



**Statement before the Senate Armed Services
Subcommittee on Strategic Forces**

“Regional Nuclear Deterrence”

A Testimony by:

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Chairman King, Ranking Member Fischer, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to participate in today's hearing. It's an honor to be here. I commend the Subcommittee for focusing on this urgent, important, and evolving challenge.

My comments today are my own and should not be attributed to the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

My colleagues have masterfully addressed the broader political-military aspects of the worsening regional nuclear deterrence problem set we face. I will focus instead on the nature of regional nuclear deterrence dynamics and their impact on US deterrence strategy and requirements. I believe improving our ability to deter and counter adversary limited nuclear use in regional conflicts is the most important challenge we face in US nuclear strategy. Let me explain why.

It is broadly agreed the most likely path to nuclear deterrence failure is escalation in the context of a major conventional conflict between nuclear-armed adversaries. It is also broadly agreed the most likely path to a large-scale homeland nuclear exchange between major powers is escalation from limited nuclear use in the context of a large-scale conventional conflict.

That is where broad consensus ends on how deterrence of limited nuclear use and large-scale escalation are related.

Some analysts and practitioners make two erroneous and dangerous assumptions regarding nuclear deterrence and nuclear escalation. First, they believe it is highly unlikely that nuclear deterrence will fail at any level, and under any circumstances, leading them to conclude that our planned capabilities are more than sufficient to deter limited use under any circumstances. Second, they also believe that if nuclear weapons are used at all, in any number or yield, the war will escalate rapidly out of control to a catastrophic large scale exchange almost automatically.

These assumptions lead them to conclude that all that is needed to deter limited nuclear use is the latent potential for a large-scale US nuclear response, and that our current and planned capabilities are thus more than sufficient to deter limited use under any circumstances.

I think such a strategy is dangerously unsuited for credibly extending nuclear deterrence to US allies because I disagree with both of these assumptions, and so do Russian, and possibly Chinese, strategists.

As we consider how to deter limited nuclear first use we must first ask ourselves this question:

Do we want to base our strategy to deter limited nuclear use on the presupposition that any limited nuclear use will result in uncontrolled escalation, and therefore such limited use won't happen if we rely on that threat? That is not a prophecy we want to become self-fulfilling if deterrence does fail in a limited way. But basing our strategy and force posture on these flawed assumptions risks making it just that.

In my view, central strategic deterrence of large scale homeland exchanges between nuclear-armed great powers is very stable, making limited use unlikely to escalate out of control rapidly. Note, I

did not say that limited nuclear escalation cannot or will not escalate out of control. Of course it can, and our deterrence strategy should continue to leverage that risk without relying solely on it.

But the decision to initiate a large-scale nuclear strike on the homeland of a nuclear-armed great power is clearly suicidal as long as both sides retain large-scale survivable second strike capabilities. Thus, leaders are likely to tolerate limited nuclear exchanges without conducting such a large-scale strike on the adversary's homeland. This is not because they want to wage limited nuclear war, but because the alternatives can be summarized as surrender or suicide.

Deterrence is about what an adversary thinks, and how he calculates. There is no area of national security affairs in which the dictum "the adversary gets a vote" is more true. In a deterrence relationship, the adversary doesn't just have "a" vote, they have the only vote. It is our job to decisively influence how they cast it.

Deterring Russian limited use is the most immediate and challenging regional nuclear deterrence problem, so I will use the Russia problem to illustrate what we are up against. Putin's Russia cast their vote in favor of the use of large-scale military force against Ukraine, demonstrating both a high propensity to take risk, and to miscalculate in the process of doing so. That combination of risk-taking and miscalculation is extremely troubling, especially when paired with Russia's repeated brandishing of nuclear threats.

Perhaps this dangerous propensity to take risk and miscalculate will be alleviated by Putin's eventual departure. But we can't count on that, and we don't know when that will be in any case. The Russian leadership's historical propensity to profoundly and repeatedly underestimate NATO's resolve and political unity under threat long preceded Putin, and will likely survive him, even if Russia's risk-taking propensity lessens somewhat in a post-Putin era.

The dismal performance of Russian conventional forces in Ukraine is likely to lead them to further increase their reliance on nuclear weapons. This means that in a future war with NATO they could perceive the need to use nuclear weapons earlier in the conflict. If true, this means that once Russia reconstitutes its conventional forces, deterring Russian limited nuclear use will become even more important to deterring Russian conventional aggression than before Ukraine.

To formulate an effective regional nuclear deterrence strategy in Europe we must closely examine Russia's nuclear strategy and doctrine. Both are ultimately rooted in the assumption that limited nuclear use in theater is unlikely to escalate to a large scale homeland exchange, though I do not believe the Russians are certain they can avoid uncontrolled escalation. Based on the scope and content of China's ongoing nuclear buildup, their strategy and doctrine may be evolving based on this perception as well.

