



Nuclear Deterrence and Arms Control in the 21st Century

Response from Kori Schake

Rebecca Heinrichs makes assertions in her opening about the risk of nuclear weapon use and international perceptions of waning U.S. strength with which I disagree. However, those things need not be true to make a strong case for continuing and strengthening our nuclear modernization programs. I find much to agree with in Heinrichs' arguments. I agree with her Schlesinger reference that if you want to prevent nuclear war, you need to prevent conventional war among nuclear powers. Geoffrey Blainey's work shows that, historically, states tend to become more, not less, committed to their war aims if victory is not achieved quickly.¹

Whether or not strategic stability should be our objective, we do not have it. And the reason is that our adversaries are modernizing their forces and cheating on arms control agreements. I agree with Heinrichs that modernization is important both for actual warfighting capabilities and for deterrence. Moreover, modernization was the bargain required to deliver Republican votes for the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, and the Biden administration should be held to those terms.

Still, I do not think the policies Heinrichs recommends are likely to be taken up either by the Biden administration or forced on the administration by Congress. For example, I struggle to see how the Biden administration can credibly argue "we are committed and willing to fight to a conclusive victory" after abandoning the war in Afghanistan. Certainly a Congress in which even Republicans adopt the framing of "endless wars" cannot sustain the fiction.

¹ Geoffrey Blainey, *Causes of War*, chapter 11, "A Day That Will Live in Infamy."

We are probably in for a decade or more of sacrificing on defense rather than closing the dangerous gap between our strategy—even our safety—and what the government commits in spending to attain it. The long shadow of mistakes in Iraq and Afghanistan is part of the problem, but the burgeoning definition of what constitutes national security is also contributory. Democrats wanted climate change to be integral to the Defense Department’s mission since the Clinton administration. President Barack Obama argued against nation building abroad when we need nation building at home. President Donald Trump disbelieved that the American-constructed international order was advantageous to our security. The pandemic raised new kinds of demands for protecting Americans from disease. And the Biden administration champions a self-congratulatory “foreign policy for the middle class,” with Secretary Lloyd Austin testifying that nondefense spending in the Department of Defense budget (for education, for example) significantly contributed to national security. Together, this has all given momentum to the argument that money spent on conventional and nuclear warfighting is no more important to preserving and advancing our national security than are domestic expenditures.

Let me underscore that this is not true. An economy as dynamic as ours can easily shoulder spending 6 percent of GDP to protect and advance its national security interests. We should reject the pretense that shaping the international order is of less importance to the country than domestic priorities—or that a country as vastly wealthy as ours must make draconian trade-offs between guns and butter. The international order the United States and its allies created from the ashes of World War II has made us and so many others safe and prosperous, and it is worth defending, even at its ragged edges. Pulling countries into freedom and good governance makes us safer, adding countries that align with our interests and values and reducing the risks of wars the United States might be dragged into.

However, if the chasm between national security requirements and spending will continue to expand because the United States will not pay for its security, the country has four options: constrict demand, “innovate our way out of this problem,” rebalance alliance responsibilities, or lose the next great-power war.

Mackenzie Eaglen and Michael Beckley’s work shows just how essential but unpalatable actually prioritizing obligations to prejudice containing China will be.² In some ways, this is the strongest case for

² Mackenzie Eaglen, “Defense strategy and priorities: Topline or transformation?” *Reagan Forum*, March 2020; Michael Beckley, *America Is Not Ready for a War with China: How to Get the Pentagon to Focus on the Real Threats*, *Foreign Affairs*, June 10, 2021.

serious nuclear modernization of the kind Heinrichs argues for. We are not buying the military force to cover all of our commitments and will not want to accept the consequences of overtly parsing those commitments. Therefore, we will need to rely on a “New New Look” strategy, with conventional forces sized at least implicitly to provide escalation credibility.

American society remains besotted with innovation. We want to drive SUVs that are clean-energy powered. We have a society and economy that often achieve conflicting objectives. Steve Jobs’ famous assessment of Apple captures the sentiment: “The cure for Apple is not cost-cutting. The cure for Apple is to innovate its way out of its current predicament.”³ That approach very often works. The United States is an engine of innovation due to immigration, deep and varied capital markets, Chapter 11 bankruptcy provisions, and a risk-tolerant culture. Nonetheless, betting on innovation is poor strategy, especially since it relies on adversaries granting the United States time to adapt.

