

## **Does the U.S. Still Need a Nuclear Deterrent?**

By: Peter Huessy - November 15, 2013

Preble and Friedman argue in the New York Times that the current and planned U.S. nuclear force is sufficient; that it was designed to be pre-emptive, and that, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union had no aggressive designs against the U.S.

The second-strike capability of the planned U.S. Triad -- complementary systems on land, sea and air -- has served America well for nearly the past seven decades. If America's adversaries could eventually locate these submarines, they could over time, take out much, or all, of the U.S. sea-based force in surreptitious attacks under the surface of the ocean. How would the U.S. know why a number of submarines did not return to base? The annual research and acquisition costs (\$12 billion) of modernizing all three legs of the Triad would be the same as what Americans now spend on going to the movies every year.

In the nation's debate over maintaining our nuclear deterrent, two questions are often asked: why do we need these weapons and how many should we keep?

While there is no exact formula, one answer that makes no sense has once more been put forward by two researchers at the CATO Institute. Benjamin Friedman and Christopher Preble argue that the current and planned nuclear deterrent force can be cut significantly by eliminating all U.S. nuclear bombers and land-based missiles, and leaving only 12 submarines for the entire U.S. nuclear deterrent force.

Preble and Friedman further assert that since the U.S. deterrent is designed to strike first in a crisis rather than relying upon a on a secure, second-strike retaliatory capability, we should have in our arsenal fewer such weapons. They also argue that at the height of the Cold War, the Soviet Union had no aggressive designs against us so the Triad of forces -- three separate but complementary missile and bomber systems on land, at sea and in the air -- that was deployed by the United States during that period need not be continued because the U.S. was no longer deterring a real threat. They argue, in fact, that the force the U.S. deployed was determined largely by inter-service rivalry, rather than by the analysis of a genuine threat. Finally, they claim that the current and planned U.S. deterrent is not really relevant to today's threats, such as terrorism and cyber warfare, and thus can be safely and dramatically cut.

Let us look at the facts.

For nearly 70 years the U.S. has maintained a nuclear deterrent second to none. It has also extended its deterrent over some 31 allies in Europe and Asia. The result? The U.S. has maintained the peace between the nuclear super powers for nearly 70 years. Before, the great powers, each century, averaged between five and eight great wars, in which each year, on average, more than 1% of the world's population perished[1].

Another success of the nuclear deterrent posture the U.S. maintained throughout the Cold War and after was that other nations -- such as Germany, Taiwan, and Japan -- feeling safely protected by America's nuclear umbrella, did not feel compelled to build their own nuclear weapons.

The success of this deterrent was in large part due to the U.S. Triad. This United States nuclear force structure so complicated any plans for an attack from an adversary that stability was maintained by America's nuclear umbrella for nearly seven decades -- a perfect record.

This peace was not maintained by accident. As President Kennedy explained after the Cuban missile crisis, the ICBM was "my ace in the hole", even though the U.S. also deployed at the time two other legs of the Triad, including the Polaris sea-based submarine and the strategic B-52 nuclear bomber.

The revolutionarily designed ICBM not only kept the peace during the Cuban missile crisis; today, a half a century later, it continues to be a critical backbone of the U.S. strategic nuclear deterrent. The 450 Minuteman III missiles now deployed in five states are the most cost-effective and least expensive leg of the Triad, as well as immensely stabilizing: its huge target base cannot be taken out by a sudden attack.

Having the Triad -- land-based ICBMs, sea-based submarines and their missiles and the bombers on alert, ready to be airborne -- gave the United States, during the Cold War, unparalleled flexibility to deal with various crises. The land-based missiles gave the U.S. stability -- no one could strike those dispersed silos without prompting a strong retaliatory response from the United States. Not only could the submarines remain at sea for many months, but their current invulnerability from attack under the sea -- the Russians cannot find them -- continues to give the U.S. a secure, second-strike retaliatory capability.

The U.S. nuclear-armed bombers can be airborne quickly, safe from attack, and can be used to signal to an adversary that "we mean business." During the crisis on the Korean peninsula on March 28, 2013,, for example, U.S. B-2 bombers flew many hours to the Pacific and assured the Republic of Korea that we would not let Pyongyang get reckless.

Even more importantly, the three legs provide the U.S. with a hedge against technological surprise, and any resulting significant change to the military and political landscape by which, for example, U.S. submarines at sea might become vulnerable to attack. If the U.S. relied solely on submarines, as Preble and Friedman propose, an American president could be faced with a sudden adverse change in the balance between the U.S. and our enemies, with possible deadly consequences.

To bolster their argument that nuclear weapons are today of less deterrent value, Preble and Friedman make two erroneous claims: they assert that our allies' conventional forces alone are more than

sufficient to deter "today's rivals," including those with nuclear weapons. And they conclude that the only reason the U.S. built and deployed three legs of the Triad was because of inter-service rivalry, rather than from geostrategic necessity.

To be clear, they do concede that US nuclear deterrence is needed. But they apparently remain very much confused as to how to maintain a deterrent they acknowledge we should keep.

This deterrent may also have stopped the possible use of conventional firepower against central Europe by the Soviet Union, the Republic of Korea by North Korea [the DPRK] and Taiwan [Republic of China] by the People's Republic of China [PRC].

