

Special for the ICON:

ICBM Ear Commentary on William Perry's op-ed this week in the New York Times and new book "The Button", where he calls for the unilateral elimination of the GBSB and the lands based leg of the nuclear Triad.

William Perry's new book, "The Button" declares the US is spending too much on nuclear modernization, an estimated \$1 trillion over the next thirty years. To remedy the situation, the former Secretary of Defense recommends the US unilaterally kill all our 400 ICBMs, cut out two of the planned twelve submarines the US is building, and cut the USAF conventional/nuclear capable bombers by twenty-five percent.

These big cuts save only \$5 billion a year, what in a normal year the United States federal government now spends every 10 hours. Far worse, however, is that Perry's recommendation unilaterally cuts 800 warheads out of the 1550 force levels the United States is allowed by the New Start treaty.

Apart from the budget savings, Dr. Perry's says his primary motive is to avoid an accidental nuclear war. Dr. Perry thinks a US national leader might launch America's missiles or bombers by mistake. How would that happen? A US president, if warned of an impending attack by the US early warning radars, might automatically retaliate against the country from where the missiles originated. Without confirming an attack actually occurred.

Now it is true during the height of the Cold War, the Soviet Union had some 12,000 nuclear warheads. Thus, the United States during that period did worry about what was termed a "bolt out of the blue. This scenario had the Soviets launch a surprise attack on the US from a normal, day-to-day peacetime posture. With over ten thousand warheads available to use, the Soviet could easily attack all the 1050 land-based missile silos. And the Soviets would still have left thousands of warheads in reserve to hold hostage the rest of the US.

One would normally ask, well that doesn't make any sense, wouldn't the US retaliate with its remaining nuclear weapons and thus annihilate the Soviets as well? Well, that is exactly the deterrence strategy upon which the US relied throughout the nuclear age.

But during the period after the 1972 SALT treaty between the US and Soviet Union was signed, the danger of just such a Soviet first strike increased. And the deterrent strategy the US relied upon was thought to be inadequate.

From 1972-1982, the Soviet strategic nuclear deployed warheads grew from 2500 to 12,000. It was thought by US military experts the Soviets could execute a strike eliminating America's most lethal weapons—the Minuteman land-based missiles—and still have in reserve nearly ten thousand more warheads with which to hold hostage American cities and other military targets such as bomber and submarine bases.

This “window of vulnerability” as it was called, was solved, however, by successive American administrations through a three-part process. Starting with President Reagan, the US reduced Soviet and then Russian nuclear weapons by 90% through arms control while simultaneously building a better and more survivable nuclear force of submarines and bombers.

The US made all ICBMs only single warhead missiles, thus making the missiles unattractive targets. Given Russia would have to use two attacking warheads to eliminate each US missile silo, the Russians would expend nearly one thousand warheads to eliminate only four hundred ICBM warheads. Another difference is the US now has other highly accurate missiles available which the US did not have at the height of the Cold War. But now the US deterrent can now effectively hold at risk key Russian targets, but with submarine launched missiles. In short, the deterrence America thought was lost because of the window of vulnerability was restored.

Now those nuclear forces built under President Reagan are all well beyond their service life and need to be replaced. The Trump administration, using roughly similar plans put forward by the Obama administration, is rebuilding our nuclear Triad. But the first ICBM and bomber won't be put into the force until 2029. Completion of the entire Triad is not scheduled until 2042. Unfortunately, this rebuilding Dr. Perry wants to tear down unilaterally. And do this despite Russia already finishing its own nuclear modernization of its 700 new missiles, submarines and bombers allowed by the New Start treaty.

Where did Dr. Perry go wrong?

At the end of the Cold War, the US went on what retired USAF General Garrett Harencak described as a “procurement holiday.” The US has not put a new nuclear

bomber, submarine or ICBM in the field since 1996. The US is hardly starting an arms race. If anything it is trying to catch up.

