

ICBM EAR Week of March 17, 2026, Prepared by Peter Huessy, President of Geostrategic Analysis and Senior Fellow at the National Institute of Deterrence Studies and the Gold Institute for International Strategy

Executive Summary

Excellent analysis of US nuclear policy by Ms. Heather Williams of CSIS; Michael Doran and details the situation in Iran; the NIPP releases a series of essays on the Administration's security strategy, one by Peter Huessy which is included in this weekly report; our Commander of US Strategic Command testifies before Congress on China's startling nuclear build-up; a critically speech by the head of NNSA details the Chinese nuclear tests; a further review of Sagan's views on missile defense; Miller and Edelman give a detailed assessment of extended nuclear deterrence and what the US can do to enhance its nuclear deterrent beyond the POR; a new intel assessment details the threat from China; the US Congress hears recommendation to increase the B21 production to 145, award \$15B to General Dynamics and Electric Boat, and accelerate Golden Dome; CRS and the Library of Congress lay out the challenges of NC3 in a new report; and it is now revealed that Iran admits have over 400 kilograms of 60% enriched uranium as well as ballistic missiles with a range of 4000 kilometers, both strong evidence of the imminence of the Iran threat.

Quotes & Commentary of the Week

Heather Williams the U.S. nuclear arsenal would benefit from tailored measures to strengthen the enterprise and adapt capabilities to the current threat environment. Additionally, improved capabilities must be complemented by risk-reduction measures that simultaneously secure U.S. and allied interests and advance global peace and security. Together, the paired ambitions of military strength and nuclear arms control could protect the United States, its allies, and the world at a time of rising global instability.

Brandon Williams, NNSA: *China is "clearly" conducting explosive nuclear testing and "trying to hide it."*

The President: Not ready to make a deal to end the war with Iran despite Tehran's willingness to do so "because the terms aren't good enough yet."

The President: Nations that receive Oil through the Hormuz Strait must take care of that passage, and we will help — A LOT! The U.S. will also coordinate with those Countries.

The President: Israel would never use a nuclear weapon in the ongoing conflict against Iran [After being asked about one his advisers warning of such a potential risk.].

Gulf states press U.S. to neutralize Iran for good as Hormuz crisis deepens.

IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi said that U.S. and Israeli airstrikes over the past year have "really rolled back the [Iranian nuclear] program considerably."

IAEA DG Grossi: A lot has survived of Tehran's nuclear capabilities and military operations alone cannot destroy them.

Jiang Bin, China Ministry of National Defense, "We have released information regarding the specifics of China's 2026 defense budget, making public its size, composition, and allocation and leaving no room for doubt."

Robert Kadlec, Assistant Secretary of War for Nuclear Deterrence, Chemical and Biological Defense Policy and Programs, told HASC "the U.S. must continue to upgrade its nuclear forces and maintain a nuclear strategy that is "robust enough to deter [China and Russia] simultaneously."

ICBM News

U.S. Navy Adm. Rich Correll, commander, U.S. Strategic Command, joined by Air Force Global Strike Command Commander Gen. Stephen L. Davis, visited F.E. Warren AFB, Feb. 18, 2026, to meet the warfighters driving nuclear modernization efforts and mission readiness of the land-based leg of the nation's nuclear triad.



Article -Leaders Mark
First Sentinel Mileston

International Strategic Nuclear News

Japan hypes up China's defense budget to find excuses for military expansion – China's defense ministry Global Times (China).

South Korean official: “There is no problem with deterrence against North Korea regardless of whether some USFK assets are relocated overseas,” re U.S. THAAD and other air defense systems being redeployed from South Korea to the Middle East.

US Central Command: U.S. forces executed a large-scale precision strike on Kharg Island, Iran. The strike destroyed naval mine storage facilities, missile storage bunkers, and multiple other military sites. U.S. forces successfully struck more than 90 Iranian military targets on Kharg Island, while preserving the oil infrastructure.

The US annual intelligence assessment released. The good news is that China does not plan to invade Taiwan in 2027 – The bad news is China seeks to take control of the self-ruled island without force.

Bill Gertz reports China's Communist government is continuing to work toward the annexation of Taiwan and hopes to complete unification with the self-ruled island democracy without resorting to force, according to the U.S. intelligence community's annual threat assessment.

Russian hypersonic jets buzz Japan's coast in 'thinly veiled threat' as Russia's defense ministry has released footage of its fighter jets carrying Kinzhal hypersonic missiles conducting exercises over the Sea of Japan, or East Sea, with the move interpreted as a message to Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi ahead of her talks with US President Donald Trump in Washington.

The Current American Administration Strategic Activities

Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Thomas G. DiNanno: “Met [on Monday] with my French counterpart, Claire Raulin, Director for Strategic Affairs, Security, and Disarmament at the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs for the U.S.-French Deterrence, Strategic Stability and Non-Proliferation Dialogue in Paris to discuss a range of nuclear related issues as well as the current strategic challenges facing our two countries.”

“U.S. intelligence report assesses China not planning to invade Taiwan in 2027,” which is the good news. The bad news is that China is seeking to control the island without recourse to military invasion.

Congratulations to General Dynamics as Electric Boat awarded \$15B in Columbia sub support.

CJCS Gen. Dan Caine explained U.S. Air Force bomber crews and maintainers have made “decisive” contributions to Operation Epic Fury.

Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory revealed that STRATCOM Commander U.S. Navy Adm. Rich Correll and Command Senior Enlisted Leader U.S. Army Command Sgt. Maj. Jo Naumann visited LLNL for a tour of the Lab's world-class facilities.

Gen. Michael A. Guetlein, director of the Golden Dome missile defense program, told the McAleese Defense Programs Conference that the Pentagon has increased its cost estimate for the project to \$185 billion over the next decade, up from \$175 billion, **to accelerate the development of space-based capabilities.**

The National Nuclear Security Administration has achieved a major milestone for America's nuclear security enterprise producing the first highly enriched uranium 'button' using a new electrorefining process –restoring a critical domestic purification capability. This enhances the precision, safety, and effectiveness of highly enriched uranium production for critical national security missions, including stockpile modernization and naval propulsion.”

President Trump said that Israel would never use a nuclear weapon in the ongoing conflict against Iran after he was asked about one his advisers warning of such a potential risk, according to The Hill.

Good News on the B-21: The U.S. military struck a \$4.5 billion deal last month to increase the rate of production on its new B-21 bomber. Now officials are considering whether they will open up an entire second production line to go even faster in constructing the sixth-generation stealth Raider.



Article - 19 is Not
Enough - Rush Order

Jules Hurst of the Pentagon's Comptroller's office is still fleshing out what budget vehicles will be used to request the FY2027 defense budget request.

