

Weekly ICBM EAR Report



Image: Illustration of the Sentinel next-generation ICBM. Credit: Northrop Grumman - Space News

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**ICBM EAR Week of May 18, 2026, Prepared by Peter Huessy, President of Geostrategic Analysis
as well as Senior Fellow at the National Institute for Deterrent Studies
and Senior Fellow at the Gold Institute for International Strategy**

Commentary, News & Quotes of the Week

NNSA Administrator Brandon Williams: “NNSA is making good on our commitment to accelerate production for the nation’s nuclear deterrent and delivering the first W76/Mk4B to the Navy ahead of schedule. As a former nuclear submarine officer, I have a special appreciation for the sea leg of our triad, which is essential to our assured second-strike capability. Great work by the entire Nuclear Weapons Enterprise.”

Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Kenneth Wilsbach: [Northrop Grumman will be increasing the production rate for the B-21 Raider bomber from 10 aircraft at a time to 12.](#)

The Belarusian Defense Ministry: Russia and Belarus on Monday began nuclear drills that will include training to simulate “the delivery of nuclear munitions and preparation of their use in cooperation with the Russian side.”

USSTRATCOM Commander Adm. Rich Correll: Met with U.S. Forces Korea Commander Gen. Xavier T. Brunson at U.S. Strategic Command’s headquarters.

Secretary Dr. Yeaw: Covert Russian and Chinese nuclear testing **could result in improved “nuclear warfighting capabilities.”**

Mark Schneider (NIPP): “This is clearly correct. Warfighting appears to be the main reason for the large Chinese ICBM silo deployments since China already had mobile ICBMs with higher survivability.”

China welcomes “the initiative put forward by the Russian side for Moscow and Washington to continue adhering to central quantitative limits under the New START Treaty that reflects the Russian side’s ambitions to support predictability, restraint and balance in the given sphere.”

USSTRATCOM Commander Adm. Rich Correll on Korea: “In today’s complex multi-polar nuclear environment, effective deterrence demands the seamless integration of conventional and nuclear capabilities.”

U.S. Strategic Command: “The B-21 Raider is the future of the nation’s flexible, lethal strategic bomber force. USSTRATCOM works closely with the @DeptofWar, @AFGlobalStrike, Direct Reporting Portfolio Manager & defense industrial base partners to develop & field modernized weapons & support systems.”

President Trump: Has not yet decided on whether to move forward with a major arms package for Taiwan after hearing concerns about it from Chinese President Xi Jinping during their recent summit.

USAF Global Strike Command: This routine MM III launch, designated GT 256, was scheduled years ago, and is not in response to world events. It acts as a comprehensive operational test, designed to evaluate both the weapon system and the personnel who maintain it in a highly-controlled testing environment.”

The Russian Defense Ministry published footage of troops delivering nuclear warheads to mobile Iskander-M missile launch systems, loading them and moving them to launch sites as part of a major nuclear exercise.

The EAR will prepare a weekly report after returning from speaking at a European Security Conference in Banja Luka in Bosnia-Herzegovina hosted by the Gold Institute for International Security. It will summarize the current Russian-China offensive on nuclear restraint and deterrence, not dissimilar to a campaign pushed in 1980 on a nuclear freeze.

Event of the Week

Pranay Vaddi Podcast Reviewing Restraint and Hedge as a strategy to deal with a 2 nuclear armed near peer world.

Part 1: <https://strategicsimplicity.substack.com/p/role-reliance-and-war-on-the-rocks>

Part 2: <https://strategicsimplicity.substack.com/p/part-2-discussing-a-recent-wotr-article>

ICBM EAR Essay of the Week

Nuclear Choices Ahead: The Road Not Taken By Peter Huessy, President of Geostrategic Analysis

With the expiration of the START series of arms control agreements, the US now faces serious choices particularly how to respond to the emergence of two peer nuclear adversaries. Especially when the current nuclear modernization program of record was agreed to in 2010 when the nuclear balance was far more benign. Projected into the future, people across the political spectrum see a nuclear environment with storm clouds ahead. However, there is a serious divide as to what the US should do. As a result, the US will soon have some difficult choices to make.

In 1981 the US faced a similar crossroad. Would détente continue along with a nuclear freeze of very large nuclear arsenals, modernized in the USSR but lacking in the US? Or alternatively, would the US and the West secure major nuclear reductions while modernizing, and adopt a peace through strength strategy as a pathway to dismantle the Soviet empire?

By 1991, the latter option won-out. Strategic long range nuclear forces were projected to come down by over 80% through a series of START arms agreements. Miraculously, the Soviet Union collapsed and all of Eastern Europe was freed. But despite this extraordinary victory, the US assumed it was the end of history, and all enemies were gone and would not emerge. And consequently, we took a subsequent interim forty year holiday from nuclear sustainment.

The US now faces the challenge of simultaneously sustaining and modernizing the entirety of the nuclear deterrent.

So, like 1981, the US and the West face another crossroads: either seek further nuclear reductions toward zero or abolition, while significantly curtailing nuclear modernization; or alternatively, accelerate and enhance both nuclear modernization and sustainment, while once again adopting a strategy of peace through strength but now to take down the hegemonic aspirations of the Chinese communist party.

Both options are relatively well spelled out by proponents, but they rely on very different assumptions.

Like the advocates of the nuclear freeze, abolitionists think nuclear deterrence is bound to fail. And while nuclear deterrence has worked since the dawn of the nuclear age, it will not be useful if deterrence breaks down. A key assumption underlines this new belief: if one or even a few nuclear weapon are used in retaliation, the odds are that nearly all other nuclear weapons will subsequently be used as escalation will take over. Thus, there is no capability to “use” nuclear weapons and survive.

Since the 2023 movie **Oppenheimer**, the abolition folks have brought forward a new twist on what is or is not possible for deterrence. As Annie Jacobsen in her book **Nuclear War: A Scenario** and the 2024 movie **A House of Dynamite** conclude, nuclear deterrence will someday not work and war will break out. And the assumption is that the US military will “jam up” the American President to retaliate “all in.” The only alternative is nuclear abolition.

