FP Roundtable Discussion with Technical Partner Booz Allen Hamilton

APRIL 16, 2018

Foreign Policy recently convened a discussion on nuclear modernization and the Trump administration, in partnership with Booz Allen Hamilton. Participants included high-level government and military officials and experts all grappling with the fact that modernization efforts are facing challenges, with a low margin for error.

INFRACLASSCHALLENGES
With a $1.2 trillion Congressional Budget Office estimate for nuclear modernization, government officials were focused not just on developing low-yield submarine-launched ballistic missiles and sea-launch cruise missiles, but also on necessary updates to the infrastructure supporting nuclear weapons. Discussion highlighted short-term challenges including debate about the value of developing sea-launch ballistic missiles, hurdles for development caused by bureaucracy on Capitol Hill, and a Congressional review timeline that makes procurement extremely difficult by distributing money halfway through the year. The short-term budget is enough to modernize existing programs, and a system is in place for stakeholders to raise concerns, but one official emphasized continuous application of band-aids on existing programs may end up costing even more than new development in the long-term.

UNDERSTANDING THE COST
Discussion highlighted a challenge in dissecting the triad’s more than one trillion-dollar budget, whose steep price tag may be inflated by essential defense items such as the B-21 bomber. Though one official emphasized that the triad makes up about 6 percent of DoD’s budget, another countered that the nuclear budget nonetheless competes with other defense programs for funding and should still justify itself. Participants disagreed about whether or not the triad even has consensus support, and one feared Congress may not be aware of the costly nuclear funding it will have to approve in the future.
MODERNIZATION VS. NEW START
While there was agreement that there has been a decline in nuclear development over recent decades, there was debate over whether new development or updates to existing programs should be the focus for the U.S. to be able to make strategic choices among different nuclear options. The view was raised that some technology is overdue for modernization, having waited for favorable modernization policy in the Obama administration that never came.

NPR SCHEDULING AND TESTING EXPECTATIONS
Participants agreed that meeting the NPR’s tight deadlines is going to be hard, and discussion turned to how to address those challenges. Though there had been talk of a “nuclear czar” to oversee programs and help keep them on track, that idea was never implemented, leaving open the question of whether greater oversight and operational changes may be needed to meet NPR deadlines or whether the existing system simply needs to do its job. One obstacle on the horizon may be a decline in expertise after two decades of insignificant nuclear development, but the U.S. isn’t starting from scratch; the components of the arsenal will see changes in capability, but even an enhanced cruise missile will remain a cruise missile. Officials agreed that testing newly developed technologies will be challenging given the limited timeframe, and years are needed to test and certify advanced software, integrate it with hardware, and isolate new tech from external vulnerabilities.

LOW-YIELD SUBMARINE- LAUNCHED BALLISTIC MISSILES
Debate also arose over the development of low-yield submarine-launched ballistic missiles (LYBMs). One participant suggested they are a necessary stopgap until future technologies are operational, while others feared they would add an immediate risk of nuclear escalation. It was argued that the strategic consideration should be whether having LYBMs makes the Russians believe our nuclear arsenal is stronger, rather than whether or not LYBMs are actually necessary. It was noted that LYBMs are simply a new delivery method within an existing strategy of tailored small, medium, or large nuclear strikes, that Russia’s buildup of its own arsenal suggests it is unintimidated by our firepower, and that Baltic countries are supportive. However, it was countered that the prevailing attitude to LYBMs among Baltic countries could change with political power shifts in those countries and that LYBMs might make nuclear escalation more difficult to control, with Russia not even recognizing what sort of warhead was headed its way.

PUTTING NUCLEAR CAPABILITIES IN CONTEXT
Discussion grew blunt over whether the NPR puts the cart before the horse, failing to answer even basic questions about the need for nuclear weapons, why the U.S. has a triad, and the very purpose of the nuclear arsenal. Participants disagreed over whether the NPR had justified nuclear force or whether it offers nuclear solutions without explaining why they would be preferable to alternative means. One suggestion put forth was a broader Deterrent Posture Review that would consider nuclear options in context with conventional alternatives, since it was argued that a Nuclear Posture Review inherently privileges a nuclear course of action. Troops in the Baltic were offered as one conventional alternative to nuclear in combating Russia, though a defense official noted those soldiers might carry a comparatively high cost.
KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Challenges lie ahead in developing submarine-launched ballistic missile and sea-launched cruise missile systems, which will require not just more technologically capable weapons but also modernization of the supportive nuclear infrastructure.
- The Nuclear Posture Review’s deadlines are tight and the Congressional Review timeline erases the margin for procurement by distributing money halfway through the year.
- The jury is still out within the nuclear policy community over whether new development is essential to ensure adequate choice among nuclear technologies or extending the life of existing programs is a viable option.
- Testing and certifying new weapons will take years, and high-budget programs may need also to focus on maintaining political support.
- Development of low-yield submarine-launched ballistic missiles sparks additional debate -- though making them is not a heavy lift technologically, some experts suggest their value as a stopgap until future nuclear development may be limited by the additional risk for escalation they introduce.
- There is even more fundamental disagreement over the value of the Nuclear Posture Review itself, which critics argue may be too nuclear, ignoring conventional alternatives to nuclear force and failing to justify why nuclear weapons are necessary.

ROUNDTABLE ATTENDEES WERE FROM THE FOLLOWING ORGANIZATIONS

Atlantic Council
Booz Allen Hamilton
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Center for Strategic and International Studies
Federation of American Scientists
Foreign Policy
Heritage Foundation
Hudson Institute
United States Department of Defense
United States Department of Energy
United States Navy
U.S. Naval War College