Key Nuclear Report of the Week

State Department officials in both testimony and remarks earlier this year revealed that China had performed nuclear weapons tests contrary to the terms of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty or CTBT. Critics questioned whether such tests had occurred and the Chinese denied that any such tests had been undertaken. The head of the NNSA within the US Department of Energy said this week that China's nuke tests 'are not small.'

Why it matters: It's a doubling down on accusations made earlier this year by top State Department arms control officials. *What they're saying:* "It appears they're doing testing in the hundreds of tons of yield. These are not small tests, folks," Williams said. "And these are absolutely against the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and all of the pronouncements they've made. "Beijing adamantly denies conducting such tests and claims it's Washington that's being irresponsible in the nuclear realm.

Context: The CTBT, as it's known, was signed years ago by nearly 200 countries. But it was not ratified by China, Israel, North Korea and the U.S., among others. *Zoom out:* President Trump in October ordered nuclear tests to resume on an "equal basis" of those abroad. He didn't say whether that meant Defense Department flight tests or NNSA explosive tests. "Any decisions about our testing program are exclusively in the realm of the president," Williams said. *Friction point:* Nuclear states today use supercomputers and data from previous tests for simulation and stewardship. The U.S. is richer in these insights than others. **Some experts worry a return to full-on nuclear testing would erode the U.S. advantage.**

Congressional Nuclear Activities

On Capitol Hill, Rep. Don Bacon (R-NE): "The B-21 Raider is a critical capability for our strategic deterrence. If 150 Raiders is the requirement, **we need to plan and build the infrastructure and production capacity now**, so we don't fall short as we did with the B-2. Leaving America undefended is not an option."

USSTRATCOM: Tells HASC Strategic Forces Subcommittee that there are conversations about possibly opening **a second production line for the B-21 Raider.**"

USSTRATCOM Commander Adm. Richard Correll tells House Armed Services Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, "China is **"heavily investing in its land-, sea-, and air-based nuclear delivery platforms"** and **underscored that the People's Liberation Army seeks to develop "a larger and more diverse nuclear force**, comprised of systems ranging from low-yield precision strike missiles to intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) with multi-megaton yields," according to the Washington Times.

Adm. Correll told HASC-lawmakers that he believes the Air Force **should increase its planned B-21 Raider fleet** to 145 aircraft, adding that a second production line for the next-generation bomber could be a way to reach that goal.

USNORTHCOM Commander Gen. Gregory M. Guillot warned that China's capability to threaten the U.S. homeland **"is advancing at an alarming pace,"** **underscoring that Beijing continues to expand its nuclear arsenal,** build novel strategic weapons, hone its offensive cyber capabilities, and develop conventionally armed hypersonic glide vehicles, according to Washington Times.

Anya Fink from the CRS authors another top-notch essay but this one on NC3; highly recommended. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF11697#>

Essays and Reports of the Week

More on Iran and the changes in the strategic landscape. From Victor Davis Hanson:

Think a few years ago, one European diplomat said, "Well, he's a bull in a China shop, only he's a bull in a nuclear China shop." Maybe, maybe not. But let's just review what's taking place right now. For the second time, we're [bombing Iran](#), and this time the negotiations clearly were not going to lead to this 47-year problem resolution.

Iran's theocracy has no intention of stopping nuclear proliferation. It wants a bomb to dominate the Middle East, to intimidate the petro kingdoms of the Gulf, to show its dominance over Sunni Islam, and to destroy eventually Israel, threaten Europe for blackmail **concessions and eventually us. We've known that. Every president, all seven of them before Trump, said that, and they were going take care of the problem or prevent it from exacerbating. None did anything.**

Trump tried to negotiate, take out the nuclear facilities, and then he learned that they were still trying to, after the bombing: restore them, expand their Russia, North Korean, Chinese ballistic missile force, ensure that nobody would dare attack them again. And Trump did. And this time his plan is to remove either now or so detrite the theocracy that it would erode in the next few months by a popular uprising or maybe have a Venezuela solution. Barring that, at least make it inert militarily.

This follows the [\[Nicolas\] Maduro](#), what do we call it, kidnapping coup. We removed this communist thug, drug lord, shipper of dangerous opiates into the United States, propped up Cuba and was trying to spread the Chavez communist message throughout Latin America. It looked like he was succeeding under Joe Biden. Now the whole world there is different.

Venezuela doesn't have Maduro. It has a strong government in the sense that they will keep order, and maybe they will have transitions to democracy. We hope so. But they are terrified of the United States that removed their government and told them they put the oil on the world market, they reform their economy, they get the Chinese out, and they will have a bright future.

This coincides with democratic revolutions in Central America, Chile, maybe Bolivia and Peru. We'll see how those work out. And of course, Argentina. So, it's a whole new Latin America. It's experiencing a westernized constitutional system revolution. And again, the catalyst has been Donald Trump.

First, by telling the Panamanians, "We know what you're doing. It's not smart for you to do this, to triangulate with the Chinese. If you do it, we'll take back the canal." And he got results. And the result is China and Russia are now excluded from the Western Hemisphere.

At the same time, he's [pressuring the Cubans](#). They have no more subsidized oil from Russia. They know that their drugs—that they are intermediaries in smuggling and shipping to the U.S.—are being blown up on the high seas. There's no more Chavez-Maduro free fuel, and their innately incompetent and inert economy is imploding. And Trump is basically saying, "You saw what happened to Venezuela, you saw what happened to Iran. You're not halfway across the world. You're not down in South America. You're right here 90 miles away from us. And this

will be a cakewalk if you don't try to reform and give your people a choice, an economic liberation, a political liberation, a cultural, social liberation."

And it looks like they're going allow American businessmen, mostly Cuban Americans, to go back in there and invest. If that happens and you start to see offshore companies, energy development, hotels, tourism, and communism will die on the vine. So, what am I getting at? I'm getting at that there's a world upheaval that Donald Trump sort of took a fuse and he lit it, and things are blowing up everywhere, and everybody is paranoid and crazy, and they're thinking that he's a disruptor.

And then we have the Ukraine war, and he has convinced the Europeans that you have to do two things that they don't understand. You can't buy energy from Russia. Maybe he's lifted that because the Straits of Hormuz are closed temporarily. But you can't subsidize the Russian war machine and then tell the United States that because of your suicidal energy policies, you have to do that. But you also have to have the United States step in and save you.