To get there HASC members Representatives Mo Khanna and Jim Garamendi (both D-CA) and SASC members Senators Markey (D-MA) and Warren, (D-MA), have joined with Senator Sanders (I-VT) to propose a unilateral cut of US nuclear forces from 400 to 150 ICBMs, from 12 to 4 strategic submarines and from 60 to zero nuclear

capable bombers. The implied force is between 300-500 strategic warheads compared to the New START allowed 1550-1850 warheads which is the current force of choice.

On the other hand, there is an option one might describe as “Record Plus.” In 2010 the US Congress strongly supported a modernized force of 12 submarines, 400 ICBMs, and 60 B2 and B52 strategic bombers for the US strategic nuclear force. Funding for such modernization has generally been approved and is projected to cost \$450 billion over the next decade. This was a force consistent with the limits of the 2010 New START nuclear treaty that expired earlier this year. What has yet to be decided is how much more nuclear capability the United States needs as generally recommended by the 2023 Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States.

The choices are relatively straight forward. The US needs theater or shortrange, nuclear forces such as sea and land-launched cruise missiles, and such development funding has now been approved. The US could add to the existing silo based and submarine based missiles we already have in the legacy nuclear forces or add to the planned new nuclear forces.

Each silo based ICBM can add upwards of two warheads. The upload process allows 3 missiles per ICBM wing per month or 44 months, while sub warheads can be added much faster. Other buildups could be an additional 3-4 submarines but that could probably only be done at the end of the current acquisition schedule, with such submarines being acquired 2041-4. The new B21 Raider is now undergoing flight testing and there is general consensus that the US needs not 100 but 175-200 more nuclear capable strategic bombers, with Northrop Grumman having committed to accelerate such new acquisition.

There is however a major new concern as the US moves forward on modernization. In April 1999 Russian President Yeltsin in a secret decree ordered the development of thousands of short-range, low-yield, “battlefield” nuclear weapons that Russia could use to win a nuclear conflict.” One recent study determined that Russian micro-testing of very low yield strategic long-range weapons could attack all 400 US silo based ICBMs and cause less than 10,000 casualties, making a US retaliatory response less than certain.

Now the current US retaliatory deterrent strategy is to destroy an enemies leadership and their supportive security forces along with their remaining nuclear weapons and industry support. The rationale is simple: threaten to take away those things the bad guys value. Mao Tse Tung once casually dismissed the consequences of nuclear war with the United States, declaring that Chinese women would in a generation make up for the loss of a few hundred million people. He hardly cared for his own people having killed some 65 million to sustain power.

To abolitionists such a US strategy is illogical as they assume such a strategy is “warfighting” and not winnable. In the two movies and one book referenced earlier, some of the abolitionists are pushing to jettison current US nuclear deterrent strategy altogether as unworkable. But what does the US do for deterrent strategy on the long road toward nuclear abolition? How does one deter bad guys brandishing nuclear weapons prior to their hoped for abolition? How do you still deter on the way toward abolition?

Author Annie Jacobsen was asked just this question but she explained she would drop her explicit support for abolition but let other “experts” figure it out. The movie **Dynamite** took both deterrence by retaliation off the table and missile defense to intercept an attack in the first place. The movie assumed missile defense—even against a single warhead—would not work. And not knowing where the missile originated, the US had to guess— retaliate against everyone as one military officer proposed or do nothing.

Yeltsin’s 1999 decree is being implemented. And since the invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Moscow has threatened to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine and its allies dozens of times. Many have assumed such nuclear strikes would involve the very battlefield nuclear forces called for in Yeltsin’s 1999 decree.

Critics of such weapons say there is no consequential difference between using a regional/theater/battlefield nuclear weapon with a minimal yield and a long-range strategic nuclear warhead of many hundreds of kilotons. Any such weapon use will result in Armageddon. That may indeed be true.

But Moscow and Beijing may not believe so and thus would be reckless enough to use such weapons. That the US and its allies must defend against and deter such use. That may take a sea-launched nuclear armed cruise missile. And a robust missile defense such as Golden Dome. Or any number of new technologies and strategies.

But probably not unilateral restraint that does not take such threats seriously in the first place.

International Strategic Developments

The Russian Defense Ministry on Thursday said that a Borei-class ballistic missile submarine, RS-24 Yars ICBMs units, and a MiG-31 armed with a Kinzhal hypersonic missile are taking part in the country's ongoing nuclear exercises, Reuters reported.

And the **National Nuclear Security Administration** announced in a press release that it has completed ahead of schedule the first unit of the Mark (Mk) 4B reentry body for the W76 nuclear warhead, which is designed for submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

From Dr. Stephen Blank: Russia putting nukes on the Arctic Seabed; <https://united24media.com/world/russia-allegedly-developing-secret-project-to-plant-nuclear-missiles-on-the-arctic-ocean-seabed-19067>

Russia flexes nuclear muscles as tensions rise with NATO: Moscow is conducting some of its biggest nuclear exercises in years, involving 64,000 people to drill its forces in "the preparation and use of nuclear forces in the event of aggression".

Russian Defense Ministry published footage of troops delivering nuclear warheads to mobile Iskander-M missile launch systems, loading them and moving them to launch sites as part of a major nuclear exercise.

Russia announced a second successful test launch of the RS-28 Sarmat (RS-SS-X-29) intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) on 12 May 2026. Sarmat is a three-stage liquid-propelled ICBM developed to replace Russia's ageing RS-20V Voevoda (RS-SS-18 Satan Mod 5) ICBM. It will be equipped with an estimated 10–15 multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs). Russia's Strategic Rocket Forces (RVSN) plans to eventually equip Sarmat with the Avangard hypersonic boost-glide vehicle.

Russia is using unannounced strategic nuclear exercises to posture strength against Ukraine's allies and distract from mounting battlefield weaknesses. Russian forces are likely conducting the surprise May 19 to 21 nuclear exercises and amplifying longstanding narratives aimed at influencing NATO decision-making and masking Russia's own weaknesses. Russia is escalating its efforts to set informational conditions for possible future aggression against the Baltic states. Russian contract recruitment continues to decline as battlefield casualties rise, despite recent increases to one-time signing bonuses. The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) reportedly trained Russian military personnel in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2025, underscoring how Russia and its allies are using the war in Ukraine for military learning and testing.

Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in China on May 19 for an official visit through May 20. Ukrainian forces recently advanced in northern Kharkiv Oblast and in the Kupiansk and Hulyaipole directions. Russian forces launched 209 drones toward Ukraine overnight.

China welcomes Russia's initiative for Moscow and Washington to continue observing New START's central quantitative limits, according to a joint statement from Russia and China following talks between the two leaders. "The Chinese side welcomes the initiative put forward by the Russian side for Moscow and Washington to continue adhering to central quantitative limits under the New START Treaty that reflects the Russian side's ambitions to support predictability, restraint and balance in the given sphere," the statement reads.

US Strategic Developments

Northrop increasing B-21 production rate from 10 to 12. Air Force chief says (InsideDefense.com, May 20 | Shelley K. Mesch)

Northrop Grumman will be increasing the production rate for the B-21 Raider bomber from 10 aircraft at a time to 12. Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Kenneth Wilsbach said today.

Pantex Plant completes W76 Mk4B First Production Unit;*The Pantex Plant has achieved a significant milestone in national nuclear security deterrence by completing the first production unit (FPU) of the W76 Mk4B. This accomplishment comes just over five years after the program began, highlighting the dedication to the United*

States' nuclear deterrent by sites from across the Nuclear Security Enterprise (NSE) and the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA).

NNSA Completes First Production Unit of W76/Mk4B Reentry Body; National Nuclear Security Administration, May 20 | Press Release; The Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (DOE/NNSA) completed the first unit of the Mark (Mk) 4B reentry body for the W76 nuclear warhead supporting sea-based strategic deterrence. The Mk4B protects the submarine-launched ballistic missile warhead when reentering Earth's atmosphere. NNSA worked alongside U.S. Navy counterparts to enhance the reliability of the previous Mk4As. The first W76/Mk4B unit was manufactured nearly three months ahead of schedule.

The Air Force Global Strike Command announced that it successfully conducted a test launch of an unarmed Minuteman III ICBM from Vandenberg SFB early on Wednesday, according to a news release, which quoted AFGSC Commander Gen. S.L. Davis as saying that the "launch verifies the health and readiness of our ICBM force, confirming the capability of every component of the ICBM enterprise, from our operators to the weapon system itself, to execute the mission." According to General Stephen Davis, head of the US Air Force's Global Strike Command, "This launch verifies the health and readiness of our ICBM force, confirming the capability of every component of the ICBM enterprise, from our operators to the weapon system itself, to execute the mission."

Submarine Group Ten: "Bravo Zulu to the crew of the Ohio-class ballistic missile submarine USS Maryland (SSBN 738)! U.S. Navy Adm. Rich Correll, commander of U.S. Strategic Command, presented the prestigious 2025 Omaha Trophy to the crews of USS Maryland (SSBN 738) at Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay. Sponsored by USSTRATCOM and the Strategic Command Consultation Committee, the Omaha Trophy is awarded annually to elite military units that demonstrate the highest performance standards in strategic deterrence. Congratulations to the USS Maryland for their exceptional contributions to the USSTRATCOM mission and our national security!"

US Congress Developments

Secretary of the USAF-*Meink old Congress that the Long-Range Nuclear Cruise Missile is 'Going Well' but Entering Critical Phase: the program to build a new long range nuclear cruise missile is performing "very well" in both cost and schedule—but will require support as it enters a critical phase.*

House Appropriators Wednesday approved in a 34-25 vote a proposal that would increase funding for nuclear weapon and energy development.

Golden Dome Update

Pragmatic Solutions for Golden Dome Command & Control, RealClearDefense.com, May 20 | Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Pete Fessler. The Golden Dome for America project is a badly needed step forward in defense of the homeland. Decades of under investment and growing adversary capability have created an urgent need, and the administration has directed rapid action. The Straits Times: "Russia and China scold the United States over 'Golden Dome' plans."

#1 Report of the Week

Mark Schneider discusses nuclear weapons testing in a new NIPP publication, Information Series #659, May 20, 2026.



Why President Trump Ordered the Resumption of U.S. Nuclear Testing

Dr. Mark B. Schneider

Dr. Mark Schneider is a Senior Analyst with the National Institute for Public Policy. Dr. Schneider previously served in DoD as Principal Director for Forces Policy, Principal Director for Strategic Defense, Space and Verification Policy, Director for Strategic Arms Control Policy and Representative of the Secretary of Defense to the Nuclear Arms Control Implementation Commission. He also served in the senior Foreign Service as a Member of the State Department Policy Planning Staff.

In October 2025, President Trump announced that he had ordered the resumption of nuclear testing stating that, “Because of other countries’ testing programs, I have instructed the Department of War to start testing our Nuclear Weapons on an equal basis. That process will begin immediately.”^[1] Despite the shock exhibited in the so-called mainstream media, covert Russian and Chinese nuclear testing had been reported in the last six State Department reports, including all four Biden Administration reports.^[2] Chinese and Russian nuclear testing also appeared in the 2009 report of the bipartisan Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States.^[3] This author discussed reported Russian nuclear testing in a 2006 publication^[4] and reported Chinese nuclear testing in 2007.^[5] Indeed, as far back as 1999, the House of Representatives *Select Committee on U.S. National Security and Military/Commercial Concerns with the People’s Republic of China* (the Cox Committee) report stated that “...nuclear tests related to development of the PRC’s *next generation of thermonuclear warheads* may be continuing at the PRC test site at Lop Non Nor.”^[6] (Emphasis added.)

In February 2026, Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Thomas DiNanno asserted at the United Nations Conference on Disarmament in Geneva that:

I’d now like to address an issue where another disparity exists. Last Fall, President Trump instructed the Pentagon to start testing our nuclear weapons, quote, “on an equal basis,” close quote. Specifically, the President was referring to Russian and Chinese nuclear testing in violation of their respective moratoria on yield-producing nuclear tests. Since the President’s statement, we have received many questions about what he meant by, quote “an equal basis,” close quote. The annual U.S. compliance report has previously assessed that Russia has failed to maintain its testing moratorium by conducting supercritical nuclear weapons tests.

