless is the last resort.

00:31:57:05 - 00:32:24:12

James Petrosky

We should start explosive testing right away as a signal. I understand those viewpoints, but I believe from a testing standpoint, all modernization involves the testing, evaluation, and the critical evaluation of our systems in a new strategic environment. It's imperative we do it. And we addressed that in the NPR, our proposed NPR here. And so that's my opening salvo regarding testing.

00:32:24:15 - 00:32:42:05

James Petrosky

Then I think there's more to be said about that. In fact, I think, Peter, we're going to be doing some more discussions and panel discussions about evaluation and testing in 2026. So, I want to turn it over to the NPR. This proposed two authors, to make any other comments.

00:32:42:06 - 00:33:09:11

Curtis McGiffin

Yeah. I'll add, I think, an issue of time the, the, the NPR was published in early November, which is right about the time that the president, put out, the guidance. And so it was simply just, the report had already been written, and so we did not address testing, and to Jim's point, that might have been one of the things we didn't even consider, on the list of things to do.

00:33:09:11 - 00:33:31:12

Curtis McGiffin

I think if we were to go back and maybe do an amendment to this NPR in 2026, actual calendar year 2026, we could possibly add some language on that, although I'm not convinced we here at NIDS, have come to a settled, position on this. So that would be I think it would be more difficult even than advocating for a larger nuclear force.

00:33:31:12 - 00:33:38:14

Curtis McGiffin

So hopefully an answer is probably not what you, what you wanted, David, but it's the one I have.

00:33:38:15 - 00:34:13:07

Peter Huessy

Let me, if I may jump in here with Kirk and Chris. Senator Cotton addressed this issue after having spoken to the head of the CIA. And he said, in his view, the evidence is that Russia and China have engaged in call it sub-kiloton or whatever testing which was subcritical below the threshold where we would be able to fully understand this or whether that was an explosion.

00:34:13:09 - 00:34:38:03

Peter Huessy

And there are those on the some who say we can tell them if they tell if they're doing something on the other end, there are those who think, no, we don't necessarily be able to. But if you look at the work done by Jim Howe down in Alabama, the Russians have developed an extraordinary number of new nuclear weapon types, which are battlefield type weapons.

00:34:38:04 - 00:35:24:07

Peter Huessy

That I was talking earlier with Kirk about this is that Yeltsin said in 1999, developed me low yield, very powerful, very accurate battlefield nuclear weapons. And my assumption is Mr. Putin wrote it in the Mr. Yeltsin put his name on it because he was president. But they've implemented that April 1999 requirements. So, the question I'm asking Curtis and Kirk is, are the Russians and Chinese engaging in testing because the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty does not have a definition of what the threshold is below which it'd be okay, but above which is forbidden.

00:35:24:09 - 00:35:47:05

Peter Huessy

We never were able to get that nailed down. So, I'm curious because I have to say, I don't I haven't decided one way or the other about testing, though. I wanted to explore the issue, which is why have put together some events on this subject. So, Curtis, why don't you start do it by addressing that and then we can go to Kirk.

00:35:47:06 - 00:36:30:00

Curtis McGiffin

All right. Thanks, Peter, for the question. I would, I know that in 2019, General Ash, who was then the commander of the Defense Intelligence Agency, made the presentation, noting, declaring that the Russians and likely the Chinese were already testing. I was, what, five, six years ago? So, so this isn't a surprise. My guess is, is that the president's, edict that came out in early November is likely because he's privy to intelligence that none of us are, and, I think what bothers me more is what we're not being told is just as American citizens, if there is a demand for testing, why?

00:36:30:01 - 00:36:52:01

Curtis McGiffin

Right. You know. Yeah, I get it. If we're going to do it equally, then that assumes that there's already testing going on and but yet we're, we're not getting the full picture. And so that I think is, is is likely what's driving this I think what's interesting, at least from my perspective, Jim's always interested in the engineering side of this and the scientific.