And so, we're trying to find a solution, but one of the tactics that Trump is using, that's very misunderstood. He is trying to say [Vladimir] Putin is a monster. Of course, he is. Don't trust him. But I wasn't the one that started this crazy reset. I was the one that got rid of the Wagner Group. I was the one that went after the oligarchs. I was the one that got out of the missile treaty. I was the one that gave offensive weapons to Ukraine, not you.

I was the one that warned you about the Nord Stream pipeline, not you, not [Joe] Biden. I did. So here, if I'm going to get involved, don't demonize him, because we can weaken him and then we can flip him so that he doesn't go back into Europe, but he also triangulates against China. So what I'm getting at, if that happens, and you see a different government in Cuba, Venezuela and a tidal wave of reform in Latin America, where at the same time you get rid of the 47-year cancer in the Middle East for which American troops have been based, take away the Iranian theocracy, and there's not going to be 200 installations of Americans in Syria and Iraq. And then you add into the combination what Cuba has done to us all these years. It's been a receptacle of American terrorists, hijackers, drug smugglers.

At one time, remember, it was going to base nuclear weapons from Russia pointed at us, the Cuban Missile Crisis of '62. It's just been a headache. If you could solve all of those things in one year, it would be unheard of. It would make [Ronald] Reagan's achievement of destroying the Soviet Union, although it fell during the successor George H.W. Bush, it would look minor in comparison almost. Think about this very quickly. This was not necessary in Trump's political calculus. He had the midterms coming up. Eight or nine months when he went into Venezuela and Iran. That took a great risk to distract attention away from the economy. The economy had been moribund under Joe Biden, and it was starting to pick up, and he was bragging about the low cost of energy.

If you're just a political animal, what you don't do right before the midterms is go into two of the largest oil-producing countries in the world and, for the short term at least, ensure their oil is going to be reduced. And yet he took that risk. And more importantly, he knows how Europe feels about it. Europe is so touchy because they have ruled out basically producing their own natural gas, their own oil. They're very reluctant to follow the French example of nuclear power. And the result is they're very dependent on imported oil, and they're whispering to Trump, "Don't do this, don't be disruptive." So, he's got a problem with this.

And then the MAGA base, remember, says, "No optional wars abroad." And Trump is trying to say, well, these are using air power. I haven't used ground troops. This is not Afghanistan. These are going to be short-term solutions to long-term problems. And in the future, if we're successful, there'll be fewer Americans abroad because we'll have a greater number of American allies and friends who will be consensual.

They'll be ruled by consensual governments. They'll have free economies. And more importantly, they will have a different attitude or view of the United States, not one as a reluctant weakling or an unarmed or a Joe Biden, Barack Obama appeaser, but somebody who's very unpredictable but follows up what he says, and they will be more likely to respect and join us. Strength radiates friendship, weakness repels it. Finally, again, I think we misunderstood what's going on. There are disruptions all over the world, but three quarters of them are reaching a consensus, an end, some type of resolution one way or the other. I don't know how they're all going turn out, but there is a good chance they could turn out with the United States in a preeminent position that we haven't seen at least since WWII.

Golden Dome Corner

Late last year the EAR reviewed commentary by Scott Sagan on missile defense. This is a follow up. Found this on the web:

In an analysis published in late 2025 and early 2026, Scott Sagan's assessment of Israeli missile defense is situated within his broader framework of "nuclear proliferation and system stability," particularly **regarding the increased risk of catastrophe** when conventional missile defense is paired with existential conflicts.

- **Existential Crisis Risk:** Writing in December 2025, Sagan argued that the Iran-Israel conflict has high potential to evolve into an existential crisis. He cautions that in such scenarios, even advanced **missile defenses can create a false sense of security, encouraging dangerous "commitment traps"** where political leaders feel compelled to engage in repeated, escalatory military actions.
- **The Commitment Trap:** Sagan notes that as Israel and Iran engage in conflict (such as the attacks seen in June 2025), both sides risk **becoming prisoners to policies where the desire for "victory" through military strikes—backed by, but not solely dependent on, missile defense—leads to apocalyptic miscalculations.**
- **Destabilizing Countermeasures:** While not exclusively focused on the technical performance of Iron Dome or Arrow, Sagan's scholarship emphasizes that **relying too heavily on missile defense can stimulate dangerous arms races.** He argues that intense, sustained missile exchanges (even when partially intercepted) can force adversaries into launching "launch-on-warning" scenarios, severely testing the stability of the entire region.

In essence, Sagan's 2025 analysis emphasizes **that Israeli missile defenses are part of a dangerous, escalating "new normal" in the Middle East, where military success in intercepting threats does not reduce the underlying risk of catastrophic conflict.**

Iran News

On CBS evening news on Sunday March 15, the Iranian foreign minister was asked where is the 440 kg of 60% enriched uranium. The foreign minister replied that the nuclear material is "under the rubble" and that Iran had not said that it had 440 kg of 60% enriched material, but that the head of the international atomic energy administration had so declared. The FM said, "this is not a secret." And then said: "But Iran has not declared this but this has been verified and declared by the agency [IAEA]." There it is. **The Iranians admitted they indeed have 10-11 bombs worth of material able to be further enriched to bomb grade in a matter of weeks. That's an imminent threat.**

In another new report, Iran launched two ballistic missiles with a range of 4000 kilometers at Diego Garcia. One missile failed. The other was intercepted. The real news was that prior to these missile launches, the critics of US missile defenses and the Iranian government itself claimed here was no need for an American deployed European based missile defense such as Aegis ashore because Iran had limited its missile ranges to 2000 kilometers or less. **The critics emphasized that was to target only Israel as Iran had no interest in holding at risk any European nation. These rocket launches now reveal the critics of US missile defense were mistaken and the Iranian government was lying to the world.**

Essays of the Week

#1: Trump's New Nuclear Architecture for Modernization and Arms Control

Center for Strategic and International Studies, Mar. 13 | Heather Williams and Nicholas Adamopoulos

- Expanding upon the National Defense Strategy (NDS), Under Secretary of State for Arms Control Thomas DiNanno recently announced a new nuclear architecture “that addresses the threats of today, not those of a bygone era,” including nonstrategic nuclear weapons (NSNWs) and China’s growing nuclear arsenal.
- Facing this increasingly volatile security environment, the United States under the Trump administration must simultaneously modernize its nuclear arsenal and pursue arms control and risk reduction measures.
- To deter adversaries and manage escalation especially in theater conflicts, the United States may need to diversify and expand its nuclear arsenal, including by investing in nuclear-capable standoff weapons.
- Following this new architecture, the administration should also continue to work toward arms control agreements with both China and Russia, including risk reduction measures, such as a Presidential Nuclear Summit.