Today, I can reveal that the U.S. Government is aware that China has conducted nuclear explosive tests, including preparing for tests with designated yields in the hundreds of tons. The PLA sought to conceal testing by obfuscating the nuclear explosions because it recognized these tests violate test ban commitments. China has used decoupling – a method to decrease the effectiveness of seismic monitoring – to hide their activities from the world. China conducted one such yield-producing nuclear test on June 22 of 2020.^[7]

Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control and Proliferation Dr. Christopher Yeaw, a noted nuclear weapons expert, stated that the June 22, 2020 Chinese test conducted at China’s Lop Nor test grounds had a seismic magnitude of 2.75.^[8] This is way beyond very low-yield hydronuclear testing and, hence, has much greater significance. He indicated that while it was clear the June 22, 2020 Chinese test was a nuclear test, the United States did not know its yield from seismic data because the decoupling factor could be 20 to 40 times or even more.^[9] (Decoupling involves creating a large cavity, pumping out the air, and then detonating the device.)

Dr. Yeaw indicated that the information he examined went beyond the original detected seismic signal. ^[10] Subsequently, *CNN* reported that China’s intent was “to radically advance its nuclear weapons” and that its “...investment in its nuclear arsenal is pushing China closer to peer status with Russia and the US and could yield technical capabilities neither of the two dominant nuclear powers currently possess.”^[11]

Dr. Robert Floyd, Executive Secretary of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO), stated, "At the specific time of 9:18am UTC, on 22 June 2020, the CTBTO's International Monitoring System (IMS) detected two very small seismic events, 12 seconds apart. The location of these events was in the vicinity of 40.65N; 89.22E and 41.08N; 89.63E."^[12] This suggests the possibility that there were two separate nuclear weapons detonations. It also indicates how ineffective international monitoring of nuclear testing can be. The supposed 500-ton yield detection capability the CTBTO claims does not assume adversary efforts to conceal the tests.

The declassified information indicating that China was "preparing for tests with designated yields in the hundreds of tons" appears to confirm a 2023 *New York Times* report that, "...waves of satellite images reveal that the military base [at Lop Nor] has newly drilled boreholes—ideal for bottling up firestorms of deadly radiation from large nuclear blasts—as well as hundreds of other upgrades and expansions."^[13] It even reported activity that may have been related to the June 22, 2020 Chinese nuclear testing. It said, "A 2020 satellite image showed a main tunnel undergoing extensive new digging and construction, its entrance surrounded by trucks, bulldozers and piles of excavated dirt."^[14] Writing in *The Wall Street Journal* in 2020, Michael Gordon also reported concerns that, "China might be secretly conducting nuclear tests with very low explosive power...."^[15]

In 2024, this author noted, "There is also a possibility that sub-kiloton Chinese nuclear tests were conducted but not detected or made public."^[16] This now appears to be what actually happened.

So, why should the United States be concerned about these covert nuclear tests? All nuclear tests have benefits for assessing the reliability and safety of nuclear weapons. This includes even very low-yield hydronuclear tests. The late Dr. John Foster Jr., a former Director of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, and perhaps the greatest figure in the history of U.S. nuclear weapons development, said that hydronuclear tests "of less than one ton" yield could provide high confidence in the "performance [of nuclear weapons] at low yield."^[17] Russian Atomic Energy Minister, the late Dr. Viktor Mikhaylov, was very open about Russian hydronuclear tests, apparently in an effort to legitimize them under the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.^[18] A declassified Clinton-era Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report stated that, "Authorities including First Deputy Minister for Atomic Energy Mikhaylov have said, Russia is looking at a range of techniques—including hydronuclear experiments—that they say would allow them to continue warhead design and maintenance research within the limits of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty."^[19] Another declassified Clinton-era CIA report said that Mikhaylov had published an article "justifying" hydronuclear tests for weapons safety and the development of new types of nuclear weapons, noting that hydronuclear experiments "...are far more useful for Russian weapons development" than subcritical tests.^[20] Dr. Mikhaylov stated that "...developed traditional nuclear powers can use hydronuclear experiments to perform tasks of improving *reliability* of their nuclear arsenal and effectively steward its operation."^[21] (Emphasis added.) Since 1992, the United States has conducted nothing more than subcritical tests, i.e., tests that do not result in a nuclear explosion.

The Russian definition of a nuclear test is apparently the release of one metric ton of TNT of nuclear yield.^[22] Thus, the nuclear tests with hundreds of tons yield that China is preparing to conduct are at least hundreds of times greater than the yield of hydronuclear tests. Their implications are serious. Their significance is far more than the simple percentage increase in yield would suggest. A report on nuclear testing by the well-known JASON study group concluded that "...testing under a 500 ton yield limit would allow studies of boost gas ignition and initial burn, which is a critical step in achieving full primary design yield."^[23] With full primary yield the chance of a dud is very low. Apparently, this is the reason that, in 1993, the Defense Department position "...favored a low-yield treaty with a 500 ton testing limit."^[24] This reflects the critical importance of testing at this level for assuring weapons reliability and safety. In 1995, the Clinton Administration made its final decision to seek a zero-yield test ban treaty. The late Dr. Paul Robinson, former Director of the Sandia National Laboratory, was an unquestioned expert on nuclear testing. He had served as Principal Associate Director of the National Security Program at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, and headed the U.S. delegation, with the rank of Ambassador, that negotiated the verification protocol to the Threshold Test Ban Treaty (TTBT), which limited test yield to 150-kilotons. In 2012, he stated, "At that time [1995], we in the U.S. labs requested that the permitted test level should be set to a level which is [was], in fact, lower than a one-kiloton limit, which would have allowed us to carry out some very important experiments, in our view, to determine whether the first stage of multiple-stage devices was indeed operating, successfully."^[25]

