

‘Nothing Endangers the Planet More Than Nuclear Weapons’

Representative Adam Smith, the prospective chairman of the U.S. House Armed Services Committee, discusses his policy priorities, the limits of military spending, and the peril of a new nuclear arms race.

With the shift in control of the U.S. House of Representatives next month following the November midterm elections, Representative Adam Smith (D-Wash.) is in line to become chairman of the Armed Services Committee. In that powerful post, he will give Democrats renewed influence over key defense-related developments and bring renewed scrutiny of key programs, including nuclear weapons procurement and policies.

In an interview with *Arms Control Today*, Smith said he plans to question the need and affordability of elements of the Trump administration’s approach toward nuclear weapons and press for greater diplomatic engagement to avert an accelerating arms race with Russia and China. He opposes U.S. plans for two new, low-yield nuclear capabilities, envisioned as a counter to Russia, that he said will do little to enhance nuclear deterrence and make the country safer. A better course, he says, includes undertaking renewed efforts with Russia to maintain the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and

to extend the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) beyond its February 2021 expiration date. This transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

What are the top two or three steps you think should be taken to enhance oversight of the administration’s approach toward nuclear weapons?

It is really a matter of taking another look at the Nuclear Posture Review [NPR]. What we want to do is to drill down, firstly, on the costs. Exactly what is this going to cost us, and how does that

balance out against our other national security needs, and then, what’s the strategy behind this? Why do we need so many nuclear weapons? Ultimately, what I want to do is see a shift to a deterrence strategy. I think the oversight will come to having an explanation for why do you think we need this many delivery platforms? Why do we need the triad? Why do we need over 4,000 nuclear weapons? I think that is the discussion that most members of Congress have not been privy to, and having seen it myself, I don’t buy the explanations, and I don’t think it is the correct course.

A key element of the Trump administration’s NPR report was the call to develop two new, low-yield nuclear capabilities for the sea-based leg of the triad—in the near term, a low-yield submarine-launched ballistic missile warhead option and, in the longer term, a new sea-launched cruise missile. Would these enhance deterrence, or could they lower the nuclear threshold and increase the risk of miscalculation?

I think it lowers the nuclear threshold and increases the risk of miscalculation. I think it increases the risk that people will see nuclear weapons as simply another weapon in their arsenal of conflict, and when you start talking about low-yield



Rep. Adam Smith (D-Wash.), ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee, questions witnesses during a defense budget hearing April 12. Smith is in line to become committee chairman in January, when control of the House of Representatives flips to the Democrats. (Photo: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

nuclear weapons, you contemplate uses other than for deterrence.

Now, the argument that the administration will make is, well, if Russia has low-yield nuclear weapons, we have to counterbalance it. My view is that we have to say that there is no such thing as an acceptable use of a nuclear weapon and that we will counter it with whatever nuclear weapons we have. When you go the low-yield route, you increase the number of weapons, you increase the risk for people thinking that they can use them in a tactical way. They do not enhance our ability to deter our adversaries, so I'm opposed to low-yield nuclear weapons. I think that speeds up an arms race that is very, very dangerous.

Do you know whether the U.S. intelligence community has concluded, as the NPR report claims, that Russia or China might believe the United States would be self-deterred from using current weapons in response to, say, limited Russian or Chinese nuclear use?

It's just speculation. I have not seen any in-depth study on that question. This is why the other big part, of course, is

to maintain an open dialogue with our fellow nuclear powers China and Russia. It is our responsibility as global powers to make sure that nuclear weapons are never used, and we need to have consistent dialogue on how to avoid that.

Whatever other differences we might have, I want to see a consistent dialogue on nuclear weapons. It is something that President Ronald Reagan understood. He was obviously for peace through strength. He wanted to build up a strong military, but he was also instrumental in negotiating arms reduction treaties where nuclear weapons were concerned, precisely because he understood the risk that nuclear weapons pose.

The Congressional Budget Office projected last year that the Obama administration's plans to sustain and upgrade the nuclear arsenal would cost \$1.2 trillion without adjusting for inflation. The Trump administration's proposals would add to the cost. Do you believe that is realistic and affordable?

