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Congressional Commission on the U.S. Strategic Posture

Congress plays an important role in U.S. nuclear weapons policy through funding and oversight of U.S. strategic military capabilities and related programs carried out by the Department of Defense (DOD) and the Department of Energy National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA). The Senate also considers providing advice and consent to ratification of arms control treaties negotiated by the executive branch.

Congress has periodically created high-level panels to examine relevant issues. Most recently, Section 1687 of the FY2022 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 117-81) established a 12-member bipartisan commission to “conduct a review of the [U.S.] strategic posture ... including a strategic threat assessment and a detailed review of nuclear weapons policy, strategy, and force structure and factors affecting the strategic stability of [U.S.] near-peer competitors”; assess “benefits and risks” of current U.S. nuclear policies and strategic posture; and “make recommendations to the President and Congress” on the U.S. “long-term strategic posture.”

Chaired by former NNSA principal deputy administrator Madelyn Creedon and former Senator Jon Kyl, the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States (Strategic Posture Commission or SPC) met between July 2022 and August 2023. The SPC’s October 2023 consensus report outlines the evolving nuclear postures from Russia and the People’s Republic of China (PRC or China) during the 2017-2035 time period and proposes over 80 recommendations for U.S. defense policy, nuclear and conventional weapons capabilities, the U.S. nuclear weapons complex, and nuclear arms control.

Findings and Recommendations

The SPC report argues that the “U.S.-led international order” is threatened by “Chinese and Russian authoritarian regimes.” This “high-stakes challenge,” the report states, requires “urgent action” by the executive branch and Congress to ensure “U.S. vital interests and international stability.”

The SPC report posits the emergence of a “two-nuclear-peer” environment. It describes the evolution of Russian and PRC nuclear weapons, as well as their conventional (nonnuclear), space and counterspace, cyber, electronic warfare, chemical, and biological capabilities. The report also describes regional threats from North Korea and Iran, the challenges of emerging technologies and proliferation, threats to the U.S. homeland from adversarial capabilities and terrorism, and the possibility of strategic surprise.

The SPC report argues that an effective U.S. strategic posture needs to account for the possibility of

“opportunistic or simultaneous” Russian and/or PRC military aggression in Europe and Asia. The report stresses the importance of U.S. relations with allies and potential allied “contributions” to the “broader strategic posture.”

Nuclear strategy and posture

The SPC report endorses a U.S. nuclear strategy “based on six fundamental tenets—assured second strike, flexible response, tailored deterrence, extended deterrence and assurance, calculated ambiguity in declaratory policy, [and] hedge against risk.” The report argues that U.S. nuclear employment planning should be “consistent with the Law of Armed Conflict,” which prohibits targeting of civilian populations, and notes that U.S. nuclear weapons should continue to target what U.S. adversaries “value most.”

Echoing multiple U.S. Nuclear Posture Reviews (NPRs), which is a periodic congressionally mandated executive branch document outlining U.S. nuclear strategy, the SPC report stresses “the traditional role of nuclear weapons,” which includes “deterrence of adversaries, assurance of [a]llies, achieving U.S. objectives should deterrence fail, and hedging against adverse events.” The report argues that the triad of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) with submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and strategic bombers, as well as modernized nuclear command and control (NC3), is the U.S. strategic posture “foundation for ... the foreseeable future.”

The SPC report calls for “fully and urgently executing” the current nuclear delivery system and warheads modernization program of record (POR) and highlights the growing risks to the program’s costs and schedule. The report also argues that the current POR is “necessary but not sufficient” because it does not account for evolving Russian and PRC nuclear arsenals. The report offers the following “modifications” to the POR:

- “Prepare to upload [mount on delivery vehicles] some or all” of the additional nuclear warheads the United States currently holds in reserve as a “hedge” against technological or geopolitical risks.
- Increase the planned procurement of the long-range standoff weapon (LRSO) nuclear-armed air-launched cruise missile, B-21 bombers and related tankers, and Columbia class SSBN with Trident SLBM.
- Plan to deploy the Sentinel ICBM with multiple nuclear warheads and “pursue the feasibility of fielding” some of these new ICBMs “in a road mobile configuration.”
- Initiate plans for continuous B-21 bomber patrols and “accelerate” the development of “advanced

countermeasures” to adversary integrated air and missile defenses (IAMD).

