

National Institute for Deterrence Studies & Peter Huessy Seminar

Strategic Deterrence in a Multipolar Nuclear Environment

A Virtual Seminar with Robert Taylor

Presented by	National Institute for Deterrence Studies
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Featured speaker	Robert Taylor, Director, Capability and Resource Integration, J8 Directorate, U.S. Strategic Command

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Abstract

Robert Taylor of U.S. Strategic Command examines strategic deterrence in an increasingly complex, multipolar nuclear environment. He describes five threat vectors that can erode U.S. advantages: cyber operations, counterspace capabilities, a contested electromagnetic spectrum, novel missile and delivery systems, and supply-chain and infrastructure vulnerabilities. Taylor explains STRATCOM's role in preserving presidential decision space, sustaining today's nuclear forces, modernizing the triad, integrating conventional, nuclear, and non-kinetic options, and strengthening assured communications and second-strike capabilities. The discussion also addresses theater nuclear deterrence, combatant-command integration, space dependencies, extended deterrence, flexible response, and the Department's partnership with the National Nuclear Security Administration.

Executive Summary

- **The current force remains credible while modernization proceeds.** Taylor stated that today's nuclear force is safe, secure, effective, and credible, but aging. He described the transition from Ohio-class submarines to Columbia, Minuteman III to Sentinel, B-2 and B-1 aircraft to B-21, B-52H to B-52J, and the air-launched cruise missile to the Long-Range Standoff Weapon.
- **Deterrence requires more than nuclear weapons.** STRATCOM seeks to give the President decision space and an array of options across conventional, nuclear, cyber, space-enabled, and other non-kinetic capabilities. Taylor emphasized that nuclear deterrence is one element of the military instrument of power, which is itself one element of national power.
- **Five threat vectors shape the operating environment.** Cyber threats, counterspace systems, electromagnetic-spectrum contestation, advanced missile and delivery systems, and supply-chain compromise can disrupt information, warning, command and control, and national decision-making.

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- **Integration is the central operational challenge.** STRATCOM is working with the Joint Staff, other combatant commands, the Services, and policy leaders to connect deliberate nuclear planning with conventional planning, authorities, communications, and complementary capabilities.
- **Theater capabilities are intended to strengthen deterrence.** Taylor argued that credible theater nuclear options can raise an adversary's threshold for use by closing a perceived response gap and complicating its decision calculus.
- **Industrial capacity and NNSA funding are essential.** Taylor described STRATCOM's relationship with NNSA as exceptionally close and urged support for the infrastructure, workforce, and production capacity required to deliver future warheads and sustain strategic deterrence.

Editorial Note: This transcript was prepared from an automated transcript and lightly edited for readability, punctuation, speaker identification, and obvious transcription errors. The speakers' meaning and sequence of discussion have been preserved.

Edited Transcript

Kimberly Cherington | Welcome and Introductions

Good morning and welcome. I'm Kimberly Cherington, and on behalf of the National Institute for Deterrence Studies, or NIDS, we thank you for taking the time to join us for this important discussion. We have Mr. Robert Taylor, Director of the Capability and Resource Integration, J8 Directorate, at U.S. Strategic Command. Welcome to those joining us live, and a special welcome to our sponsors on the call today: Lockheed Martin, Moog, TechSource, Northrop Grumman, and SPA.

We encourage you to submit questions throughout the presentation using the chat or Q&A button, and we will address them during the dedicated Q&A portion. We have a full lineup of virtual seminars this fall. On September 25, retired Lieutenant General In-Bum Chun will discuss deterrence education and war prevention on the Korean Peninsula. On October 2, Matthew Kroenig will discuss deterrence with two nuclear peers. On October 16, Major General Harencak will join us for "The Nuclear Knowledge Gap." On October 30, Vice Admirals Richard Goucher, Douglas Williams, and Richard Seif will participate in a panel on the future of undersea deterrence. The lineup and registration are available at thinkdeterrence.com. You can also follow NIDS on LinkedIn and X and subscribe to our newsletter through the website.