00:36:52:01 - 00:37:16:02

Curtis McGiffin

And I God bless him. I'm only interested in the in the affect side. How useful is it for deterrence? Is it stabilizing or destabilizing? Should we do that? And, there are many arguments, that are, on both sides that are equally interesting. And so, I always tend to lean to doing more rather than

less.

00:37:16:03 - 00:37:36:04

Curtis McGiffin

But I am unsettled on, on, what would be the effect? On one hand, you know, some have said, well, maybe the world would benefit from a reminder of seeing what a mushroom cloud would be. I mean, the states could all come together in agreement and say we are going to do a demonstration just to remind everybody just what this power is.

00:37:36:05 - 00:38:06:05

Curtis McGiffin

I mean, that would I mean, that's an absurd example of what that could be. But I think, the idea, that, that states will test only because the United States is testing, is, I think the fundamental question, you know, and there's been plenty of studies that already sort of lay out the idea that that states don't necessarily react to what we do.

00:38:06:05 - 00:38:40:04

Curtis McGiffin

They tend to do what's in their national interest. This may be one of these examples that might be counter to that, because there has been some relative delay, if you will, or, an ability to conform to this and national, global taboo, you know, so we'll see, we'll see. But I think there is little ability, I think, for this NPR to address testing and keep the document at 50 pages.

00:38:40:06 - 00:38:42:02

Curtis McGiffin

Over to you, Kirk.

00:38:42:03 - 00:38:45:02

Kirk Fansher

Yeah. It's an interesting experiment, mind experiment, thinking through this, but I'm not sure it really matters. Okay. I look at, you know, I kind of go back to what Curtis said about modernization. I am convinced that the Russians and the Chinese are doing everything they need to do to feel modern weapons. If they are doing if they feel they need to do testing, I'm sure they're doing it.

00:39:11:06 - 00:39:39:10

Kirk Fansher

If they feel that they can assure from an engineering standpoint, without doing testing, I, I'm sure that they're doing that. If they're having the North Koreans do testing for them, also a possibility, but I am totally convinced that both Ji and Putin are doing everything they need to do to try and get a leg up on the United States.

00:39:39:11 - 00:40:08:02

Kirk Fansher

And the question is whether or not we can detect it. I'm a little bit alarmed that, you know, the Chinese put 350 silos out there, and people don't think they've got the missiles in the warheads to put in them that we cling to. What, in my belief, is a fantasy of 500 Chinese warheads with the potential to go to a thousand by 2030, when simple math would tell you the number is probably closer to 3000 already.

00:40:08:04 - 00:40:19:07

Kirk Fansher

Now, some people will find that alarming, but I would rather bet on the worst-case scenario and be wrong than bet on the best case scenario and be wrong.

00:40:19:09 - 00:40:24:13

James Petrosky

To assume that Peter, are you going to always follow up?

00:40:24:14 - 00:40:28:02

Peter Huessy

I was going to,

00:40:28:03 - 00:40:50:12

Peter Huessy

Lay out one of the questions we had from the chat. Go ahead. This is from Ian Harris, who says in regard to testing, evaluation and sustainment, do you see a need to increase capability at the nuclear enterprise assurance and securing offshored supply chains to ensure allies that weapons will work and can be delivered as advertised? Yes, but you try to go with that, Curtis.

00:40:51:12 - 00:41:14:08

Curtis McGiffin

Yes, I think look, I think the key here is, is that, I think it goes without saying there shouldn't be any element in the nuclear enterprise sustainment logistics chain that comes from a foreign power, much less an adversarial power. I mean, that's just got to stop. It fundamentally, it's counter to deterrence, much less national security writ large.