Now why is the US building a Triad of forces? The US has a multiplicity of forces for a number of reasons. First, defense planners do not want a technical failure to take down the deterrent. That requires a redundant capability. While bombers can be recalled, and thus can signal resolve, their required time to get to the target is very long. Here land-based ICBMs are really valuable because they can reach Russian targets in 30 minutes. And given the land-based missiles are in known, fixed silos, submarines at sea are needed which the Russians can't find to make sure a certain portion of the US nuclear deterrent can survive a possible Russian first strike.

America thus spends a lot of money on a Triad of forces rather than rely upon only one technology. This Triad assures the President does not have to launch nuclear forces early in a crisis or on warning of an attack. The US is thus guaranteed the ability to retaliate while sustaining crisis stability.

And though the cost to modernize the force over 30 years is high, Dr. Perry's budget books are cooked. The cost of the three legs of the Triad in today's budget is \$8.5 billion. Two-thirds of the nuclear budgets simply sustains and operates the old, legacy systems that are being replaced. For all intents and purposes nuclear modernization is cheap.

Even cheaper if one takes into account that the \$8.5 billion annually includes 100% of the cost of the new B-21 bomber which while it will be nuclear capable, primarily serves a conventional mission. As Obama era defense official Jim Miller acknowledged, the "nuclear" cost of the B-21 bomber is actually only 3% of the total bomber cost so even the estimated annual \$8.5 billion annual modernization price tag is too high.

Even if the cuts Perry proposes saved a lot of money, the unilateral cuts would still not be smart. If the US followed Perry's lead, the US would not have sufficient capability to deter our adversaries. Who says so? The past 11 American administrations, all of whom supported a robust ICBM force.

But Perry's ideas are also quite reckless for an additional reason. They would make the US highly vulnerable to a disarming first strike, the very threat Perry says the US has to prevent. For example, unilaterally eliminating the nearly 500 missile silos and launch control facilities making up the ICBM leg of the triad would leave

the United States with 10 or fewer nuclear assets. Three bomber bases, two sub-bases, and 3 submarines at sea would be the entirety of the US nuclear force.

What's the point of making it easy to disarm the United States given that today the US has over 500 nuclear targets that the Russians and Chinese cannot eliminate, assuring the survivability of the US nuclear deterrent. Why reduce that number to less than 10?

Nearly 40 years ago Bill Perry was a member of the 1983 Scowcroft Commission that recommended building a new ICBM, the Ohio class submarines, the D5 missile for the submarines, and the B1 and B2 nuclear capable bombers. All these nuclear systems comprised the entirety of the Reagan proposed nuclear modernization program. And the Scowcroft Commission recommendations were accepted by Congress and thus together the Reagan administration and Congress roundly rejected the Soviet proposed alternative of a nuclear freeze.

Dr. Perry unfortunately thinks the men and women of the industrial base which builds the nuclear deterrent do so just for the money. Perry says the industry is only interested in profits and thus effectively lobbies Congress to support such systems. Nothing could be further from the truth. Industry and Congress support this modernization effort because we need to do so to protect the country.

That is why Perry's efforts to eliminate America's ICBMs received a paltry 12 votes out of 56 in the House Armed Services Committee this summer. While last year getting defeated on the House floor by a vote of 166-266.

Now the past two administrations placed the new GBSD ICBM in the budget. And the last ten administrations before that —during and after the Cold War— supported a robust ICBM force and nuclear Triad.

As for arms control, Perry apparently believes the country should be punished because the INF Treaty has been discarded. But the Russians walked out of the INF treaty, not the United States. And the Chinese refuse to even talk about nuclear weapons, despite having the third highest number of nuclear weapons of any country in the world.

The plans Dr Perry has for a world of zero nuclear weapons are all well and good. But until the nine nuclear armed nations all agree to go to zero, the USA will in the meantime keep a strong, credible deterrent, seek reasonable and verifiable arms

control where possible and build stabilizing missile defenses to better protect our people. And a new GBSB land-based ICBM force is integral to that effort.