I do not. I think that is the biggest challenge that we face within our national security budget. Every single branch says

it doesn't have enough, that we need more, and yet we don't have the money to do that. We need to reconfigure a national security strategy that would better reflect both our resources and our true national security needs.

Nuclear weapons are a great example of where we could save money and still maintain our national security interests. A deterrent strategy is what's going to help us the most, and we could do that for a heck of a lot less money than is currently being spent. We could meet our needs from a national security standpoint with a lot fewer nuclear weapons. The path we're going down now is certainly unsustainable from a fiscal standpoint, and it doesn't make us safer.

You noted we can get the deterrence we need with fewer nuclear weapons. What might be the options to maintain the nuclear arsenal that would be more cost effective while still providing for a strong deterrent?

Build fewer of them. We can calculate what we need the weapons for in order to deter our adversaries, and there's a compelling argument to be made that a submarine-based nuclear weapons

approach alone gives us an adequate deterrent. But we can certainly simply build fewer weapons to meet our national security needs. It's not really that complicated.

I know you're familiar with the plan to develop a new fleet of nuclear-armed, air-launched cruise missiles, known as the long-range standoff [LRSO] system, that the Air Force says is needed to ensure that the air leg of the nuclear triad can continue to penetrate the most advanced air defenses well into the future. Critics argue that retaining such cruise missiles is redundant, given current plans to build the stealth B-21 long-range bomber and upgraded nuclear B61 gravity bomb. Do air-launched cruise missiles bring a unique contribution to the U.S. nuclear deterrent?

I don't think they're worth the money in terms of what they get us, and I would agree with the arguments that our new air-launch plans more than cover the need and, heck, our submarines cover the need as well, in terms of being able to reach these targets. So, no, I don't see the need for the LRSO.

Earlier this year, you said that the United States does not need as many intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) as the Air Force plans to build. The service is planning to replace the existing Minuteman III ICBM system of about 400 deployed missiles with missiles that are part of the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent system. The program is very early in its development, and there is significant uncertainty about the cost, which is estimated at between \$85 billion and \$150 billion, counting inflation. What options should be considered to reduce the cost?

Build fewer of them. Again, this isn't terribly complicated. You look at the total number of nuclear warheads that we have and how many we truly need for our national security. In the studies I've

seen, we are planning on winding up with 4,000 warheads by the end of this nuclear modernization when, in fact, 1,000 would be more than sufficient. You could also make an argument that we do not even need the ICBM component of the triad in order to meet our needs for deterrence with nuclear weapons. But certainly, it's a very compelling argument that we could get by building fewer of them.

So, do you think the Pentagon should more seriously consider further extending the life of a smaller number of existing Minuteman III ICBMs as a cheaper, near-term alternative to the plan for an entirely new ICBM system?

That I would have to examine to figure out the viability of extending the life of our existing nuclear weapons. If that's possible as a cheaper alternative, I think it's certainly something we should consider, but I would have to hear more arguments about that. But no matter how you get there, if you build fewer of them, you save more money.

The Trump administration's NPR expands the circumstances under which the United States would consider the first use of nuclear weapons, including in response to non-nuclear attacks on critical infrastructure or on nuclear command, control, and communications and early-warning capabilities. You introduced legislation last year that would make it U.S. policy not to use nuclear weapons first. Why adopt a no-first-use policy?

In order to reduce the risk of us stumbling into a nuclear war. There are a lot of threats, there are a lot of weapons systems out there. Nothing endangers the planet more than nuclear weapons. If you introduce them, you cannot predict what your adversaries are going to counter with, and an all-out nuclear war is the likely result, with the complete destruction of the planet.

Look, war in general causes an enormous amount of suffering, but nuclear war is the greatest danger to the future of the planet. Introducing nuclear weapons first is an unacceptable escalation

of any conflict that we could possibly envision. We have conventional means of responding, and we have a variety of different means of preventing getting into that war in the first place. I don't think it makes sense to have first use of nuclear weapons on the table as an option.

What would you say to critics who believe that a no-first-use policy could undermine deterrence and unsettle our allies?

I think our allies are more unsettled by the possibility that we might introduce nuclear weapons into a conflict, as they are a lot closer to the nuclear powers in the world than we are. I think our allies would like to see us have a no-first-use policy, and, look, there are a whole lot of other things we need to do to deter our adversaries. I just don't think that nuclear weapons should be a part of that equation.

