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COMMITTEE

STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE THE

SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON STRATEGIC FORCES

APRIL 20, 2026

Chair Fischer, Ranking Member King, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify to you again on our Nation's nuclear deterrent.

The 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS) and 2026 National Defense Strategy (NDS) lay out a stark and sobering reality: for the first time in its history, the United States will face the challenge of deterring two nuclear peers, China and Russia, simultaneously; as well as regional powers with growing capabilities. This unprecedented challenge demands a fundamental reexamination of our strategic thinking and a sustained national commitment to the cornerstone of our security: a robust and modern nuclear deterrent capable of addressing nuclear and non-nuclear strategic threats to our Nation.

To do this, we must continue to field a strong, secure, and effective nuclear arsenal underpinned by a supercharged defense industrial base and nuclear security enterprise. The Department and the Nuclear Weapons Council (NWC) will continue to prioritize nuclear modernization and sustainment of the three legs of our nuclear triad—ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), and strategic bombers—as well as supplemental capabilities and the sustainment and modernization of our nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3) weapon system. Additionally, the Department supports the efforts of the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (DOE/NNSA) to recapitalize, sustain, and operate the nuclear security enterprise.

As the first Assistant Secretary of War for Nuclear Deterrence, Chemical, and Biological Defense Policy and Programs and as the Staff Director of the NWC, I am personally responsible for ensuring senior leaders are fully scoped on the issues associated with the nuclear deterrent. You have my commitment that I will continue to lean forward on aligning resources and policy to enable the United States to maintain the world's most robust, credible, and modern nuclear deterrent.

As the 2026 National Defense Authorization Act made clear, the NWC serves as the primary mechanism for integrating, streamlining, and ensuring unity of purpose and direction for all nuclear deterrence-related activities across the Department of War and the Department of Energy. The NWC takes this charge very seriously. We understand that the threats we face demand the full and urgent execution of our nuclear modernization program of record, including vital NC3 systems. We also recognize we need to adapt our nuclear forces with focused

attention on regional deterrence challenges and escalation management. Finally, we cannot lose sight of sustaining our legacy systems until their modernized replacements come online.

The NSS underscores the idea of peace through strength. When President Trump took office in January 2025, the United States faced one of the most dangerous security environments in our Nation's history. China is engaged in a rapid and opaque nuclear weapons expansion, coupled with a massive investment in theater-range, dual-capable delivery systems, including forces designed for operations in the Western Pacific as well as those capable of reaching targets much farther away. The risks of China's expansion are clear: a force of this size and sophistication could provide China with a spectrum of nuclear options to try to deter U.S. intervention and coerce a resolution to a conflict on China's terms.

Meanwhile, Russia remains a formidable nuclear power with the world's largest arsenal and a doctrine that explicitly integrates nuclear weapons for regional coercion. Its ongoing modernization and development of novel systems underscores its continued reliance on nuclear forces to offset conventional weaknesses. Additionally, while the primary responsibility for the conventional defense of Europe must rest with our wealthy and capable European allies, U.S. nuclear extended deterrence provides a critical backstop. Our strategy, however, can no longer be sequential or focused on a single theater. It must be global, integrated, and capable of deterring both peers simultaneously, preventing one from taking advantage of a crisis involving the other.

Additionally, North Korea's nuclear forces are increasingly capable of targeting the U.S. Homeland, and its missile forces can strike South Korea and Japan with nuclear or conventional warheads. These forces are growing in size and sophistication, and they present a clear and present danger of nuclear attack on the American Homeland.

We will modernize and adapt our nuclear forces accordingly with focused attention on deterrence and escalation management amidst the changing global nuclear landscape. The United States will never be left vulnerable to nuclear blackmail. Therefore, the modernization and adaptation of our nuclear deterrent and supporting enterprise is an urgent and non-negotiable imperative. To this end, we will continue to invest in the long-overdue replacement of Cold War systems that are operating decades beyond their intended service lives, as well as in critical infrastructure and nuclear warhead modernization programs – and accelerate these programs

whenever possible. As Secretary Hegseth said recently, “nothing else matters if we don’t get this right.” As Staff Director of the NWC, I am focused on ensuring that the U.S. nuclear deterrent remains robust, including during the heightened risk period of transition from legacy to modern forces, which coincides with a period of amplified geopolitical risk. In my role as the civilian advisor to the Secretary on nuclear forces portfolio management, I will explore every avenue to prevent further delays to our nuclear modernization and mitigate them if they do occur.