Introduction

Thirty-four years before his second presidential administration, in a 1990 interview with Playboy, Donald Trump summarized his thinking on nuclear weapons issues: “I’ve always thought about the issue of nuclear war; it’s a very important element in my thought process. It’s the ultimate, the ultimate catastrophe, the biggest problem this world has, and nobody’s focusing on the nuts and bolts of it.” Trump’s position on nuclear issues has been relatively consistent since 1990, with an enduring emphasis on competition, homeland defense, and a long-term goal of working toward nuclear disarmament. Indeed, in the same 1990 interview, Trump confided that one of his lifelong goals was to negotiate an arms control agreement, an ambition that led him to attempt to contact then-President Ronald Reagan in hopes of leading an arms control negotiation with the Soviet Union in 1984.

The Trump administration’s January 2026 NDS and recent statements by senior officials contain the clearest indicators yet of the administration’s approach to nuclear issues. The NDS emphasizes a role for nuclear weapons in escalation management, a sentiment echoed in statements from senior administration officials and the president himself about the February 2026 expiration of the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).

In a major speech on the future of arms control, for example, Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Thomas DiNanno said that there was “a clear imperative to call for a new architecture that addresses the threats of today, not those of a bygone era. **This means taking into account all Russian nuclear weapons, both novel and existing strategic systems, and addressing the breakout growth of Chinese nuclear weapons stockpiles.**” Thus far, Trump’s new nuclear architecture appears to be based on the joint pillars of a more flexible deterrent and more comprehensive arms control. Moreover, the strategy comes with a sense of urgency as the administration faces crucial decisions about how to execute nuclear modernization plans, reassure increasingly anxious allies, and deliver on the president’s ambitions for arms control and “denuclearization.”

This policy brief analyzes the Trump administration’s recent strategy documents and speeches to better understand Trump’s efforts in nuclear modernization, alliance management, and arms control. Furthermore, it revisits the sense of urgency expressed in the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission report, which thus far has been largely ignored by the Administration, and recommends immediate steps that the administration can take to simultaneously execute on nuclear modernization, deterrence, and arms control.

Diversify and Expand: Force Posture Options for Deterrence and Assurance

U.S. nuclear posture is at an inflection point: The Department of Defense (now called the Department of War) and the National Nuclear Security Administration are in the process of modernizing all three legs of the strategic nuclear triad—(1) land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), (2) ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs),

and (3) strategic bombers. With the Sentinel ICBM, the Columbia SSBN, and the B-21 bomber at differing stages of completion, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby affirmed that “ensuring we retain a modern, capable, and effective nuclear deterrent should be our top priority.” Although the current modernization program of record (POR) is necessary to achieving stated U.S. nuclear goals, the Strategic Posture Commission and some policy analysts suggest that the POR may be insufficient, and the United States may need to supplement the POR with different or additional capabilities. The Trump administration’s strategy documents provide some hints as to which augmentations the administration may prioritize to reach its interpretation of nuclear sufficiency.

The first pillar of Trump’s new nuclear architecture is a more flexible deterrent. While the 2026 NDS was relatively light on details about the United States’ nuclear posture, a clear priority was to “modernize and adapt our nuclear forces . . . with focused attention on deterrence and escalation management amidst the changing global nuclear landscape.” The document continues, “The United States should never—will never—be left vulnerable to nuclear blackmail.” Previous strategy documents—including the first Trump administration’s 2018 Nuclear Posture Review—did not explicitly mention “escalation management.” The new 2026 NDS’s focus on escalation management as a guiding consideration for nuclear modernization is a notable departure from the past and may provide some clues as to the administration’s thinking on which systems to prioritize, as well as whether (and how) to expand the current program of record.

The Trump administration’s NDS and its 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS) both call for a strong, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent that is robust, credible, and modern. The NDS further articulates that such goals will require the modernization and adaptation of U.S. nuclear forces. Although neither document specifies which systems are required to achieve U.S. nuclear objectives, the administration’s focus on escalation management alongside deterrence suggests that filling what it perceives as potential gaps in the escalation ladder with nuclear options is a priority.

The administration is also likely to prioritize the defense of the homeland, strengthening deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, and burden-shifting onto allies for conventional regional defense. The administration may also give precedence to systems that can be built and fielded quickly. This would align with the 2018 Trump Nuclear Posture Review, which called for “expanding flexible U.S. nuclear options now, to include low-yield options . . . for the preservation of credible deterrence against regional aggression. It will raise the nuclear threshold and help ensure that potential adversaries perceive no possible advantage in limited nuclear escalation, making nuclear employment less likely.” This is an even more urgent priority given the expansion of China’s nuclear arsenal.

A prominent omission from the 2026 NDS is an explicit commitment to extend deterrence to U.S. allies. Former British Defense Secretary Denis Healey famously opined during the Cold War that it “only takes five percent credibility of American retaliation to deter the Russians, but ninety-five percent credibility to reassure the Europeans.” Given the challenges of making allied assurance credible even when commitments are frequently and explicitly stated, this omission can be read either as an unnecessary fumble of alliance management or as an intentional signal from the administration that the United States is reevaluating its role in its alliances and the world more broadly.

Subsequent statements from the administration, however, clarified U.S. extended deterrence commitments. At the 2026 Munich Security Conference, for example, Secretary of State Marco Rubio affirmed that “in a time of headlines heralding the end of the transatlantic era, let it be known and clear to all that this is neither our goal nor our wish.” Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth has frequently reaffirmed the importance of extended nuclear deterrence in conversations with U.S. allies, and the NDS indicates U.S. allies will receive “critical but more limited” U.S. support in defending against threats below those that pose the greatest threat to U.S. interests. And perhaps most decisively, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colby has repeatedly restated the U.S. commitment to NATO Article 5, and at a NATO Defense Ministerial said unequivocally, “We will continue to provide the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent.”

The NSS and NDS both reaffirm the Trump administration’s longstanding ambition to shift the burden of conventional regional defense and deterrence onto U.S. allies, with the United States facilitating a burden-sharing network to enable allies to take primary responsibility for regional conventional defense, and the United States continuing to provide extended nuclear deterrence. The United States is urging Europe to finalize this burden shift by 2027, while Europe’s Readiness 2030 initiative has targeted conventional defense autonomy by 2030.

Though the United States has made very clear its desire for allies to possess the conventional capabilities necessary to defend themselves, the software that will synchronize allied capabilities and U.S. extended nuclear deterrence remains underdeveloped. Significant effort will be needed by all allies to develop deterrence and warfighting concepts that seamlessly mesh allied conventional capabilities and U.S. nuclear deterrence. Conventional nuclear integration is not a new challenge, meaning fora already exist for managing the problem.