Shifting more responsibility for allied security obligations to the allies most affected is overdue. The progression of the U.S. role for European defense is illustrative. In the late 1940s and 1950s, the United States committed to reverse any conquest; in the 1960s and 1970s, to defend at the forward edge of NATO territory; in the 1980s, to attack Soviet troops before they crossed into allied territory; in the 1990s, to take in new allies on the Russian periphery without stationing troops on their territory and expanding the kinds of attacks NATO addresses (e.g., cyber, gray zone). There are, however, limits to this approach. Most allies other than South Korea are a very long way from the ability to defend their territory, much less their interests, and are likelier to compromise their and our interests rather than shoulder greater obligations. A shift without catastrophic risk could not be carried out within about a decade.

Losing a war or balking at fighting are surefire ways to reduce obligations—just not risk. As we have seen in Iraq and are beginning to see in Afghanistan, wars do not end just because we stop fighting, and risks increase rather than decrease without U.S. involvement.

This leaves us in a dangerous place. If I were a U.S. enemy, I would rush to nuclear possession. The challenge is determining what works to prevent wars among nuclear powers or nuclear weapons acquisition by our adversaries.

³ Steve Jobs, quoted in Carmine Gallo, “The 7 Innovation Secrets of Steve Jobs,” *Forbes*, May 2, 2014.

Modernization is important but insufficient. Missile defenses are unlikely to ever surmount the problem of saturation. Nuclear stability among contesting great powers has historically resulted in proxy wars, pushing the responsibility for preserving our interests onto states least able to bear them.

The threat of preventative force has proven incredible in the cases of North Korea and Iran. Our enemies accurately read public hesitance across the Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations to attack either North Korean or Iranian nuclear weapons facilities.

Regime change is attractive, but we have little means to influence internal developments, especially on a politically salient time frame. Moreover, sanctions have produced a harder-line trend in Iran and possibly Russia, which may make the regimes more brittle. However, it is not clear whether that brings them closer to replacement or just produces even more dangerous governments.

Sanctions have succeeded in dramatically raising the costs but not preventing Iraq, Iran, or North Korea from pursuing their weapons programs. Moreover, our use of secondary sanctions is aggravating allies whose support we need and has begun to foster payment systems that skirt the dollar zone (e.g., the petroyuan in China and the payments mechanism in the EU payments mechanism), which creates a nascent but significant threat to dollar dominance.

Giving stature to adversaries, as President Trump did with Kim Jong-Un and both President Trump and President Joe Biden have done with Vladimir Putin, incentivizes bad behavior and does not appear to inhibit continued nuclear development. While North Korea has not tested a nuclear weapon since the summit, that may be due to where they are in the development cycle.

John Maurer argues that linking modernization and arms control in ways that channel development to the advantage of the United States can create the basis for bipartisan action.⁴ That may be sufficient for securing domestic support for modernization but probably not for getting arms limitation agreements. We have not been able to cajole China into any negotiations to limit their nuclear forces nor Russia on tactical weapons. Russia's comportment toward the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty suggests that not only will they remain in noncompliance with current agreements but that they want to be known as cheating. Maurer admits that "with Russia so far ahead of the United States in their nuclear modernization, there is little

⁴ John D. Maurer, "Restoring Nuclear Bipartisanship: Force Modernization and Arms Control," *War on the Rocks*, April 14, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/restoring-nuclear-bipartisanship-force-modernization-and-arms-control/>

chance of serious concessions in the short term.” U.S. withdrawals from treaties (beginning with the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002) make any adversary agreement more difficult and probably more costly.

To conclude, I agree with Heinrichs that modernization as she has outlined is important, but it cannot substitute for resolve that engenders credibility. Substantial increases in defense spending and deeper commitment to winning wars would go a long way toward restoring U.S. credibility. We are a long way from doing either of those things. Therefore, while pressing for modernization and better strategies, we also need to try and reduce the political value of adversaries acquiring nuclear weapons by reiterating they will make no difference in our resolve to honor our own security and our commitments to help defend allies. Then, we should brace ourselves to be tested.