Such testing would allow high confidence that the life-extended primary of a thermonuclear weapon would work as designed and even allow the development of new advanced thermonuclear weapons. Absent nuclear testing to diagnose problems, a defective primary can result in a dud. Taking into account the enormous amount of U.S. nuclear weapons design information stolen by China (documented in the Cox Committee report), and the fact that Chinese nuclear weapons are not one-point safe which tends to make them more robust,^[26] covert nuclear testing at hundreds of tons could allow Chinese development and deployment of advanced high-yield nuclear weapons for deployment as MIRVs. Indeed, *CNN* has reported:

Evidence collected as part of a subsequent review of the June 2020 event, has led US officials to conclude the test was motivated by China's pursuit of next-generation nuclear weapons, the sources familiar said. That includes efforts to develop additional weapons systems capable of delivering multiple, miniaturized nuclear warheads from a single missile. China also appears to be developing low-yield, tactical nuclear weapons—something the country has never previously produced—that could be deployed against targets closer to home, including in scenarios where Beijing responds to a potential US defense of Taiwan, the sources added.^[27]

According to Dr. Yeaw, covert Russian and Chinese nuclear testing could result in improved “nuclear warfighting capabilities.”^[28] This is clearly correct. Warfighting appears to be the main reason for the large Chinese ICBM silo deployments since China already had mobile ICBMs with higher survivability.

The first use of low-yield/low-collateral-damage nuclear weapons is the core of Putin's nuclear escalation doctrine.^[29] The 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* report stated, “Russia's belief that limited nuclear first use, potentially including low-yield weapons, can provide such an advantage is based, in part, on Moscow's perception that its greater number and variety of non-strategic nuclear systems provide a coercive advantage in crises and at lower levels of conflict.”^[30] Russia has placed great emphasis on low-yield nuclear weapons. In December 2017, Dr. Philip Karber, President of the Potomac Foundation, stated that roughly half of Russia's 5,000 tactical nuclear weapons have been modernized with new sub-kiloton nuclear warheads for air defense, torpedoes and cruise missiles.^[31] Reportedly, the modern Russian warheads, which include nuclear artillery, have yields as low as 20 tons and include enhanced radiation weapons.^[32] Dr. Viktor Mikhaylov, former Russian Atomic Energy Minister and then Director of the Sarov nuclear weapons laboratory, stated that Russia was improving thermonuclear weapons which range from “megaton class” to “weapons yielding hundreds of tons.”^[33] (With testing at hundreds of tons, China could clearly do the same.) He also discussed Russian development “...of a ‘nuclear scalpel’ capable of ‘surgically removing’ and destroying very localized targets. The low yield warhead will be surrounded with a superhardened casing which makes it possible to penetrate 30–40 meters into rock and destroy a buried target—for example, a troop command and control point or a nuclear munitions storage facility.”^[34] (This is another type of weapon China could develop with covert testing at hundreds of tons.) The United States clearly has nothing like this type of weapon.

China seeks a greatly expanded and unprecedented nuclear force with weapons ranging from multimegaton to low-yield.^[35] Testing at hundreds of tons yield can allow full-yield tests of advanced low-yield nuclear weapons or these weapons, if their design yield is a kiloton or so, could be tested at least at a significant fraction of their full-design yield. This is very important, particularly when viewed in the context of the massive Chinese expenditure on strategic and theater delivery vehicles and their development and deployment of MIRVed missiles.^[36]

Testing at hundreds of tons is not comparable in value to high-yield nuclear testing. But compared to zero testing, it has great value.

Despite China's bogus claim that it supports no first use of nuclear weapons, Chinese nuclear doctrine appears to be little different from Russia's. In 2022, DoD's (now the Department of War) China military power report stated that, notwithstanding its announced “no first use” (NFU) policy, “...China's nuclear strategy probably includes consideration of a nuclear strike in response to a nonnuclear attack threatening the viability of China's nuclear forces or C2, or that approximates the strategic effects of a nuclear strike. Beijing probably would also consider nuclear use to restore deterrence if a conventional military defeat gravely threatened PRC [People's Republic of China] survival.”^[37] China's formulation on “no first use” is cleverly worded propaganda. Colonel (Ret.) Dr. Larry Wortzel, a leading U.S. expert on Chinese military capability, pointed out that a careful analysis of China's “no first use” language indicated, “...if China launched a surprise nuclear attack tomorrow, it would still not be the first nation to use nuclear weapons,” and, thus, “...the attack would not violate its NFU policy since the United States used nuclear weapons first in World War II.”^[38]

Available open source evidence indicates that covert nuclear testing by Russia and China goes back to the 1990s. (China's overt high-yield nuclear testing continued until 1996.) The cumulative impact of these covert tests is quite considerable. In 2024, China's Communist Party Central Committee pledged to “...speed up the development of strategic deterrence forces.”^[39] This objective may be linked to China's preparations for nuclear tests with yields of hundreds of tons.

Decades of Russian and Chinese covert nuclear testing more than justify President Trump's decision to resume nuclear testing “on an equal basis.” With this decision, President Trump reaffirms his commitment to “peace through strength” and common sense policies that advance the national security interests of the United States.

- [1] Donald J. Trump, "Trump's Truth," October 2, 2025, <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/115460423936412555>.
- [2] Mark B. Schneider, "President Trump Is Correct About Adversary Nuclear Testing," National Institute for Public Policy, *Information Series*, No. 645, December 3, 2025, https://nipp.org/information_series/mark-b-schneider-president-trump-is-correct-about-adversary-nuclear-testing-no-645-december-3-2025/.
- [3] William J. Perry and James R. Schlesinger, *America's Strategic Posture - The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2009), p. 83, http://media.usip.org/reports/strat_posture_report.pdf.
- [4] Mark B. Schneider, *The Nuclear Forces and Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2006), pp. 18-19, <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Russian-nuclear-doctrine-NSF-for-print.pdf>.
- [5] Mark B. Schneider, *The Nuclear Doctrine and Forces of the People's Republic of China* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, November 2007), p. 19, <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/China-nuclear-final-pub.pdf>.
- [6] *Report of the Select Committee on U.S. National Security and Military/Commercial Concerns with the People's Republic of China*, Volume I (unclassified), May 1999, pp. 69-76, 241, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRPT-105hrpt851/pdf/GPO-CRPT-105hrpt851.pdf>.
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ICBM EAR Report #2 of the Week