00:41:14:09 - 00:41:58:07

Curtis McGiffin

If that is even an issue, I think I think the challenge, you know, Denis Healey, you know, the Healy theorem, said it only takes 5% of your effort to deter an adversary, but 95% of your effort to assure an ally. I don't think we do 95% of our of our effort to assure our allies, we just all live on faith and hope and, and, and, and sort of this pat on the head that, you know, it'll all be okay, because, many of our seniors don't really believe that this is even that nuclear, the use of a

nuclear weapon in a conflict is, is thinkable even

00:41:58:07 - 00:42:32:05

Curtis McGiffin

by the adversary. And I'm just, I'm just, not convinced, that that is the reality of the future. It is reality today. But whether or not that is the reality of the future, and that's what deterrence is all about, is arming to prevent a possible future. And if we don't embrace that, axiom that, that sort of, three-dimensional thought, if you will.

00:42:32:06 - 00:43:01:15

Curtis McGiffin

It's very hard to assure allies if you don't, show them that you're, that you're willing to invest. And I think what this NPR lays out is, is a clear signal to, to our allies that we are investing, that we are building capacity. And then at the same time, we are empowering them to assume responsibility for the national security, not only of their own, but in the partnership of us.

00:43:02:01 - 00:43:30:01

Curtis McGiffin

Others call that burden sharing. I prefer a more positive, term which is empowering. Right? They're not vassal states of us. We should be empowering them through whatever weapons capabilities that they're comfortable and willing to amass and that we're, of course, comfortable and willing to allow them to have if our goal, hold on, if our goal is to ensure that America is going to be the preeminent power in the West.

00:43:30:01 - 00:44:03:06

Curtis McGiffin

Right. The only country with a nuclear bomber force and a nuclear ICBM force, then we darn well better invest in it, and we better have enough. And you need to convince them, the allies, that we have enough. And that's why that 95% matters. And, when you just look at the Dia, public Intel, the little graphic they put out in early May of this of this year, you know, it says that the Chinese will have 700 ICBMs by 2035.

00:44:03:08 - 00:44:27:08

Curtis McGiffin

Plus you add in the 360 some odd that the Russians already have. And then you look at the modernization program of record that's recapitalization. We add nothing new. So, we'll be at a 60% deficit ish. In ten years. How many out there say, well, that's okay. We can live with that. We disagree. And that's what this is about.

00:44:27:08 - 00:44:28:11

Curtis McGiffin

Go ahead. Kirk.

00:44:28:12 - 00:44:51:13

Kirk Fansher

Yeah. I'm going to contradict Curtis here a little bit. Okay. I don't think we are, I don't think we assure our allies at all. I mean, I kind of coined the phrase during the 2010 that deterrence assurance is a is a continuum of coercion. On one side is positive coercion. And at the far end, you know, it's negative coercion.

00:44:52:01 - 00:45:17:08

Kirk Fansher

So, we're using sticks and carrots. Well, my comment on that is too often we hit our allies with the carrot. So, I mean, let's be frank here, when we took TLAM-N out of the inventory, allies in the Pacific were not happy and we coerced them into shutting up. It's as simple as that. They didn't really get a vote.

00:45:17:09 - 00:45:48:02

Kirk Fansher

Okay, we told them this is what we're going to do to assure you. Be good with it. And it's not necessarily what they want to be assured. So, you know, I think we've got and this goes across administrations. This is not something that only the Trump administration is, is good at. The Obama administration did the same thing when allies disagreed, be it Israel or Japan disagreed with U.S. policy.

00:45:48:02 - 00:45:55:06

Kirk Fansher

And where we were driving the train on, nuclear disarmament. We told them to shut up and color.

00:45:55:08 - 00:46:34:08

Curtis McGiffin

Let me add to that. In 2023 or 24, whichever one the sorry, it's all blurring together. During the Biden administration, when there was a real push in South Korea to, to demand their own organic nuclear capability. President Yoon at the time, after the Washington Declaration came out and sort of this new sort of, again, a comforting of our ally, came out and basically said publicly that that South Korea cannot afford to pursue its own nuclear weapons because it cannot afford the pariah status and the economic sanctions that its own allies would impose on it.