Russian conventional and nuclear strategy and doctrine are fully integrated. Their nuclear forces' role is to both deter large scale nuclear attacks on the Russian homeland and compensate for NATO conventional superiority through the limited use of nuclear weapons in theater through coercion if possible, but through defeat if necessary.

The coercive escalation option is to initiate limited first use of nuclear weapons to compel termination of an ongoing conventional war on terms acceptable to Russia.

The defeat escalation option is to conduct large-scale theater nuclear operations against NATO's conventional forces if the Russian leadership assesses they pose a threat to "the very existence of the Russian state". This option is what drives Russia's force requirement for thousands of theater nuclear weapons embedded throughout their conventional forces.

What, then, is required to deter Russian limited nuclear escalation in theater given their strategy and doctrine, their demonstrated propensity to take the risk of invading their neighbors, and their track record of miscalculating regarding NATO's will and cohesion?

Given that Russian strategy is based on the belief that mutual strategic deterrence of large-scale homeland strikes is very robust, deterrence of limited nuclear use requires the perceived ability of the US and our NATO allies to persevere in the face of Russian limited escalation without being politically coerced into accepting war termination on Russia's terms, and without being decisively militarily disadvantaged. That requires a set of US nuclear capabilities that are militarily relevant in such a conflict. Russian theater nuclear capabilities are designed to be just that: militarily relevant in a limited nuclear war. The evolution of Chinese theater nuclear capabilities seems to indicate they understand this as well.

In my view the core requirement for deterring Russian limited nuclear escalation in a war with NATO is a Flexible Response strategy that credibly convinces the Russian leadership that limited nuclear escalation does not provide effective insurance against miscalculating about NATO's resolve and cohesion, will not result in war termination on their terms, and does indeed run the risk of uncontrolled escalation because the United States and our Allies are visibly prepared for what Schelling called a "competition in risk-taking" to defend our vital interests.

Such a strategy must be enabled by US and Allied nuclear and conventional forces that are capable of three key things:

1. Providing a robust range of response options to restore deterrence by convincing Russian leadership they have miscalculated in a dire way, that further use of nuclear weapons will not achieve their objectives, and that they will incur costs that far exceed any benefits they can achieve.
2. Countering the military impact of Russian theater nuclear use.
3. Continuing to operate effectively to achieve US and Allied objectives in a limited nuclear use environment.

In sum, our strategy and capabilities must convince them with high confidence that nuclear escalation is always their worst option. And while there remains uncertainty about whether China's nuclear strategy and doctrine are shifting to match the comprehensive nuclear buildup they are undertaking, we are likely to need to be able to do the same in the Asia-Pacific theater.

Now for the nuclear capabilities bottom line: to meet the requirements for deterring limited nuclear use with high confidence we need a range of forward deployed, survivable theater nuclear

capabilities that can reliably penetrate adversary theater air and missile defenses with a range of explosive yields and on operationally relevant delivery timelines. Based on these attributes, I do not believe that planned US nuclear capabilities are sufficient for the future threat environment we face.

Strategic nuclear forces alone are insufficiently flexible and timely to convince a major power adversary that we are fully prepared to counter limited nuclear first use with militarily effective nuclear responses of our own. Given Russian strategy, doctrine, and capabilities, theater nuclear capabilities are required.

Completing the modernization of our dual capable fighter aircraft capabilities is necessary, but not sufficient. Our planned theater nuclear forces are too small, insufficiently survivable, and insufficiently militarily relevant. But they could be improved to be a much more credible deterrent to limited nuclear use without having to match Russia and China weapon for weapon.

We should supplement dual capable fighter modernization with at least one more survivable, forward deployed, selectable yield delivery system with a higher probability to penetrate advanced defenses. There are several candidates that could meet this requirement, but I assess that SLCM-N deployed on attack submarines is the best solution for the following reasons:

It is highly survivable day-to-day, and thus not subject to preemptive strike.

It provides theater nuclear deterrent presence, whether it is actually present or not.

It provides an effective ability to penetrate, in part due to in some instances being capable of launch from inside the outer edges of an adversary's integrated air defenses.

It provides operationally significant promptness when compared to bomber-delivered ALCMs.

It exploits the attack submarine fleet's large pre-existing launcher infrastructure, reducing cost.

It has no ballistic missile launch signature that could be misinterpreted by an adversary.

It could leverage the LRSO program, reducing the impact on our nuclear weapons enterprise.

No other system I am aware of checks all those boxes.

In conclusion, regional nuclear deterrence is not the place the US should choose to take risk, and not only because theater deterrence failure is the most likely path to large scale nuclear war that poses an existential threat to the United States, though that is a pretty good reason in and of itself. An inability to confidently deter or counter limited theater nuclear use will undermine the credibility of US capability and willingness to decisively project power against a nuclear-armed adversary in defense of US and Allied vital interests. Our Allies have not forgotten this. Neither should we.