Flexible Response 2.0: Rebuilding NATO's Deterrence Architecture **HERITAGE FOUNDATION, MAY 20 | ROBERT PETERS AND LEO KEAY**

SUMMARY

European allies should assume primary responsibility for deterring high-intensity conventional conflict while the United States ensures that NATO maintains a credible and flexible theater nuclear deterrent that is capable of managing escalation if deterrence fails. At the top of the escalation ladder sits the Alliance's ultimate guarantee: the strategic nuclear forces of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. NATO 3.0 therefore requires a modernized doctrine of Flexible Response 2.0.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. The NATO 3.0 debate emphasizes Europe's responsibility for conventional defense, but the Alliance must also rebuild its nuclear-level escalation architecture.
2. A stronger U.S. theater nuclear posture in Europe would both stabilize deterrence against Russia and reduce the risk of Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific.
3. Flexible Response 2.0 is not about increasing reliance on nuclear weapons. It is about ensuring that nuclear coercion fails as a strategy.

For 75 years, NATO has relied on American conventional power to defend Europe. That era is ending. [1] As the United States increasingly prioritizes deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, European allies will need to assume primary responsibility for defending the continent. Yet America's contribution to European deterrence remains both indispensable and unique. NATO's security has always rested not only on conventional strength, but also on the credibility of its nuclear deterrent—and that responsibility will continue to fall primarily on the United States.

By the middle of the Cold War, NATO deterrence strategy was known as Flexible Response: an integrated escalation architecture that combined conventional forces, theater nuclear weapons, and strategic nuclear deterrent capabilities. [2] While NATO still has Flexible Response as one of its deterrent options, that architecture's capability has eroded.

Russia possesses the world's largest arsenal of non-strategic nuclear weapons (most of which are in its Western Military District, which abuts NATO states) and openly integrates nuclear escalation into its regional war planning. Moreover, Moscow has nearly completed the modernization of its strategic arsenal and, with the collapse of arms control constraints, faces few if any limits on its nuclear posture. [3] By contrast, NATO retains a minimalist theater nuclear posture developed in the 1990s and centered on a small number of Cold War-era gravity bombs delivered by dual-capable fighter-bombers. [4] At the same time, the United States today must deter two nuclear peers simultaneously, stretching a nuclear force structure originally designed for a single adversary. [5]

A new division of deterrence labor is therefore required. European allies should assume primary responsibility for deterring high-intensity conventional conflict while the United States ensures that the Alliance maintains a credible and flexible theater nuclear deterrent that is capable of managing escalation if deterrence fails. At the top of the escalation ladder sits the Alliance's ultimate guarantee: the strategic nuclear forces of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. NATO 3.0 therefore requires a modernized doctrine of Flexible Response 2.0.

THE CONVENTIONAL GAP OF THE LATE 2020S

The most immediate danger facing NATO is a conventional offensive in a narrow window before the Alliance's rearmament—begun following Russia's invasion in 2022—is complete. Russia's battlefield losses in Ukraine have significantly degraded its conventional forces, but the Kremlin has already accelerated wartime mobilization of its

defense industrial base and has begun to rebuild key combat formations, especially its ground and missile forces of particular utility for an invasion of one of its NATO neighbors. [6] Western intelligence assessments increasingly suggest that Russian force reconstitution could occur within three to seven years. [7]

The expansion of NATO's conventional capability will take much longer to mature. Many European armies must reconstitute brigade-level and division-level formations after decades of downsizing. [8] Defense industrial capacities—particularly for munitions, armor, and air defense interceptors—must expand radically so that European nations can provide the ships, planes, munitions, and platforms that are needed to arm modern militaries. [9] Even where funding has increased, it will take the better part of a decade for European states to translate resources into deployable combat power.

These efforts are necessary and will take time. Even moving with purpose, European states are unlikely to make meaningful progress on these issues before the end of the 2020s. Until they do so, there will be a potential deterrence gap in the late 2020s during which Russia will regain offensive capability before NATO's conventional buildup is complete. [10]

In this context, Moscow would not need to achieve conventional superiority over all NATO forces deployed across Europe to succeed. It would need only to achieve localized conventional superiority within a narrow area to convince NATO that further resistance risks uncontrolled escalation—thereby shifting the burden of decision from the conventional battlefield to the nuclear domain. [11]

RUSSIA'S THEATER NUCLEAR ADVANTAGE

Russia's theater nuclear posture is designed precisely to enable this form of coercion. Moscow's advantage is not simply numerical: It is structural. The Kremlin fields roughly 2,000 non-strategic nuclear weapons across a wide range of delivery systems, including cruise missiles, short-range ballistic missiles, naval platforms, and dual-capable aircraft. [12] These capabilities are integrated into operational planning, giving Russian leaders multiple options to calibrate escalation at the regional level.

This creates a form of escalation density that gives Russian leaders optionality while creating targeting and escalation dilemmas for NATO leaders. Russia is therefore able to escalate at a time and intensity of its choosing. [13] NATO, on the other hand, has far fewer credible nuclear options at the theater level. The result is an asymmetry in both capabilities and doctrine that leaves NATO exceptionally vulnerable to Russian nuclear coercion at the theater level.

NATO'S MISSING RUNGS

NATO does not simply lack nuclear weapons; it lacks usable options. The Alliance's theater nuclear posture remains centered on gravity bombs that are delivered by dual-capable aircraft from a limited number of forward bases. [14] This structure presents three key weaknesses.

- The bases that host these systems are vulnerable to preemption. Known airbases can be targeted by conventional missile strikes, cyber disruption, or sabotage in the early stages of a conflict.
- NATO's existing nuclear posture offers limited escalation flexibility. With few intermediate options, NATO faces a stark transition between conventional operations and mutually destructive strategic nuclear exchanges because of its paucity of low-yield non-strategic options and therefore reliance on high-yield strategic nuclear capabilities.