00:46:34:10 - 00:46:35:01

Peter Huessy

Yep.

00:46:35:03 - 00:47:12:04

Curtis McGiffin

At that moment, South Korea was more afraid of us than of North Korea. And so when we think about how we how we, work with our allies, we have to remember these sorts of things. We should never be more coercive on our allies than the adversaries. And so, this NPR sort of lays out, I think, a mechanism in which we empower them and we assure them, and in different areas and, and, and for those who are nonproliferation supporters, they should feel comforted by that.

00:47:14:07 - 00:47:31:04

Peter Huessy

Let me ask a question that, one of our attendees, Doug Ward, asked, and he says, given the security strategy, focus on the Western Hemisphere, I'm curious how your proposal would enhance regional security, particularly in Latin America.

00:47:31:06 - 00:47:34:07

Curtis McGiffin

Kirk, why don't you take that one since you're the shared regional guy?

00:47:34:09 - 00:48:04:09

Kirk Fansher

Well, I you know, one of the things that we talk about within the idea of regional shared deterrence is, a tailored approach, okay. Bringing, bringing allies on board, having, having forces now, you know, sharing the hemisphere with our Latin American, friends and not friends, gives us an advantage in, geography of being able to, be more responsive from the continental, the United States.

00:48:04:10 - 00:48:31:06

Kirk Fansher

But, you know, traditionally in Latin America, we've done things like discourage the Brazilians and the Argentineans from pursuing, maritime nuclear power, which could be converted into a weapons program. So we've really, you know, have deterred, allies, neutral parties, whatever you want to call them in Latin America from becoming full members, in the club.

00:48:31:07 - 00:49:19:05

Kirk Fansher

We are certainly taking notice of some of what the Chinese are doing in the hemisphere. That could go down that road and trying to deter them from participating in the hemisphere. I mean, they send a hospital ship, to, the western coast of, Latin America. I was waiting for them to try and send the military hospital ships through the Panama Canal, to, you know, come into the Caribbean and with our carrier battlegroup, but anyways, you know, probably, I guess, to cut to the chase, the Latin America is where one place where conventional deterrence and diplomatic and economic, aspects of deterrence and national power are sufficient to

00:49:19:05 - 00:49:33:11

Kirk Fansher

get the job done and are what we generally rely on in that respect. So not every problem is a nail. We've got other, other tools besides a hammer. And in Latin America we use those other tools.

00:49:33:12 - 00:50:04:00

Peter Huessy

The man okay. Question if I might. So, we've got ten minutes left. I three questions first for Kirk. What should we do in enhancing our theater nuclear weapons in the Pacific? We talked about this before we came on live, but I think given the fact we have zero in the Pacific, that was a subject of a conference I attended and spoke at yesterday with Ellie Gold of the Gold Institute.

00:50:04:00 - 00:50:35:13

Peter Huessy

We had a whole delegation of Koreans here in Washington talking about extended deterrence and then the how the alliance is critical to the security of the area. That's number one. Number two, either view can take many people have suggested, well, we don't need more nuclear weapons. We just need to enhance our conventional capability. And the third one is a little more theoretical, but it's often said by the abolition folks, if nuclear weapons are good for deterrence but not for warfighting.

00:50:35:15 - 00:50:55:10

Peter Huessy

And I've always taken that is what you mean. You can't use them. But if you can't use them, isn't it just bluff? Maybe I'm misinterpreting what they mean by warfighting, but if you take a nuclear warhead, you know a lot of it at Moscow I think Putin will think you're fighting. I don't think you'll they'll mistake this world, you know, anything else.

00:50:55:10 - 00:51:15:14

Peter Huessy

So those are the three issues is one. What should we do in the Pacific with respect to non-strategic nuclear weapons. Number two, why not just increase our conventional forces. And three, what is meant by people in the abolition community who say nuclear weapons are good for deterrence but not for fighting?