Today we welcome Mr. Robert Taylor, a retired Army officer and distinguished military graduate of the University of Nebraska at Kearney. Mr. Taylor served in numerous Army and joint leadership roles, including four combat deployments to Iraq. Prior to his current position, he led U.S. STRATCOM's Joint Exercises, Training and Assessments Directorate, J7. His distinguished service has been recognized with the Defense Superior Service Medal, Legion of Merit, and three Bronze Stars. We are honored to have you with us today, sir.

I am pleased to introduce our host and moderator, Mr. Peter Huessy, President of GeoStrategic Analysis and a senior fellow at NIDS. Peter, the floor is yours.

Peter Huessy | Opening Tribute

Thank you, Kimberly, and welcome, Bob. Before we begin, I want to honor the people who died on 9/11, the courageous Americans who tried to rescue others, and the first responders. God bless those who tragically lost their lives and the families and friends who loved them. It was an event that changed America. We should remember them, offer a short prayer, and ask God to protect this country, which is what our guest speaker is tasked with doing.

On behalf of NIDS, our members, and everyone here today, thank you for joining us. One description of your work is that you are in the business of integrating how we might respond to a crisis or conflict. That is a tremendous responsibility. Bob, thank you for speaking with us today. Over to you, sir.

Robert Taylor | Strategic Environment and Threat Vectors

Peter, Kimberly, and Curtis, thank you for having me. Peter, I'm glad you brought up 9/11. During my drive this morning, I reflected on where I was that day and what I did for roughly the next 15 years. As Kimberly highlighted, I spent significant time in Iraq and Afghanistan. I also thought about the men and women who worked to find those responsible and bring them to

justice, and the soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines who lost their lives or limbs and served valiantly around the world. It is imperative that we not forget.

We have moved beyond the immediate environment of 9/11, but terrorism has not disappeared. Other threats continue to rise: Russia's war against Ukraine, continuing conflict in the Middle East and engagement with Iran, and the rise of the People's Republic of China and its efforts to gain control in the Pacific in ways that challenge open trade and access to markets.

This changing geopolitical context shapes how U.S. Strategic Command contributes to the larger strategic deterrence construct. The military is one instrument of national power available to the President. Nuclear deterrence is one element of that military instrument, not the entirety of strategic deterrence.

The multipolar nuclear environment, great-power competition, and advancing technologies are defining characteristics of today's security environment. Autonomous systems and AI-enabled capabilities are changing how we think about vulnerabilities and how we might harness technology. At STRATCOM, we see five key threat vectors.

First is cyber. Potential adversaries are investing heavily in capabilities designed to exploit, disrupt, or destroy the information infrastructure on which we depend, from tactical networks in contested theaters and enterprise services in the homeland to the specialized systems that underpin nuclear command, control, and communications and ensure the President remains connected to the nuclear force.

Second is counterspace capability. Russia and the PRC are fielding systems ranging from reversible interference and jamming to direct-ascent anti-satellite weapons that threaten space-based sensors and communications networks.

Third is the contested electromagnetic spectrum. The spectrum that carries radar, communications, and data links is now a maneuver space in its own right. Our ability to fight and win depends on understanding that environment and operating through jamming, interference, and deception. It is also critical to national infrastructure, including banking, timing, and navigation.

Fourth is novel missile systems and delivery platforms, including fractional and multiple orbital bombardment systems, advanced cruise missiles, hypersonic glide vehicles, maneuvering reentry vehicles, and dual-capable systems. These complicate detection, characterization, and attribution and place a premium on integrated indications and warning.

Fifth is supply-chain and infrastructure risk. Hardware, firmware, and software can be compromised through malicious code, counterfeit components, or insider access. Competitors seek to shape, deny, or delay decision-making at the most critical moments, precisely when leaders need reliable information to distinguish actions that must be taken immediately from those that can wait.