Even though the Cold War is over, American nuclear deterrence remains needed for all these contingencies, especially given the rapid and historically unprecedented current nuclear modernization efforts of Russia, China [PRC] and North Korea. All three nations are building new ballistic missiles, bombers, submarines and cruise missiles at a pace not seen even during the height of the Cold War.

Preble and Friedman may believe nuclear deterrence is less useful today but these American adversaries apparently do not.

The idea that a conventionally armed Taiwan, for example, is by itself powerful enough to deter aggression from a nuclear or conventionally-armed China, for example, is preposterous. A 2009 RAND study, for instance, found that by 2020, Taiwan will not be able to be defended -- even with the help of the United States -- from a Chinese air attack.

Furthermore, as detailed by Mark Schneider and me, Russia has repeatedly threatened the use -- even pre-emptively -- of nuclear weapons against the United States and its allies. Under Russian military doctrine, actually, the first use of nuclear weapons is deemed a "de-escalatory" strategy[2].

There remains, therefore, little doubt that nuclear dangers persist, despite the wishful thinking of these CATO analysts.

Their analysis also suffers from two deeply troubling flaws: The first is the assertion that the Triad of nuclear forces they now seek to destroy was put together more as a result of bureaucratic ambition than strategic necessity. The father of the Minuteman missile program, however was former USAF General Bernard Schriever, who said over 30 years ago that both sea-based and land-based missile technologies were developed in response to the Soviet-launched satellite, Sputnik, and the resulting American vulnerability to ICBM attack which the Soviet space launch demonstrated.

It was not, therefore, inter-service rivalry that led to the dual development of Minuteman and Polaris elements of the Triad, so much as absolute necessity. The nation's absolute survival was at stake. Conventional wisdom at the time, said Schriever, from both the USAF and Navy, was that such long-range missile technologies could not be developed. He said that he believed otherwise, and went on to be the major USAF factor behind the successful deployment of the first Minuteman missile, which as President Kennedy acknowledged, kept the peace during the Cuban missile crisis.

The CATO analysis also claims that U.S. deterrent relied upon a policy of "going first" in a crisis, to initiate the use of nuclear weapons.

Every commander of U.S. nuclear forces since General Larry Welch in 1985, up to the just-retired General Robert Kehler, Commander of US Strategic Command, have addressed this issue, and over several decades have repeatedly been unanimous in their view that U.S. deterrent policy has never be predicated on the first-use of nuclear weapons in a conflict.

During the height of the Cold War, the U.S. had the option of stopping Soviet aggression in Western Europe with a nuclear armed strike. Contrary to what Preble and Friedman assert, the Soviets did indeed have plans to invade Western Europe; they could be seen regularly exercising their forces in anticipation of just such an aggression. Preble and Friedman's assertion that the Soviets played only a defensive role Europe during the Cold War is simply incorrect. Moreover, U.S. conventional and nuclear retaliatory capability was designed to stop aggression, not initiate it, as can be seen in the history of U.S. nuclear deterrent policy by the National Institute of Public Policy and their new study from September 2013, "Minimum Deterrence: Examining the Evidence".

Current US policy has also repeatedly underscored the necessity of a secure second-strike retaliatory capability -- a policy explained in the administration's April 2010 Nuclear Posture Review.

To have such a strategy, a Triad of forces -- spread over land, sea and air -- is needed. To throw such a capability away and rely on only 12 submarines -- five at sea at any one time and the remainder at two bases in Georgia and Washington state -- as the CATO analysis proposes we do, is a high-risk gamble. Enemies of the U.S. are working hard to find American submarines at sea, as well as the U.S. surface fleet, according to the top military leader in the U.S. Navy.

If America's adversaries could eventually locate these submarines, they could, over time, take out much, or all, of the U.S. sea-based force in surreptitious attacks under the surface of the ocean. How would the U.S. know why a number of its submarines did not return to base? Thus assured of no retaliation, America's adversaries could then proceed to use force against the U.S. and its allies.

As the country learned from the proceedings at a meeting at Kings Bay, Georgia, at the nation's Trident base on November 7-8, co-hosted by the former President of the Navy League, Sheila McNeill, the Camden Partnership and this author, the United States now spends 6/10ths of 1% of the U.S. federal budget on its nuclear deterrent, compared to 4.4% in 1991, the year the Cold War ended. That is close to an 87% decline. The CATO analysis asserts there is a lot of spare funding that can be easily cut from U.S. nuclear deterrent forces, although all evidence points in the opposite direction.

Even fully modernized, the peak expenditure by the U.S. for its nuclear deterrent probably planned for 2025-6, would be 5/10ths of 1% of its federal budget on nuclear deterrence -- a percentage less than what is spent today, and lower than at any other time during the entire nuclear age[3].

The annual estimated acquisition and research costs (\$12 billion) to modernize all three legs of the U.S. Triad is the same as what Americans now spend on going to the movies every year[4].

For keeping the peace for nearly the past seven decades, the cost for the Triad is a bargain. For promising to keep the peace for the next seven decades, it is an offer one cannot refuse.

[1] Former White House Special Assistant to the President, Frank Miller, Address to the Henry Jackson Society, March 20, 2013, House of Commons, London.

[2] Mark Schneider, Remarks to the Kings Bay Triad Conference, November 8, 2013, Kings Bay Naval Base, Georgia.

[3] Lt Gen James M. Kowalski, Commander, USAF Global Strike Command, "The True Cost of Deterrence," March 2013.

[4] Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2010, US Department of Commerce, US GPO.