00:51:15:15 - 00:51:41:05

Kirk Fansher

Well, let me start with the Pacific region, because I think, effectively, what we're trying to do is replicate what we do with NATO. So, there's a lot of levers that we can pull there. But the other piece that we're advocating for, again, is having the allies contribute more according to their core competencies. So, we've got AUKUS going on with the UK and Australia.

00:51:41:06 - 00:52:08:07

Kirk Fansher

I've advocated for the Australians and the Brits, each having two squadrons of B21s, which give us a dual capable deterrence, either conventional or nuclear, in the region, without us having to pay the bill of constant deployments which affect the readiness of our bomber, our bomber resources. So B21s in the Pacific, I think are, an important aspect of that.

00:52:08:08 - 00:52:51:04

Kirk Fansher

So, you combine having B21s in Australia with the ability to put B21s on either Guam or Diego Garcia, for conventional deterrent or respond from the United States in a nuclear, scenario in northeast, Asia. I think there's a lot of different things that that could be done, some of them harder to do than others, but long range strike, F-35, DCA on the Peninsula are two relatively easy things to do, but it also highlights that, our allies sometimes can contribute things that we don't have as core competencies anymore.

00:52:51:05 - 00:53:30:09

Kirk Fansher

The Koreans maintain, an intermediate range ballistic missile capability in the ... I think we need to look at, dual capable, capabilities in ballistic and cruise missiles as well. That can be forward deployed there. You know, resurrecting TLAM- N and again, a lot of times it's just demonstrating the capability we could use a SLCM type cruise missile, nuclear capable of, attack submarines, which our allies also have off of surface vessels, which our allies also have.

00:53:30:10 - 00:53:59:04

Kirk Fansher

But that doesn't mean there have to be nuclear weapons on them day to day. It just means that you have to create the fear in the enemy's mind that you could deploy the weapon systems that way, and by doing that, you complicate their risk calculus and you complicate their targeting calculus. I think we need to spread the pieces on the board more widely and give our adversaries a much more difficult problem to solve.

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Peter Huessy

Curtis, you have anything you want to add to that?

00:54:01:15 - 00:54:36:08

Curtis McGiffin

No, that is ditto, on all of that, I would like to take on the, conventional forces question. I suppose. So, why not just have more, more conventional forces that, you know, we've thought about this a lot, First of all, the nuclear forces, shockingly to maybe to some of our, our viewers and participants here are cheaper, the conventional, if we're only spending, you know, 6 to 7% of our DoD budget on the nukes.

00:54:36:08 - 00:54:57:12

Curtis McGiffin

You know what is the rest of it being spent on? You know, after you take the people costs, it's conventional arms. It's the stuff we fight wars with rather than we deter with arming for deterrence is a little bit different than arming for defense or war. And so we're sort of advocating maybe between the lines here that we should relook at that philosophy.

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Curtis McGiffin

Much of our adversarial is built nuclear buildup is an attempt to, to asymmetrically counter the conventional prowess of the American armed forces. I mean, we're just at since the Gulf War, 1991, the world knows that the, the best way to deal with the United States is to have a nuclear weapon, because you can't take us on and win conventionally, adversaries fear our conventional arsenal, rightly or wrongly, and view it as a much more usable capability.

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Curtis McGiffin

They don't fear our nuclear arsenal. I mean, they respect it enough that it that the deterrence holds, but it's not what drives why they're nuking up in our opinion. In my opinion. And so, when we I'm sorry. So, when we, when we look at this, that that is what matters. Conventional arms don't deliver the same kind of fear, factor that a nuclear weapon does.