Robert Taylor | STRATCOM Responsibilities and Priorities

U.S. Strategic Command is responsible for strategic deterrence, nuclear operations, the command and control that links the President to the force, electromagnetic-spectrum operations, and conventional global strike capabilities. Today's nuclear force is safe, secure, effective, and credible in deterring adversaries from using nuclear weapons on the battlefield or against the homeland. That force is aging, and we are modernizing it from top to bottom, largely through replacement systems with attributes that will make future capabilities more effective.

We see two critical responsibilities as we integrate with the rest of the joint force. First, provide the President decision space so that he can act with appropriate advice from across the government. Second, provide an array of options to achieve presidential objectives in a crisis. Those are not limited to a single nuclear option. They can span multiple domains and, if requested, be integrated in time and space.

Our first priority is to sustain the force until it is replaced: Minuteman III, B-52s, B-2s, and our ballistic-missile submarines must remain ready at a moment's notice. We also need to operationalize emerging technology to improve our processes. There will always be a human in the loop for nuclear options development and any nuclear options offered to the President. Technology can nevertheless accelerate our understanding, planning, and ability to filter extraneous information.

A third priority is maximizing flexibility and effectiveness through combinations of non-kinetic, conventional kinetic, and, if necessary, nuclear capabilities. Closely tied to that is strategic integration: developing the capabilities policymakers request and integrating them across domains and combatant commands. Finally, as we move into the early 2030s, we must transition legacy capabilities to a modernized force that combines long-range conventional and non-kinetic strike with modernized strategic nuclear capabilities.

These efforts align with the National Defense Strategy priorities of defending the homeland, deterring China, sharing burdens with allies, and strengthening the defense industrial base. Initiatives such as Golden Dome for America are directly relevant to assured second-strike capabilities, including nuclear command and control, the force itself, and the protection of both. We are working closely with U.S. Northern Command and the Department.

We must also address simultaneity and the possibility that adversaries or competitors could work together against us. Assured communications are essential, laterally and vertically within the military and between military and civilian leadership. We must protect submarine bases, air bases, and the platforms that provide assured command and control. The hardest challenge may be building integrated conventional and nuclear capabilities that provide the President joint-force options and decision space. We do many of these things well unilaterally; the next step is to do them better collectively across the joint force.

Robert Taylor | Nuclear Modernization

All three legs of the triad are being modernized nearly simultaneously. That may not have been the preferred sequence 15 years ago, but the Services are leaning into the challenge and driving toward capabilities that can sustain nuclear deterrence for future administrations.

The Ohio-class ballistic-missile submarine will be replaced by the Columbia class. Columbia is operating under a delay, but the Navy is working to retain Ohio through the transition so the operational commander continues to have a sea-based deterrent. We are confident in the effectiveness of both Ohio and Columbia. The sea-launched cruise missile-nuclear program is on schedule and is expected to provide a theater nuclear capability that helps address a deterrence gap.

On land, Minuteman III will be replaced by Sentinel. Following the Nunn-McCurdy breach, the program has been addressed under General White's leadership and is moving toward its next departmental milestone. Sentinel is intended to provide enhanced capabilities and improved sustainment well into the future.

In the air leg, the B-2 is a highly effective but high-demand, low-density capability. The B-52H will transition to the B-52J with new engines, radar, and advanced communications. The B-1 and B-2 will be replaced by the B-21, a highly effective conventional and nuclear-capable aircraft designed to penetrate advanced air defenses. The air-launched cruise missile will be replaced by the Long-Range Standoff Weapon, or LRSO, which is planned for initial employment from the B-52.

Why is all of this necessary? Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has expanded an array of strategic and theater nuclear capabilities and has repeatedly brandished the possibility of use. The PRC has developed dual-capable systems whose applications can be ambiguous and theater-oriented. While the United States and Russia were constrained by New START's treaty-accountable limits, adversaries developed capabilities around those limits, particularly China. The strategic deterrent remains absolutely necessary, and the Department continues to assess whether the program of record will be sufficient.