- The Alliance is increasingly challenged by modern air defense systems that complicate the penetration missions required for gravity bomb delivery, particularly given the need for aerial refueling of nuclear-capable fighter-bombers.

The result is a short and fragile escalation ladder—one that risks leaving NATO without credible responses at the very point that escalation becomes most dangerous. [15]

FLEXIBLE RESPONSE 2.0

If NATO is to deny Russia the ability to coerce through limited nuclear escalation, it must rebuild the escalation architecture it has allowed to atrophy. This requires a modernized doctrine of Flexible Response—Flexible Response 2.0—structured around three pillars: European conventional deterrence, U.S. control of theater nuclear escalation, and strategic deterrence provided by the United States, the United Kingdom, and France.

Pillar I: European Conventional Deterrence. Europe must assume primary responsibility for forward conventional defense, particularly along NATO's northeastern flank. A credible conventional posture requires not only increased spending, but also the generation of deployable, integrated forces that are capable of denying a rapid Russian breakthrough. [16]

One practical step would be the establishment of a multinational corps of approximately 40,000 conventional troops deployed in the Baltic region. This force should be structured as a credible warfighting formation—not merely as a tripwire—that is capable of denying a rapid Russian breakthrough and imposing immediate operational costs. Such a deployment is politically and militarily feasible: Recent “coalition of the willing” proposals envisioned a comparable European force for Ukraine, demonstrating that both the scale and the willingness that are required already exist within the Alliance.

However, Europe's conventional buildup must avoid the trap of preparing to fight the last war. The conflict in Ukraine has often devolved into attritional positional warfare, but this reflects the specific conditions of that battlefield. A future NATO–Russia conflict is more likely to involve large-scale maneuver under persistent long-range precision strike.

European force development must therefore combine mass with mobility. Armored formations must be capable of rapid maneuver, supported by deep fires, air defense, and resilient logistics. Europe must become not only the Alliance's conventional shield, but also a shield that is capable of operating in a dynamic, high-intensity battlefield environment. [17]

Pillar II: U.S. Theater Nuclear Deterrence. If Europe provides conventional denial, the United States must ensure credible control of escalation. The objective is less to fight a nuclear war than it is to deny Russia any advantage from limited nuclear use. This will require the expansion and diversification of NATO's theater nuclear capabilities.

The United States should therefore consider deploying an additional 100–150 non-strategic nuclear weapons in the European theater, forward deployed to bases potentially in Poland and Finland to ensure a credible deterrence posture and operational relevance. [18] Such deployments would help to restore escalation ladder density and reinforce deterrence credibility across both theaters.

In the near term, the United States should prioritize adapting existing delivery systems to provide credible theater nuclear options. This would include the integration of nuclear warheads—such as W80 variants—onto platforms like the Joint Air-to Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM), Tomahawk (TLAM), and emerging systems such as Dark Eagle. Such adaptations would provide rapid, flexible strike options without requiring entirely new force structures, restoring escalation ladder density on timelines relevant to the late-2020s deterrence gap. [19]

At the same time, NATO should modernize its delivery systems. The transition to the Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II offers an opportunity to move beyond gravity bombs toward nuclear standoff weapons. [20] A

miniaturized nuclear-capable cruise missile designed to fit within the F-35's internal weapons bay would significantly improve both survivability and flexibility.

Sea-based systems also play a critical role. A sea-launched nuclear cruise missile (SLCM-N) deployed on Virginia-class submarine platforms would provide a survivable, flexible option that is capable of threatening key targets such as the Kola Peninsula and elements of Russia's Northern Fleet infrastructure. [21] Other basing modes would offer more limited reach against these critical assets.

Finally, NATO should reconsider ground-launched intermediate-range systems analogous to the Pershing II and BGM-109G Gryphon deployed during the Cold War. [22] Such systems would enhance signaling, reduce response times, and reintroduce bargaining leverage into arms control dynamics.

Pillar III: Strategic Deterrence (U.S.–U.K.–France). At the top of the escalation ladder sits the Alliance's ultimate guarantee: the strategic nuclear forces of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. These forces ensure that no adversary can escalate to the strategic level without facing unacceptable consequences.

Maintaining this strategic guarantee requires sustained modernization of the U.S. nuclear triad and its supporting command, control, and missile defense architecture. [23] The United States is recapitalizing all three legs of its deterrent, but these programs must be delivered quickly and at scale to ensure credible deterrence against two nuclear peers. Russia, by contrast, has nearly completed the modernization of its strategic forces and continues to develop novel systems such as the nuclear-powered Burevestnik cruise missile. [24] In this context, emerging missile defense initiatives—often framed as a “Golden Dome”—should be understood not as a quest for invulnerability, but as a form of damage limitation that strengthens deterrence by complicating adversary attack planning and reinforcing the survivability of the U.S. and allied deterrent. [25]

France's renewed interest in “dissuasion avancée” (forward deterrence) should be welcomed as a political signal of European commitment. [26] However, the French deterrent remains strategic in both doctrine and capability, France's relatively limited arsenal constrains both its ability to provide extended deterrence at the theater level and its ability to generate forward-deployed options without eroding the survivability required for a credible second strike.

The United Kingdom's contribution to NATO's strategic deterrent also warrants careful attention. Britain's continuous at-sea deterrent currently relies on a single ballistic missile submarine on patrol at any given time, placing significant weight on a limited force structure. As the U.K. transitions to the Dreadnought-class SSBNs and modestly expands its warhead ceiling, maintaining credibility will require greater operational resilience—including consideration of a second boat at sea to enhance second strike survivability. [27]

French and British forces therefore strengthen NATO's strategic deterrent at the highest level of escalation, but they cannot substitute for the flexible, theater-level nuclear capabilities that only the United States currently provides.