00:56:00:13 - 00:56:29:00

Curtis McGiffin

And, and our adversaries have written their doctrine basically to warn the world that it doesn't matter what you use. On our target, it's the target that is going to draw that nuclear response from the adversary. In other words, you can't JASSM your way out of a nuclear war if you're attacking the things that matter to them most and they feel a nuclear response is appropriate, they will respond.

00:56:29:01 - 00:56:37:05

Curtis McGiffin

And then the question will fall on us. And I know Kirk has a great thing to consider on this disparity, on the escalation cycle.

00:56:37:07 - 00:57:06:02

Kirk Fansher

Yeah, I mean, I would argue that conventional deterrence is destabilizing. Yes. Putin came out in 2008 and said, hey, you attack my strategic forces with conventional weapons. I will respond in with nuclear weapons. He came out and said, you try and keep me from pursuing my national objectives in the near abroad. I will nuke their bases in, European countries.

00:57:06:03 - 00:57:34:09

Kirk Fansher

He has you know, he is he's been very clear. I mean, if nothing else, Putin is pretty good at communicating. Exactly what he's thinking. They write about it, they tell you it, we ignore it. We misinterpret it. We choose not to believe it. We, you know, we get it wrong constantly. I call it the Cartright - Gottemoeller syndrome.

00:57:34:10 - 00:58:08:03

Kirk Fansher

All right. We don't want more usable weapons as a deterrent because then you will use them. We have caused the Russians to adopt the NATO strategy from Cold War as far as nuclear deterrence of conventional capability. And we refused to understand that, you know, our inability to get our mind around what our own strategy is doing is our biggest liability.

00:58:08:04 - 00:58:12:09

Peter Huessy

Jim, I'm going to turn it over to you, sir, because we have a couple of minutes left.

00:58:12:11 - 00:58:36:07

James Petrosky

Yeah, well, I appreciate it. Yeah. So, I'm not going to ask any more questions. We're up against the hour, but I think we got from this article what we wanted in from the seminar, what we wanted, which is to get the conversation started, finding out where the right place to do the right thing is it's not a perfect document, but it certainly is a starting point to look at a way to build a strong nuclear deterrent.

00:58:36:08 - 00:58:58:11

James Petrosky

I want to give out a special thank you to Curtis McGiffin and Kirk Fansher for putting pen to paper on this, sharing their expertise, and also thank all those that helped in writing this. This wasn't just a singular effort or even a two person effort. A lot of people got involved in this, and we got valuable thoughts and insights on future nuclear deterrence aimed at maintaining peace and prosperity.

00:58:58:14 - 00:59:22:04

James Petrosky

So thank you for educating and engaging with us on this important conversation. If you're new to the NIDS, we're a 501C3 nonprofit dedicated to advancing peace and promoting stability through a strong national security and nuclear deterrent. We do this by offering a wide range of deterrence education from live and virtual events like this and podcast publications, workshops.

00:59:22:06 - 00:59:41:12

James Petrosky

We do courses, we do all kinds of stuff. And so we hope that you and your colleagues will engage us a little bit more. I hope to see you next Friday. On the 19th with Dave Hoagland, Strategic Perspective on Nuclear Modernization. We have a full lineup of events and speakers on Friday morning, so be sure.

00:59:41:12 - 00:59:58:08

James Petrosky

And you and your colleagues come and check us out at thinkdeterrence.com. Thank you for being a part of our growing community. Be sure to follow us on LinkedIn and share our content with your network, your friends, your neighbors, everyone you know and spread the word. We hope you have a peaceful day.

00:59:58:08 - 01:00:10:03

James Petrosky

Oh, I failed to mention. Thank you. Peter, this is your seminar and I'm glad you're with us and making this happen. So we hope you have a peaceful day and very happy holidays. Thank you very much. Thank you all day.

01:00:10:05 - 01:00:14:01

Peter Huessy

Thank you Kirk, and thank you, Curtis for wonderful presentation.

01:00:14:02 - 01:00:15:01

Curtis McGiffin

Thank you for having us. Thank you.