The current nuclear deterrent is safe, secure, effective, and credible. Modernization programs are gaining traction and should provide an operational deterrent well beyond the 2050s. At the same time, we are assessing strategic conventional strike and non-kinetic capabilities that can complement the force and give the President additional space and options.

Peter Huessy | Question on Uploading Legacy Weapons

What changes in an adversary's nuclear posture would trigger consideration of uploading legacy nuclear weapons, meaning placing more warheads on existing missiles?

Robert Taylor

Any decision to upload more weapons on missiles would be a presidential decision. The intelligence community tracks adversary posture closely and reports to the commander daily. Any indication of a change would be watched carefully. Uploading additional warheads could be used as a deterrent signal, but that decision would flow through the Secretary to the President.

Today, the operational force is effective and provides multiple options for any contingency the President might conceive. The Commander of STRATCOM already has an array of options within the capabilities maintained under New START.

Peter Huessy | Question on Theater Nuclear Options

A recent Foreign Affairs essay argued that giving the President more retaliatory options, including theater nuclear capabilities, could heighten instability and lower the threshold for nuclear use. How do you address that argument?

Robert Taylor

We take a different view. Adversaries have developed tactical or theater nuclear capabilities partly because many U.S. nuclear response options are strategic in nature, especially in the Pacific. We believe theater nuclear capabilities can raise the threshold for an adversary by closing a perceived response gap and complicating its decision calculus.

If the President has a theater nuclear-capable force available, an adversary must consider conventional, dual-capable, and nuclear theater responses before deciding to use a theater weapon. Without such a force, U.S. options may be less timely or may appear more escalatory, such as a bomber generated from the continental United States or a ballistic missile response. A theater capability fills the gap below a response perceived as primarily strategic, increases ambiguity around dual-capable platforms, and strengthens deterrence.

Peter Huessy | Question on Conventional-Nuclear Integration

How is U.S. STRATCOM coordinating with geographic combatant commanders to conduct integrated conventional and nuclear operational planning and execution, particularly when a conventional conflict could escalate?

Robert Taylor

The Department is addressing that through conventional-nuclear integration. One example is our work with U.S. Central Command. B-2 bombers are assigned to U.S. Strategic Command, so planning their conventional employment is a combined effort involving STRATCOM, Air Force Global Strike Command, CENTCOM, and CENTCOM's Air Force component. Collective bomber planning already occurs routinely.

The next step is to connect air-operations-center planning more broadly with the more tightly controlled nuclear planning environment. We are working closely with U.S. European Command, the Joint Staff, policy leadership, and our internal team to combine what STRATCOM knows about deliberate strategic nuclear planning with EUCOM's experience with dual-capable systems, including F-35s and gravity bombs used in support of NATO arrangements.

We are also determining how conventional networks, joint-fires networks, and systems such as Maven can connect appropriately with strategic-force planning. In the Pacific, a nuclear response today might involve a bomber option. The planning challenge is to identify complementary conventional capabilities needed to ensure the option achieves the President's objectives and to integrate planning, communications, command and control, and authorities.

We are developing concepts of operations and employment concepts for these capabilities. We are not finished, but we are moving forward with EUCOM and INDOPACOM.

Peter Huessy | Question on STRATCOM and SPACECOM

How do STRATCOM and U.S. Space Command coordinate where space capabilities and strategic deterrence overlap?

Robert Taylor

STRATCOM does not have a counterspace mission, but U.S. Space Command was established from capabilities previously within STRATCOM, so the relationship is deep. Our ties with SPACECOM and NORTHCOM are important for missile defense, future space-based defense capabilities, advanced communications, global situational awareness, crisis monitoring, and protection against adversary counterspace capabilities.

We coordinate directly on advanced capabilities that can help drive Space Force acquisition. STRATCOM is not the lead for counterspace, but it remains a demanding customer of the Space Force and U.S. Space Command for the capabilities we need.

Peter Huessy | Question on NATO and Extended Deterrence

How is the evolution of NATO affecting U.S. extended-deterrence commitments in Europe?