To mitigate the risks of modernization delays contributing to “militarily significant shortfalls in [U.S.] deployed nuclear capability,” the SPC report also recommends the United States “exercise upload of ICBM and SLBM warheads” on current systems, “develop plans and procedures” to reverse the conversion of SLBM launchers and B-52 bombers implemented in order to meet U.S.-Russian strategic nuclear arms control commitments, and ensure the service life extensions of NC3 and the Ohio class SSBN. The report does not offer cost estimates for any of its proposals.

The SPC report also advocates providing the President with “a range of militarily effective” flexible options to “deter or counter” Russian or PRC “limited nuclear use in theater,” as well as assure U.S. allies. The report argues for theater nuclear capabilities that are prompt and “forward deployed or deployable”; “survivable against preemptive attack without force generation day-to-day,” possessing “a range of explosive yield options, including low yield”; and able to penetrate adversary IAMD. In congressional testimony, Chairwoman Creedon stated that the SPC sought to avoid endorsing specific systems, though vice-chair Kyl has noted that the proposed nuclear sea-launched cruise missile would meet the requirements.

Conventional (nonnuclear) capabilities

The SPC report notes the need for a variety of conventional capabilities to “effectively deter and defeat” a “simultaneous” PRC and Russian act of “aggression in Asia and Europe using conventional forces.” These capabilities include long-range, nonnuclear precision strike systems, a “more resilient space architecture,” and an integrated IAMD to deter and defend against “coercive attacks” on U.S. critical infrastructure. The SPC report argues that “without these necessary enhancements to the conventional force, an increased [U.S.] reliance on the nuclear deterrent is likely.”

Nuclear weapons industrial base and complex

The SPC report argues for an expansion and “overhaul” of the DOD nuclear weapons defense industrial base and the NNSA nuclear weapons complex to meet current POR needs and address proposed POR modifications, as well as offer flexibility and serve as a hedge against technological and geopolitical risks. Among over 20 proposals, the SPC report recommends that Congress “forge and sustain bipartisan consensus and year-to-year funding stability” and support programs to support an adequate future workforce.

Risk reduction and arms control

The SPC report contends that arms control and nonproliferation can “enhance” the “effectiveness” of U.S. deterrence strategy and notes the “paramount importance” of U.S. leadership in efforts “to reduce strategic risks.” However, the report posits that arms control must follow the U.S. government’s development of a strategy and force requirements to address the “two-nuclear-peer threat.” Until a “change in the geopolitical environment,” the report adds, the U.S. government must pursue research on verification to

“limit all nuclear weapon types” and also pursue “nuclear risk reduction measures to increase predictability and reduce uncertainty.”

Reception of Recommendations

The SPC report received mixed reactions from nongovernmental analysts. Some observers have argued that the SPC provides a greater “recognition of the contemporary threat context” than the 2022 NPR. Others have asserted that the SPC understates adversaries’ nuclear capabilities and called on the United States to suspend compliance with New START to enable the upload of additional nuclear warheads.

Some critics have charged that the report does not prioritize among the potentially competing requirements for conventional and nuclear weapons capabilities. Others have argued that some SPC recommendations, like mobile ICBMs, are impractical and challenged the SPC’s finding that current U.S. theater nuclear options provide insufficient flexibility. Still others have criticized the SPC report for omitting potential changes to nuclear targeting and weapons employment guidance. Finally, critics have asserted that the report not only prioritizes increasing U.S. nuclear weapons capabilities over diplomacy, but also proposes actions that are inconsistent with U.S. international disarmament obligations.

Issues for Congress

The SPC presented its findings to the Senate and House Armed Services Committees in late 2023. In open hearings, Members of Congress were generally receptive to SPC report findings but sought clarification on recommendations. Some Members raised concerns about the possible costs of implementing all SPC recommendations; others noted challenges of prioritizing between investments in conventional and nuclear weapons. Still other Members emphasized human capital and other capacity challenges across the DOD industrial base and NNSA complex, particularly the availability of skilled-trade workers. Some Members also noted the SPC report’s recommendation for timely congressional funding.

Members of Congress and committees of jurisdiction covering DOD, NNSA, and the State Department could evaluate some of the SPC report’s recommendations during strategic posture, authorization, appropriation, and oversight hearings for FY2025 and beyond. SPC report proposals for potential consideration could include those related to nuclear and conventional military capabilities, and the defense industrial base and nuclear weapons complex, as well as recommendations concerning arms control and nonproliferation, such as the implementation of related international treaties and development of monitoring and verification technologies. Through intelligence community briefings, Congress could also continue to track the evolution of Russian and PRC nuclear and other capabilities and intentions to determine possible U.S. responses. Congress may also examine options related to risk reduction engagements with adversaries and initiatives to bolster deterrence with allies.

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