CONCLUSION: NATO 3.0 REQUIRES FLEXIBLE RESPONSE 2.0

The NATO 3.0 debate rightly emphasizes European responsibility for conventional defense, but conventional burden-sharing alone will not stabilize deterrence in Europe. The Alliance must also rebuild its escalation architecture at the nuclear level. This will require a new division of labor by which Europe provides the conventional shield; the United States provides theater nuclear escalation control; and the United States, the United Kingdom, and France together provide the Alliance's ultimate strategic guarantee.

In addition to stabilizing deterrence against Russia, a stronger U.S. theater nuclear posture in Europe would reduce the risk of Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific. Reducing the need for large-scale U.S. conventional deployments to counter a nuclear-backed offensive in Europe would free American forces to concentrate on the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, it would demonstrate both the capability and the willingness to respond to limited nuclear

use at the theater level. China would continue to expand its own theater nuclear arsenal, but it would be less likely to conclude that it could replicate a Russian-style strategy of nuclear coercion to achieve a rapid fait accompli.

Flexible Response 2.0 is not about increasing reliance on nuclear weapons. It is about ensuring that nuclear coercion fails as a strategy. In a world of multiple nuclear powers, deterrence cannot be managed one region at a time. Rebuilding NATO's escalation ladder is therefore not only a European requirement: It is a global requirement.

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Agenda and Event of the Week

The June 18th TRIAD SYMPOSIUM at LSUS in SHREVEPORT: <https://www.lsus.edu/community/strategy-alternatives-consortium>; Here is the link to our agenda which is constantly updated. Just so you always have the most recent version:

 [FOR PUBLIC Triad Agenda 5-21.docx](#)

RIP: Lawrence J. Korb, Sr. died April 20, and according to the BAS left "behind an exemplary career in American national security policy, in teaching, in research and university administration, and in military service. Larry served under President Ronald Reagan as Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower, Reserve Affairs and Logistics. He was a naval aviator during the Vietnam War and retired from the Navy reserve as a captain. He was past head of what is now the Matthew B. Ridgway Center for International Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. Larry has also been affiliated with a number of influential Washington, D.C. think tanks, most recently the Center for American Progress.

Larry's contributions to the academic and policy-relevant literature included definitive studies on the US Joint Chiefs of Staff and widely read commentaries on nuclear arms control, nonproliferation, and related issues. His expert analyses reached a wide audience of scholars, policy makers, defense analysts with similar professional interests, and members of the general public. His *Washington Post* obituary correctly notes his decades spent speaking truth to power and causing good trouble."

UPDATE: RUSSIAN WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

ISW: A year ago, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky [articulated](#) a strategy of "bringing the war back to Russia." "The war was brought from Russia, and it is to Russia that the war must be pushed back. They must be the ones forced into peace. They are the ones who must be pressured to ensure security," Zelensky [said](#) in March 2025. Since then, and ever more intensely this year, Ukraine has been pursuing a "[strategic neutralization](#)" of assets in Russia. This means scaling back the hard-fought, casualty-intensive thrusts to claw back occupied territory that have cost Ukraine so much in terms of blood and treasure, and instead embracing long-range, asymmetric warfare to degrade Russia's economy, rupture its military manufacturing, and deflate civilian morale. This spring, there's every sign that this strategy is bearing fruit—and perhaps even shifting the battlefield calculus [in the war's fifth, grinding year](#). Almost daily, Ukraine's new weaponry capabilities, in particular its own long-range missiles and high-precision drones, are wreaking havoc where they hit energy infrastructure, arms and explosives factories, and military command and logistics centers. On the home front, Ukraine is playing defense, killing or wounding about [35,000 Russians a month](#), according to Ukrainian sources, bringing some estimates of the war's total death toll to [352,000](#) Russian service members.

From the Archives and History

The CIA reported to President Truman that the PRC (China) would not invade across the Yalu river to stop US military forces from eliminating the North Korea regime and with it the country of North Korea. Much criticism has historically been leveled at General Douglas MacArthur as supposedly having been almost alone in believing the PRC would not enter the war. Apparently, it was the considered opinion of the US intelligence agencies as well.

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NIDS Nuclear Seminars 2026

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|----------------------------|--|
| <u>1/23/2026</u> | Rick Fisher |
| <u>1/30/2026</u> | Mark Schnieder and Steve Blank |
| | |
| <u>3/6/2026</u> | Sean McDonald (NNSA) NNSA |
| <u>3/13/2026</u> | Paige Gasser --LLNL |
| <u>3/20/2026</u> | Frank Miller and Eric Edleman |
| <u>3/27/2025</u> | |
| <u>4/3/2026</u> | Lt. Gen Jason Armagost |
| <u>4/10/2026</u> | |
| <u>4/17/2026</u> | Stacy Jo Huser |
| <u>4/24/2026</u> | George Miller |
| <u>5/1/2026</u> | |
| <u>5/8/2026</u> | Drew Walter |
| <u>5/15/2026</u> | Breakfast / All Things Nuclear with Peter Huessy |
| <u>5/22/2026</u> | |
| <u>5/29/2026</u> | |
| <u>6/3/2026- Wednesday</u> | Lt. Gen Lutton live at the CHC |
| <u>6/5/2026</u> | Frank Rose:: Missile Defense Outlook |
| <u>6/12/2026</u> | |
| <u>6/18/2026</u> | Triad Symposium at LSUS |
| <u>6/25/2026</u> | RDML Weeks live at the CHC |
| <u>6/26/2026</u> | |
| <u>7/3/2026</u> | |
| <u>7/2026</u> | Uzi Rubin Live Event |

About the ICBM EAR

Peter Huessy's ICBM EAR Report was originally prepared for the USAF in 1981 to help inform US nuclear deterrent policy professionals at the height of the Cold War. Eventually it was provided only to key elements of the Nuclear related Aerospace Industry. The objective: help build an informed political community on nuclear deterrent issues, especially the deployment of the US nuclear deterrent, especially the MX (Peacekeeper) missile. The report covered developments in the nuclear arena on a weekly basis, including developments in Congress, key events, threat assessments, remarks of top US officials, international activity key to US security interests, nuclear budget and program element issues, and arms control and proliferation matters as well.

Weekly ICBM EAR Report

Prepared by Peter Huessy

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