The NATO High Level Group and extended deterrence dialogues with Indo-Pacific partners will be invaluable to ensure that the administration's desired burden-sharing outcomes continue to adequately deter adversaries and reassure allies.

Trump's new nuclear architecture, therefore, will focus on escalation management and prioritize a more flexible nuclear force to give the president options to deter and defeat adversaries, particularly at the regional level. Given these guiding principles, the administration has at least three options for diversifying the U.S. nuclear force to meet the requirements outlined in the NDS and NSS.

The first option is to expand on existing capabilities, such as by uploading additional warheads or by increasing the orders for capabilities already planned in the POR. Unrestricted by treaty obligations, the United States could significantly expand the size of its nuclear arsenal over the next 12 months by uploading warheads on all three legs of the triad. The ICBM force could accommodate double its current number of warheads, approximately 30 B-52s could be restored to nuclear capability, and the existing Ohio-class SSBNs could be refitted to carry 24 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) each, thus achieving a higher number of active SLBM tubes during the transition from Ohio- to Columbia-class.

The administration's focus on deterring threats to the homeland indicates that modernization of all three legs of the strategic triad will likely continue at pace, if not accelerate. Several experts and officials have already called for increasing the number of certain systems. For instance, the Air Force plans to buy 100 B-21 Raiders, though former STRATCOM Commander Gen. Anthony Cotton argued that number should be at least 145, and other analysts have proposed ideal inventories closer to 300. While the slow initial production rate of the B-21 was designed to insulate the program from potential budget cuts, one option for rapidly achieving more is to increase both the rate of production and the total number of aircraft produced. The Air Force and Northrop Grumman recently expanded production capacity for the B-21, utilizing the \$4.5 billion in funds appropriated by Congress in 2025 to hasten bomber production.

Another way to expand the POR would be to grow the Columbia SSBN program beyond the initial plan of 12 hulls, a number set with New START treaty obligations in mind. With the expiration of New START in February 2026, the United States is no longer beholden to limitations on the size of its SSBN fleet, though several hurdles remain between the current POR and a larger fleet. The Navy aims for hulls 3–12 to be built at a rate of one per year, meaning options for expanding the size of the Columbia fleet are either decades in the making or would require a significant expansion of U.S. shipbuilding capacity.

While some analysts have advocated redesigning future submarines in the class to carry an additional four launch tubes, bringing them from 16 to 20 in total, others have indicated that such additions would render those boats incompatible with existing SSBN support architecture. Therefore, a larger number of smaller boats may yield a cheaper and more flexible fleet than a smaller number of larger ones.

Second, introducing new theater standoff weapons to the U.S. arsenal could satisfy most of the goals the administration has laid out for nuclear weapons. The United States lags behind its chief competitors in nonstrategic, theater-range systems, creating what some analysts fear could become a significant gap in the country's ability to manage crisis escalation in future regional conflicts in Europe or the Indo-Pacific.

By prioritizing lower-yield nuclear standoff weapons that can be rapidly deployed and fielded in-theater, the Trump administration would go a long way to filling in this potential gap in the U.S. escalation ladder, providing the president with options to rapidly respond to adversary aggression without having to utilize strategic forces. Not only would theater-based standoff weapons free up strategic forces for homeland defense, but they would also improve the credibility of U.S. deterrence at the lower end of the escalation ladder by complicating adversary decision making to aggressively act against U.S. interests beyond the homeland.

Paradoxically, in light of the cold shoulder the NDS shows to U.S. allies, the nuclear weapons it may value the highest are also among the best options for strengthening extended deterrence, though only if paired with adequately assuring strategy and policy. Critically, the fiscal year 2026 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) accelerates the deadline for limited deployments of SLCM-N to the end of FY 2032, two years earlier than that set in the FY 2025 NDAA.

Third, in order to enable additional flexibility in regional conflicts while managing costs, the Department of Defense could increase the number of dual-capable systems in its arsenal. Developing a small warhead that can be easily hot-swapped onto a usually conventionally armed short- or medium-range system would give the United States significant additional operational flexibility, generating the option for prompt and precise low-yield nuclear strikes. There are several reasons why the administration may choose not to pursue such capabilities, chief being

that a hot-swappable warhead program would likely redirect significant National Nuclear Security Administration resources away from other, more pressing strategic priorities.

Resources are already being directed toward novel technologies that have the potential to flip the offense-defense cost curve in the missile age, or that at least could provide the United States with adequate defenses in the face of rapidly diversifying missile threats. For example, should the production of directed energy weapons capable of missile intercept at scale become possible, the United States may be well on its way toward solving the homeland missile defense equation. While these may be unlikely short- or medium-term solutions, the administration would be wise to continue maturing the science facilitating directed energy weapons and other potential black swan systems.

A New Era of Arms Control

The second pillar of Trump's new nuclear architecture is a more inclusive approach to arms control. Statements by Rubio, DiNanno, and the president himself signal that the administration remains open to arms control initiatives, but on a more equitable basis. DiNanno spoke amidst New START's conclusion, as Washington chose not to accept a hollow Russian offer to continue to observe the central limits without verification. President Trump has suggested that it would be "a wonderful thing for China, for Russia, and for the United States to denuclearize as much as possible."

Any future arms control efforts will face at least three main challenges. First is deep distrust of Russia due to Moscow's legacy of noncompliance. According to analysts Eric Edelman and Frank Miller, Russia has violated at least nine arms control agreements since Putin came to power in 2000, including the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. In 2024, the United States revealed concerns that Russia could be planning to violate the Outer Space Treaty by placing a nuclear weapon in space, an action which could threaten critical communication systems. Even with intrusive inspections, trust between Washington and Moscow is not only likely to remain at a deficit but could be particularly challenging if future arms control is in a treaty format and must go to the U.S. Senate for advice and consent.

China's enduring refusal to participate in strategic arms control poses an additional challenge. Following DiNanno's statement, for example, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian declined to participate in multilateral arms control talks and instead urged the United States to "resume dialogue with Russia on strategic stability," repeating its claim that Russia and United States, as the two largest nuclear powers, hold primary responsibility for arms control. There were some early signs that China may be more open to arms control, such as an October 2023 meeting between senior officials from both countries and China's subsequent missile launch notifications, but these overtures are a far cry from the type of arms control agreement the Trump administration seems to be envisioning. Moreover, there is the practical challenge of the lack of experience in information exchanges, transparency, and verification activities between China and the United States.

