

Defense One

In Defense of the Nuclear Triad

Peter Huessy October 18, 2013

Peter Huessy is president of GeoStrategic Analysis

Cato Institute researchers, in a new report, conclude we can kill our nuclear bombers and land based missiles and save \$20 billion a year. They assert bombers and missiles have a sharply diminishing role in that you cannot use such weapons against terrorist threats. They further claim the world is so safe that there is no adversary that would seek to destroy our nuclear deterrent, so reducing our force from 500 potential targets (bombers, missiles and submarines) to less than 10 (just the submarines) is without risk.

Though both Russia and China are modernizing their nuclear arsenals at a pace not seen even during the height of the Cold War, Cato's team says we should cut ours unilaterally.

Cato's claims are without foundation.

The cost of all nuclear forces today is \$23 billion a year, according to Deputy Defense Secretary Ash Carter. That includes 60 nuclear bombers, 12 Trident submarines and 450 intercontinental ballistic missiles, plus their associated facilities. It also includes related nuclear laboratories and communications capability.

Killing all ICBMs would save at most \$1 billion a year, if there were no costs to closing the three related Minuteman bases. But closing bases costs money, and those costs will eat 40 percent of the projected savings. Eliminating the new strategic bomber from a nuclear deterrent role saves at most 5 percent of the acquisition and R&D costs, or \$250 million a year. Eliminating the conventional capability of these bombers as well -- which Cato is unclear on whether it supports -- would eliminate a significant ability of the United States to strategically project a conventional force overseas. Substituting a carrier battle group capability or forward deployed tactical aircraft would cost tens of billions more each year. So, annual savings from cutting all ICBMs and the nuclear capability of our bombers would account for less than \$1 billion a year over the first ten years and slightly more over the next decade after that. Putting aside the paltry savings, is there merit to rethinking the Cold War-era U.S. nuclear deterrent strategy that Cato says is no longer relevant?

Much is made of the notion that nuclear weapons have no role against terrorists. But our conventional and police capability also did not deter 9/11. So, should we conclude such capabilities are not relevant to our security? And despite our soldier's heroic efforts, state-sponsored terrorism remains a top threat and is not easy to contain.

Cato misses the mark entirely when it comes to U.S. nuclear security doctrine. The central mission of our nuclear deterrent is to prevent the use of nuclear weapons by any of the great world powers. It is not to actually use them in war. And at least four of our adversaries have nuclear weapons. Fifteen times in the past half-decade, Russians have explicitly threatened the use of nuclear weapons against the U.S. and its allies.

The key issue is whether the U.S. and Russia might come eyeball to eyeball. In a crisis, we may then find our interests are being threatened. Russia may seek to keep the U.S. out of a theater of operations and have a free hand with which to operate. And thus it may contemplate the use of military force -- including nuclear weapons -- to achieve its objectives.

In that respect, our nuclear forces must have three characteristics. They must be credible to our adversaries. They must invite stability, meaning any adversary must conclude the use of such weapons cannot be undertaken successfully. And our nuclear deterrent must hold at risk an adversary's forces so they cannot remain in a sanctuary, freely able to threaten the US.

Practically, what does this mean? Credible means that the American nuclear force must be invulnerable to any future change in technology. Nothing can change the current ability of 450 separate ICBM silos and 50 launch control facilities to withstand an attack. No sane Russian planner would contemplate trying to simultaneously destroy all of these targets.

But a technology "surprise" could make the U.S. submarine force vulnerable. Adm. Jonathan Greenert, chief of naval operations and a former submariner, in the July 2012 issue of the naval magazine *Proceedings*, said that an ability to find ships at sea was a capability on the horizon that most worried him. Over time our submarines at sea could be attrited without our being able to determine who was taking them out. A too limited or small force is an invitation to the Russians and Chinese to "come get us".

Having all three legs of our triad means we have technology insurance -- if there are problems with any one of our legs, the other two can do the job while we repair the first. Bombers are recallable and subs cannot now be found. The ICBMs remain highly stabilizing in that they cannot be attacked with stealth. They require such a high number of attacking warheads to take them out that we leave an adversary with two choices: invite Armageddon or do nothing with nuclear weapons.

For nearly 70 years of the nuclear age, our adversaries have concluded just that -- do nothing with nuclear forces. Our 500 nuclear assets when presented to an adversary during a crisis quickly leads to their conclusion: "Not today, comrade". Reducing our deterrent to 12 submarines, which Cato recommends, puts our nuclear eggs in very few baskets -- eight submarines at sea and the rest at two naval bases.

In a world of 400 current conflicts involving militias, terror groups, state sponsors of terror, guerilla groups and tribal armies, in some 62 countries, it is remarkable that no central nuclear power has been drawn into using nuclear weapons. That is because our deterrent has worked perfectly for nearly 70 years.

Finally, the U.S. cannot do these things in a vacuum. Unilaterally wiping out some 1000 to 1200 or more American nuclear warheads would be a harsh jolt to the security of the international system. Already Japan, South Korea and our NATO allies have expressed concern they will be forced to adopt nuclear weapons in their respective national arsenals if we diminish our deterrent.

In short, Cato's radical and unwise plan saves very little money; creates huge instabilities; invites attack over time on our remaining deterrent the U.S. nuclear deterrent force; and threatens to divorce our allies in Europe and East Asia from our nuclear umbrella, spurring further nuclear proliferation. On top of which, the threats to our security from nascent nuclear weapons states -- North Korea and Iran -- are where real serious nuclear dangers lie, whether from the surreptitiously delivery of nuclear weapons in an electromagnetic pulse, or EMP, attack on our country or the detonation of an Iranian nuclear device somewhere in an American city. Those are serious threats that much be addressed as well. Cato diverts our attention to the wrong issue -- the U.S. nuclear deterrent.

The central role of our nuclear deterrent triad is to keep any crisis from escalating to a nuclear conflict. That requires a credible, stable and effective deterrent triad. Each successive administration from Eisenhower to the present, through 70 years of nuclear history, has so concluded.