- Theater nuclear options: The NWC is committed to overseeing the fielding of flexible nuclear forces that enhance regional deterrence. As Secretary Hegseth stated: “We will develop additional options to support deterrence and escalation management.” Accordingly, the NWC is focused on overseeing the development of additional theater nuclear options. We are proceeding with the nuclear-armed, sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) program to enhance our regional deterrence options and will deliver a limited initial operating capability in the early 2030s. SLCM-N will complement our existing capabilities and provide the President a persistent, survivable, regional, nuclear presence without dependence on allied host nations. We will continue to field the F-35A dual-capable fighter aircraft which can be equipped with the B61-12 bomb. We continue to work with our NATO allies to examine ways to strengthen the credibility and effectiveness of NATO’s nuclear deterrence mission. We will also retain the W76-2 low-yield submarine launched ballistic missile warhead.
- Ground-based: Our ICBMs deter aggression day-to-day, in crisis, and in conflict as the most responsive leg of the nuclear triad. The land-based leg of the triad presents potential adversaries with an impossibly high bar for an effective comprehensive attack on U.S. nuclear forces. The ICBM is highly survivable. The Department of War will continue to sustain the Minuteman III ICBM system to maintain a credible deterrent during Sentinel transition. We will also continue to work closely with DOE/NNSA to develop and field the W87-1 warhead / Mk21A reentry vehicle and ensure program alignment.
- Sea-based: The Department continues to develop the COLUMBIA-class-nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN), which will replace the OHIO-class submarine fleet as the most survivable leg of the nuclear triad. COLUMBIA will safeguard the effectiveness and availability of the sea-leg through the 2080s. We are also

taking steps to ensure the availability of the current generation of OHIOs, so they can operate longer during the transition to COLUMBIA. We are committed to fielding the W93 warhead and the Mk7 reentry body as well as the Trident II (D5) Life Extension 2, which are critical to maintaining the Trident system through the 2080s.

- Air-delivered: The Long-Range Standoff cruise missile (LRSO) will contribute to the continued credibility of the air-leg of the triad, which provides the President flexible options to deter and respond. The LRSO, coupled with upgraded B-52 and new B-21 bombers, will ensure the continued credibility and effectiveness of the air-leg of the Triad for the foreseeable future. Our bomber forces will eventually be capable of delivering the B61-13, providing the President with additional options against certain harder and large-area military targets.
- NC3: The Department is modernizing NC3 so that the President can continue to credibly and effectively command and control U.S. nuclear forces under all conditions and in a world of multiple major nuclear adversaries. NC3 modernization is focused on retaining survivability, endurance, and redundancy across all mission essential functions. The Department's NC3 modernization programs include, among other initiatives, the development augmentation of the Evolved Strategic Satellite (ESS) communication system, which will eventually replace the Advanced Extremely High Frequency (AEHF) communications system/constellation; recapitalization of the E-4B National Airborne Operations Center aircraft under the Survivable Airborne Operations Center (SAOC) program; and the recapitalization of the E-6B Mercury Airborne Command Post (ABNCP) and Take Charge and Move Out (TACAMO) aircraft under the United States Air Force LOOKING GLASS-Next program and the United State Navy's E-130J TACAMO program.

The NWC is prepared to make recommendations to adjust our nuclear forces to strengthen deterrence while reducing risks to the modernization program, our industrial base, and nuclear security enterprise. The establishment of Direct Report Portfolio Managers within the Department of War signals the high priority of our modernization efforts, and these managers are in direct coordination and collaboration with the NWC.

A critical component of this modernization is the health of our defense industrial base and nuclear security enterprise. We must return to being the world's premier arsenal, one that can produce at scale, rapidly, and at the highest levels of quality. With Department of War and Department of Energy leadership, we are making significant progress in realizing the enterprise we need to meet the demands of the mission. The Department will continue its close collaboration with DOE/NNSA through the NWC to realize our collective mission, including reviewing and reforming requirements and processes, and making recommendations for adjustments when necessary. We will test nuclear weapons on an equal basis as others. The NWC also understands the importance of undertaking the research and development that force modernization requires to ensure we are prepared to meet future threats.

A key aspect of this is strengthening regional deterrence. The shift from a one-peer to a two-peer calculus requires an adaptable and resilient nuclear force sufficient to inflict unacceptable costs on both adversaries under any contingency, ensuring neither believes they can exploit a crisis elsewhere for their own gain. Both Russia and China have invested in large stockpiles of low-yield, theater nuclear weapons, which were not accounted for under the now expired New START Treaty. Potential adversaries must understand that nuclear first-use, however limited, will fail to achieve their objectives, fundamentally alter the nature of a conflict, and trigger incalculable and intolerable costs. Our strategy will ensure that adversaries understand that any use of nuclear weapons, however limited, is unacceptable. To that end, a mix of capabilities is needed to provide the President with credible, limited options to counter limited nuclear use and correct possible adversary misperceptions. This includes the acceleration and deployment of SLCM-N. The NWC is actively analyzing potential additional options and will be prepared to make recommended adjustments to our nuclear forces to strengthen regional deterrence.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, we are at a critical juncture. It is prudent for the United States and its allies to be prepared for the possibility that one or more potential adversaries might act together in a coordinated or opportunistic fashion across multiple theaters. We cannot meet this challenge with hesitation or half-measures. The 2026 NDS provides clear direction, recognizing the unprecedented threat of two nuclear-peer competitors and laying out a comprehensive plan for strengthened deterrence. To execute this strategy, we must continue to invest in the modernization of the nuclear triad, in NC3, and in theater nuclear forces, like the

SLCM-N. The cost of these investments is significant, but the cost of failing to make them—a loss of deterrence and a world where our adversaries believe they can engage in nuclear blackmail or limited nuclear war without consequence—is infinitely greater. A strong, modern, and credible nuclear deterrent is the ultimate insurance policy that ensures peace through strength. We owe it to our service members and to future generations to ensure the nuclear component of our arsenal of freedom remains ready, reliable, and resolute.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.