A final challenge lies in the asymmetry in NSNWs. Historically, arms control addressed operationally deployed strategic systems, such as ICBMs and bombers, wherein the United States and the Soviet Union (and then Russia) had relative parity. That is no longer the case. In fact, since 2010, Russia has expanded its number of NSNWs by 25 percent and China by 300 percent; in contrast, the United States has decreased its number of NSNWs by 33 percent. Concern about these imbalances is not new, and the U.S. Senate's 2010 consent to ratification of the New START treaty mandated that any future agreement "would address the disparity between the tactical nuclear weapons stockpiles of the Russian Federation and of the United States and would secure and reduce tactical nuclear weapons in a verifiable manner."

But future arms control does not necessarily have to look like arms control of the past. A trilateral legally binding treaty with intrusive verification and on-site inspections is politically problematic in the near-term not only for Beijing and Moscow, but also for Washington, because of distrust and the strategic necessity of expanding and diversifying the arsenal. Therefore, as U.S. deterrence becomes more flexible, so must arms control. This can take the form of informal agreements and focusing on behaviors rather than capabilities. Additional considerations for a new era of arms control include how it can be used to shape the wider international nuclear narrative, and how the Trump administration can use its new nuclear architecture to combat Chinese and Russian nuclear disinformation.

Based on the vision outlined thus far by the Trump administration, there appear to be at least three potential pathways for a new arms control architecture. In descending order of formality, the first is a legally binding treaty with a joint warhead ceiling that allows states to freely mix capabilities and design their force postures below that ceiling. The first Trump administration made a similar effort, hoping to set the United States and Russia at a one-warhead ceiling and China at a different, lower limit. The benefits of this approach are that it would address the

asymmetry in NSNWs while also providing the administration the flexibility to pursue a more diverse nuclear force with predictability about Chinese and Russian arsenals. The downside is, as in 2019–2020, China is highly unlikely to accept such an offer.

A second option is a multilateral effort within the P5 process, such as joint commitments to hotlines or other forms of crisis communication channels, to keeping a human in the loop in the nuclear decision making, or to reaching an agreement on missile launch notifications. An agreement on launch notifications would be particularly valuable going into a Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference (NPT RevCon) and could inject new momentum into the P5 process. Many of these risk-reduction initiatives have been proposed or discussed in the past, with Russia or China typically playing a spoiler role, which they may do again, leaving the United States, France, and the United Kingdom to develop shared best practices and responsible nuclear behaviors.

Moreover, given Russia's legacy of noncompliance, these agreements may not come with any meaningful predictability. For example, in January 2022, Russia along with the rest of the P5 signed a statement that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought." Yet, less than two months later Putin began his invasion of Ukraine backed by repeated nuclear threats. Russian commitments remain of little value.

An even less-formal option would be a presidential agreement between Trump, Putin, and Xi on specific measures to prevent nuclear use or to reduce the risks associated with nuclear weapons. There is historical precedent for this in the 1973 Agreement on the Prevention of Nuclear War, which committed the United States and the Soviet Union to, among other things, "refrain from the threat or use of force against the other Party, against the allies of the other Party and against other countries, in circumstances which may endanger international peace and security." A similar high-profile agreement between heads of state may come with similar challenges of trust; however, it could also impose high defection costs and have some restraining power. Such an agreement could also align with the increasingly personalist foreign policies emerging in all three countries.

An Enduring Sense of Urgency

China's and Russia's rapid nuclear buildups, delays in U.S. nuclear modernization, and the breakdown of institutions including traditional arms control treaties have injected a sense of urgency into updating the United States' nuclear posture. Failing to act on this moment of urgency would risk a future deterrence gap from potential production and development lag times, along with increasingly anxious allies that could present a short- to medium-term proliferation risk. With that in mind, what follows are five recommendations for how the second Trump administration can implement its new nuclear architecture.

First, because speed and cost requirements will impose restrictions on what weapons systems and policies are possible, fast, cheap options should take priority. Where existing tools and delivery systems can be utilized to speed up the delivery and deployment of new capabilities, they should be. Furthermore, fast and cheap options that fill existing gaps in the arsenal should be prioritized, such as the continued development of air-launched standoff weapons including the long-range standoff weapon, which will grant the United States a rapidly forward deployable nuclear asset, assisting both assurance and deterrence signaling in regional crises or conflicts. In searching for places to trim fat and enable a nimbler acquisition strategy, the administration should avoid cutting high-value programs that are close to fielding an initial capability.

Second, the Administration should strengthen the capabilities and credibility behind its extended nuclear deterrent and strengthen the software that goes into burden-sharing. As the United States manages competition across multiple domains and theaters, its global alliance network remains a critical advantage and force multiplier. In accelerating the redistribution of the defense burden, hardware innovations, while important, will be secondary to ensuring the right software is in place to integrate regional strategy, planning, and defense. Recent remarks by world leaders at the Munich Security Conference indicate the appetite for collaboration among U.S. allies still exists. The administration would be wise to capitalize on this positive momentum by strengthening communication channels through the NATO High Level Group in Europe and through bilateral deterrence dialogues in the Indo-Pacific. These channels will be critical for ensuring the United States and its partners adequately integrate conventional and nuclear planning as U.S. allies increase their conventional deterrence capabilities and responsibilities.

Third, arms control and risk reduction must play a role in preventing nuclear escalation. The era of strategic competition is not likely to end anytime soon. Moreover, assuming China and Russia continue to qualitatively and quantitatively develop their own strategic arsenals and maintain regional ambitions as the United States also expands and diversifies its arsenal, nuclear-related risks will continue to rise. As much as a credible nuclear posture must be backed up by new capabilities and the capacity to produce them, it must also be paired with an arms control policy that is ready to engage when the time is right. In the short term, President Trump should

publicly invite his Chinese and Russian counterparts to a nuclear summit to discuss three priorities for nuclear risk reduction: (1) clarifying the testing moratorium, (2) establishing a trilateral nuclear hotline, and (3) reaffirming the principles outlined in the 1973 Agreement on the Prevention of Nuclear War to refrain from nuclear threats.

Fourth, the United States should play a leadership role in the forthcoming NPT RevCon, particularly by working with allies and partners, including in the Global South, to hold China and Russia accountable for their nuclear expansion and testing activities. This can include leading on transparency within the P5 process, such as by discussing nuclear doctrine under the Trump administration. President Trump's comments about nuclear testing present a timely opportunity to pressure Beijing and Moscow to be more transparent about their own nuclear programs, and the administration's attempts to provide concrete testing data about China are a valuable first step. Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control Chris Yeaw has indicated that a U.S. priority in the upcoming RevCon is to encourage "countries of the world to continue to press that all nuclear weapon states need to be involved in this. It's not a special responsibility for the U.S. and Russia, particularly given the geometric expansion of the Chinese nuclear force structure." Perhaps most importantly, however, the United States should avoid playing a spoiler role in RevCon, by (for example) blocking consensus on specific issues such as language on nuclear testing or past commitments. This will require active diplomacy in the coming months and during RevCon itself, particularly when working with allies.