Robert Taylor

There is considerable discussion within NATO, including France's approach to its sovereign nuclear capabilities. That has not altered U.S. extended-deterrence commitments to NATO or to Asian allies. We continue to collaborate with nuclear partners, particularly in Europe. Extended-deterrence policy is led by the Office of the Secretary of Policy, with support from the Joint Staff and U.S. STRATCOM on capabilities. We have not experienced a significant change in those commitments.

Peter Huessy | Question on Flexible Response and Counterforce

News coverage often describes U.S. nuclear strategy as mutual assured destruction. Could you explain flexible response and its relationship to counterforce rather than deliberate countervalue attacks on cities?

Robert Taylor

The Department is developing guidance for the nuclear force as an extension of the National Defense Strategy, and leading thinkers at the command are contributing. That guidance has not yet been finalized.

Targeting cities and populations is not how we think about employing military systems to achieve objectives. Flexible response and counterforce are connected to the goal of reducing an adversary's ability to strike the United States. The President needs options with sufficient capacity to address a growing set of adversary capabilities.

The objective is to think faster, move faster, and provide options that reduce an adversary's ability to strike our homeland and cities. Integration with homeland defense, including Golden Dome, is important because an adversary should not believe it can achieve its objectives by attacking the homeland. Credible defense and an assured second strike are foundational to deterrence.

Counterforce need not mean only nuclear weapons against nuclear weapons. Long-range precision conventional strike, hypersonic capabilities, cyber capabilities, and other options may help deny an adversary's ability to strike us. The President should have an array of integrated options rather than a nuclear-only response.

Peter Huessy | Question on NNSA Partnership

How would you characterize the relationship with the National Nuclear Security Administration, and what is needed to strengthen the partnership as the nation modernizes delivery platforms and warheads?

Robert Taylor

I have seen the relationship between the Department and NNSA evolve over several years, and it is tighter today than ever before. Administrator Williams is leading efforts to reestablish the capabilities needed to produce weapons. NNSA is working with urgency to replace existing capabilities, introduce advanced technologies and modularity, and ensure future weapons remain employable over time.

I would ask those listening to encourage congressional leaders to fully fund NNSA's infrastructure and workforce requirements. Warheads, delivery platforms, and their command and control are all critical to strategic deterrence. I engage with NNSA weekly, not only on programs of record but also on advanced capabilities, the laboratories, and the infrastructure needed to deliver them. NNSA needs the resources to deliver the weapons the nation will require.

Peter Huessy | Closing Remarks

Thank you. I have been impressed with Administrator Williams and the progress NNSA has made. I also invite members of the audience to send me perspectives on arms control in Northeast Asia for an essay I am preparing for the Contemporary Chinese Review. It is a difficult issue, especially given North Korea's nuclear arsenal. Robert, your remarks have been excellent. I will turn to NIDS Vice President Curtis McGiffin for final comments.

Curtis McGiffin | Appreciation

Thank you, Peter, for hosting, and thanks to everyone who took time to hear these important remarks and Mr. Taylor's perspective on the nuclear enterprise. Sir, on behalf of the National Institute for Deterrence Studies, thank you for your time and for all you do for our security, sovereignty, peace, and stability. You are always invited back. If there is anything we can do to support you and your mission, please do not hesitate to ask. Kimberly, over to you.

Kimberly Cherington | Closing

Thank you, Curtis. Mr. Taylor, we extend our appreciation for being with us today and for your continued work. I hope everyone will join us for the upcoming events mentioned at the beginning of the session. Visit thinkdeterrence.com to register.

If you are new to NIDS, we are a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization supported by generous donors and dedicated to advancing peace and stability through strong national security and nuclear deterrence. Special thanks to everyone who helps us continue to provide timely and critical programming that highlights the importance of our deterrence force and the people who keep our nation safe. Please share our content with your network and help us grow our community. We hope to see you next time, and we hope you have a peaceful weekend. Thank you for joining us.