President Donald Trump announced his plan to have the United States withdraw from the INF Treaty. You have strongly criticized that and expressed concern about not being briefed or consulted. Do you think that the United States and Russia have exhausted all diplomatic options to resolve the compliance dispute?

I do not, and my biggest concern is we have not included our NATO allies in this discussion. I think we should pursue diplomatic efforts to try to preserve the INF Treaty. I think it is an important treaty, and I think we are abandoning it prematurely.

Does the United States need to field intermediate-range missiles in Europe or East Asia, and what would be the benefits and risks of doing so?

I don't think that we need to. I think we have other deterrent capabilities. The risk is an arms race. The risk is that Russia would greatly expand its arsenal of these types of weapons. I think the treaty made sense when we signed it. It still makes sense now.

If the INF Treaty collapses, the only remaining bilateral

U.S.-Russian arms control agreement would be New START, which expires in 2021 but can be extended by up to five years through agreement by both parties. The administration has said that it does not yet have a position on whether to take up Russia's offer to begin extension talks. What would be the impact of a U.S. withdrawal from or failure to extend New START?

An escalating arms race which gets us in dangerous territory. I think it would be problematic if we let that treaty expire.

The Obama administration had determined that the United States could reduce the size of its deployed strategic nuclear arsenal by up to a third below the New START limits of 1,550 warheads and 700 delivery systems. Should the United States seek to engage Russia on further reductions, including on Russian concerns about U.S. missile defenses?

Yes. I think we would benefit from greater dialogue with Russia. It's actually something that I do agree with the president on. I don't agree necessarily agree with the way he's handled it, but as two of the greatest military powers, I think the whole world would benefit from us having more robust discussions and negotiations with the Russians on all of these issues.

As part of its effort to win Republican support in the Senate for New START in 2010, the Obama administration pledged to modernize the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Senator Robert Menendez (D-N.J.), who is the ranking member on the Foreign Relations Committee, said in September that congressional support for nuclear modernization ought to be tied to maintaining an arms control process that limits and seeks to reduce U.S. and Russian nuclear forces. Do you agree?

As I said, negotiating with Russia to reduce military might in an equal way helps reduce the risk of conflict and the



President Donald Trump signs the National Defense Authorization Act of 2019 at Fort Drum, New York, on August 13. Rep. Adam Smith says the House Armed Services Committee, under Democratic control, will undertake renewed scrutiny of key defense programs, including nuclear-weapons procurement and policies.

(Photo: Sgt. Thomas Scaggs/U.S. Army)

risk of escalation. We've got a long history of this, starting with President Richard Nixon in the 1970s. But as we looked at the build-up of our military strictly on the nuclear side, it made sense to negotiate a sensible limit on what weapons we would develop and that continues to be the case. Now that Russia is rebuilding and rearming and is much more in conflict with the United States, I think it makes sense that we have these discussions.

The administration is conducting a major review of U.S. missile defense policy. Some Trump administration officials have suggested that the review should augment the role of missile defense in countering Russia and China, not just the limited threats posed by Iran and North Korea, and they have urged the development of interceptors in space. Do you believe that such steps would be wise?

We need to have a dialogue with the Russians and Chinese about this. We don't want either side to get to the point where it thinks that it can win a war with an acceptable level of loss and therefore stumble into that war. Certainly, missile defense is part of what concerns the Russians, and their reaction has been toward wanting to build more weapons.

We need to be able to defend ourselves, but I think we need to have an open dialogue with the Russians about an arms control approach that gives us a more secure world.

There have been efforts off and on to engage with Russia in a strategic stability dialogue. There was a strategic stability dialogue meeting last fall, but since then, a follow-up has not been scheduled despite the fact, as we understand it, that the Defense and State departments want to have it and the Russians want to have it. Is this something that the secretary of state and secretary of defense should be directly involved in, rather than relying on Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin meeting occasionally on the margins of other meetings?

Yes, I think there needs to be robust engagement across all those fronts. I think the secretary of state and secretary of defense need to be involved. I think President Putin and President Trump need to be involved. I think a regular negotiation on the subject would be very, very helpful. So, yes, I think that is the right approach. We just need to follow through on it and do it.