Fifth, the administration needs to continue and to expand work to modernize the supporting infrastructure of the nuclear enterprise and the wider nuclear defense industrial base, building on the president's May executive order. The less robust the enterprise is, the more likely capabilities arrive delayed and over budget. Bolstering the capacities of the industrial base and nuclear enterprise are the strongest peacetime signals the administration can send to adversaries and allies that the United States is serious about achieving the president's goals as stated in the NSS. Expansions of both the industrial and human capital available to the nuclear enterprise are urgently needed. Furthermore, the security environment mandates a sharpened focus on the production tasks at hand, and a return to underground explosive testing or pulling plutonium from the stockpile for other purposes could risk a distraction or diversion of resources.

Conclusions

In the same 1990 Playboy interview, when asked how he would handle nuclear issues if he were president, Trump replied in the third person: "He would believe very strongly in extreme military strength. He wouldn't trust anyone. He wouldn't trust the Russians; he wouldn't trust our allies; he'd have a huge military arsenal, perfect it, understand it."

Events of the Week

National Institute for Deterrence Studies
NIDS@Thinkdeterrence.com

Miller/Edelman Remarks, March 20, 2026



7HS Miller and
Edelman Transcript 2026

https://youtu.be/dMmH1jPO7bo?si=ZhM9KBlxOeJI7T_D .

Executive Summary

The National Institute for Deterrence Studies (NIDS) Huessy Seminar, “**Nuclear Strategy at the Crossroads,**” brought together The Honorable Frank Miller and Ambassador Eric S. Edelman for a high-level examination of the United States’ nuclear deterrence posture amid intensifying strategic competition with Russia and China. Moderated by Peter Huessy, the discussion assessed whether current U.S. policy, force structure, and alliance commitments are sufficient for today’s security environment—and what actions are required to restore credibility and stability.

Key Findings and Themes

- **Deterrence Environment Has Fundamentally Changed:** The speakers argued that U.S. nuclear forces and planning assumptions remain anchored in a post-Cold War environment that no longer exists. Russia has completed extensive modernization of both strategic and non-strategic nuclear forces, while China continues a rapid and opaque expansion of its nuclear arsenal. The United States now faces the unprecedented challenge of deterring **two peer nuclear competitors simultaneously**.
- **Policy–Implementation Gap:** Miller emphasized that declaratory policy alone is insufficient. While recent U.S. strategies acknowledge the need to deter Russia and China concurrently, force implementation has not kept pace. No new U.S. strategic nuclear platforms have yet been deployed, and the current “program of record” was designed for a vastly different threat environment.
- **Urgent Near-Term Actions Available:** The seminar highlighted practical steps that could be taken quickly to strengthen deterrence, including increasing the capacity of existing systems (“uploading” warheads), accelerating regional nuclear capabilities, and reassessing force structure ceilings. Longer-term measures include expanding strategic force inventories and advancing regional and standoff capabilities to enhance extended deterrence.
- **Extended Deterrence and Alliance Confidence at Risk:** Ambassador Edelman warned that uncertainty surrounding U.S. reliability is eroding allied confidence, particularly in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. This erosion raises the risk of “**friendly proliferation,**” as allies consider independent nuclear options if extended deterrence is perceived as weakening.
- **Nonproliferation Stakes Are Rising:** While rogue-state proliferation remains a concern, the seminar underscored that allied proliferation now poses a significant threat to the global nonproliferation regime. Edelman called for a renewed national debate—and potentially a new commission—on the role of extended deterrence in preventing proliferation and sustaining alliance cohesion.
- **Conventional–Nuclear Blurring and Missile Defense:** The discussion highlighted how advances in dual-capable systems, hypersonic weapons, cyber operations, and missile defense are blurring traditional boundaries between conventional and nuclear conflict. Integrated air and missile defense was identified as a critical component of modern deterrence, raising the threshold for adversary aggression.

Conclusion: The seminar concluded that the United States is at a strategic inflection point. Without timely action to align policy, forces, and alliance commitments with today’s threat realities, deterrence credibility—and the stability it underpins—may continue to erode. The speakers emphasized urgency, alliance reassurance, and informed public debate as essential to sustaining effective deterrence and preventing both adversary aggression and allied nuclear proliferation.

The Iran Corner

Michael Doran of the Hudson Institute lays out a serious review of the war to end Iran's nuclear ambitions.

**The president wants an end to the war.
But he also knows that a premature exit leaves Iran's core threat intact.**

By [Michael Doran](#)

03.18.26 —To assess who's winning the Iran war, imagine Donald Trump stepping off Air Force One in Beijing in early May, preparing to face Xi Jinping across the table on trade, tariffs, rare earths, and technology. The question is: What hand will the war deal him?

In one scenario, he arrives with a stronger hand. U.S. forces have seized Kharg Island, Iran's main oil export terminal, through which roughly 90 percent of the regime's crude flows—nearly all of it shipped to China at a steep discount. Trump sits across from Xi having already begun to take Iran off the board.

In another, he arrives weaker. Iranian forces get off a lucky shot that strikes the USS *Tripoli* as it nears the Strait of Hormuz, killing and wounding hundreds of American Marines and triggering a domestic political crisis. The attack demonstrates that the Revolutionary Guards can still make Trump bleed and force him toward a ceasefire before he has broken them.

Iran foresaw this war and built its strategy around a single ace in the hole: the ability to disrupt global energy flow.

Short of regime collapse, these are the outer bounds of what the war, now three weeks old, might yet deliver. In the best-case scenario, Trump arrives in Beijing holding China's energy lifeline at risk. In the worst, he arrives bloodied, having failed to break Iran's chokehold on the Gulf's energy flows. The distance between those two outcomes measures what remains at stake in Operation Epic Fury.

The United States and Israel have carried out a masterful campaign that has killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, de facto leader Ali Larijani, and a host of other senior figures. They have turned the surviving Iranians into hunted foxes. Pointing to these military achievements, Trump has occasionally suggested that Iran is already defeated. For instance, on March 11, 2026, Trump [told reporters](#): "They've lost their navy. They've lost their air force. They have no anti-aircraft apparatus at all. They have no radar. Their leaders are gone and we could do a lot worse."

This sounded to some ears like preparation for a ceasefire proclamation: The United States had won, Iran was shattered, and the war could end on favorable terms. If Trump declared victory today, he could legitimately claim that the United States and Israel had "won" on points—but that might prove to be a temporary victory.

To be sure, Iran would emerge profoundly weakened. Its economy was already in shambles before the war. Rebuilding lost conventional infrastructure would take years. Yet its drone arsenal could be replenished in months. Iran has long partnered on drone production abroad—including facilities in Tajikistan and ties to Russia and Belarus for Shahed-series systems. Destroying factories inside Iran has imposed costs and demonstrated resolve, but it has not eliminated Tehran's ability to field swarms capable of intimidating shipping through the Strait of Hormuz.

Rebuilding ballistic missiles would prove harder, as Iran lacks major production infrastructure outside its borders. Still, rearmament could take only a few years, aided by China, Russia, and North Korea. Israeli strikes in October 2024 setback elements of Iran's solid-fuel missile production, but recovery has been faster than expected, supported in part by components and precursor materials imported from China.

Beijing's interest is clear: Iran ties down U.S. forces away from the South China Sea and Taiwan, supplies discounted oil, and provides a platform for studying American responses to asymmetric threats. In a Taiwan conflict, Iran—and its proxies, including the Houthis—could disrupt energy flows to East Asia through the Strait of Hormuz, which carries roughly a fifth of global oil trade, or through the Bab al-Mandab and Suez canal.

Iran's conventional navy and air force were never the real threat. Those forces were outdated, limited, and secondary to the Revolutionary Guards' asymmetric arsenal: missile arrays, drone swarms, coastal batteries, and an advancing nuclear program. The route to decisive victory runs through its destruction.

The U.S. and Israeli strategy of decapitation has brought to a head a deeper transformation that has been underway for two decades: the steady conversion of the Islamic Republic into a system dominated by the Revolutionary Guards. The question that once defined the regime—who guards the guardians—has now been answered in practice. The Guards guard themselves.

Iran's conventional navy and air force were never the real threat.

Civilian authority has withered. When President Masoud Pezeshkian struck a conciliatory tone toward Iran's neighbors—saying Iran, “does not seek conflict” and wants “constructive relations with the region”—hard-liners aligned with the IRGC immediately undercut him. Hard-line MP Hamid Rasaei publicly [slammed the remarks](#) on X as “unprofessional, weak, and unacceptable,” arguing that countries hosting U.S. bases should be the ones apologizing instead.

Pezeshkian backtracked within hours, issuing a follow-up statement that omitted the apology and reaffirmed defense of sovereignty. The underlying message was unmistakable: The president speaks, but he does not decide.

The succession of Mojtaba Khamenei only reinforced the point. Lacking the clerical stature or governing record traditionally expected of a supreme leader, he emerged as the candidate of the security apparatus. Credible reports indicated that the selection process was shaped, if not effectively controlled, by the Guards. What began as a revolutionary state is hardening into a military dictatorship, and the war has speeded up the process.

One major obstacle therefore persists: The IRGC's missile and drone teams remain active and effective. They conduct target acquisition, threaten neighbors, and—most critically—hold the Strait of Hormuz at risk. China and India can still obtain Tehran's assurances of safe passage for their tankers; nations Iran deems hostile cannot, and no shipping firm will take the risk. The drone and missile teams have not only survived; they remain embedded in a larger, resilient system that continues to hold global energy supplies hostage.

Iran foresaw this war and built its strategy around a single ace in the hole: the ability to disrupt global energy flows. It dispersed capabilities, decentralized command, and built redundancy into every layer of the system. The route to decisive victory runs through the destruction of that system.

The first step is to break the back of the missile and drone teams. Yet this remains extraordinarily difficult. High-profile leaders can be tracked—through communications, intelligence penetration, or fixed locations—and eliminated. These teams are different. They are elusive by design.

Iran is a vast country with rugged terrain and a dispersed population. Without occupying forces, locating every mobile unit is a needle-in-a-haystack problem. Tehran anticipated this kind of conflict and built its resilience around the “mosaic defense” doctrine, developed by the IRGC in the mid-2000s. Authority is fragmented into semiautonomous provincial commands, each capable of operating independently if central control collapses. Decapitation does not end the fight; it diffuses it.

American and Israeli progress has been greater against ballistic missiles, which are easier to detect and track. Drones are far harder to suppress. Systems like the Shahed can be assembled in small workshops, stored in civilian areas, and launched from improvised platforms with minimal warning. Mobility, deception, and redundancy combine to produce a resilient threat.

Without clear evidence, to the contrary, we must assume these teams are not collapsing or deserting. They remain active, embedded, and capable of inflicting costs long after conventional forces have been shattered.

Until those teams are defeated, the United States cannot take Kharg Island. Seizing the island and controlling Iran's export infrastructure would be the most elegant end to the war. It would sever Iran's role as an energy

supplier to China and, more importantly, starve the regime of revenue. If Donald Trump arrived in Beijing with Kharg Island in American hands, he would not be negotiating at gunpoint—but he would be close.

But Marines cannot conduct an amphibious landing on Kharg unless the missile and drone threat is suppressed. Otherwise, they would be exposed to sustained attack from shore-based systems and mobile launch teams. The United States would also have to push back Iranian forces along the coast opposite the island and along the Strait of Hormuz, creating a buffer zone deep enough to prevent interdiction.

Enormous pressures now bear on Trump to declare victory and end Operation Epic Fury—domestic fatigue, rising costs, and the lure of a quick “win on points.” Last June, he proclaimed a ceasefire after the 12-day war, believing overwhelming force had finally knocked sense into Tehran. Instead, Iran doubled down, accelerating its nuclear and missile programs with external support.

If Trump declared victory today. . . that might prove to be a temporary victory.

Trump undoubtedly wants out. But he also knows that a premature exit leaves the core threat intact.

The costs of premature closure are already visible. Israeli strikes on Iran’s South Pars gas field—the world’s largest, shared with Qatar—drew retaliatory missile and drone strikes on Qatar’s Ras Laffan liquefied natural gas complex and Saudi petrochemical sites in the Eastern Province, sending oil prices up more than five percent. The exchange illustrates exactly what a ceasefire before victory would lock in: an Iran still capable of threatening the regional energy architecture on which American allies and adversaries alike depend. A temporary end to the fighting would not end that threat.

The United States and Israel will be marching toward decisive victory only when they break the back of the IRGC’s system—its missile and drone teams. Anything short of that will fail to impress Xi Jinping. The Chinese leader will see that, in a future war over Taiwan, he can still rely on Iran and its proxies to close the Strait of Hormuz to Western shipping while securing safe passage for China’s tankers. Until then, Trump steps off Air Force One with a strong hand only if that system lies shattered, not merely bloodied.