TRANSCRIPT

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Kathleen Hicks: Hi, I’m Kathleen Hicks, Senior Vice President and Director of the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. And this is Defense 2020, a CSIS podcast examining critical defense issues in the United States' 2020 election cycle. We bring in defense experts from across the political spectrum to survey the debates over the U.S. military strategy, missions, and funding. This podcast is made possible by contributions from BAE Systems, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and the Thales Group.

Kathleen Hicks: On this episode of Defense 2020, I continue my discussion with three experts on the issues surrounding nuclear weapons and arms control: my colleague, Rebecca Hersman, Director of the Project on Nuclear Issues and a Senior Advisor in the International Security Program at CSIS; Alexandra Bell, Senior Policy Director at the Center for Arms Control and Nonproliferation; and Rebeccah Heinrichs, Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute.

Kathleen Hicks: I want to spend the remainder of our time talking a little bit about nuclear modernization. This often comes as a conversation around the dollars spent, which it seems to me, as often happens in the case of defense issues, you can use data to support your viewpoint. So you can either say nuclear weapons constitute less than 10% of the defense budget, or you can say nuclear weapons are estimated to cost over a trillion dollars over the next 30 years. Both of these things could be true, and yet they lead the listener to different kinds of conclusions perhaps about the value of our nuclear monitorization strategy. So Rebecca Hersman, I’m going to give you the responsibility to help walk us through what the major debates are right now on nuclear modernization, and then we’ll get into that deeper discussion.

Rebecca Hersman: You know, the core element of modernization has probably, I mean, I guess I’d say four major elements, right? It is the replacement of the three major legs of what we call the triad, that triad of delivery systems. The air leg, that is our dual-use, strategic bombers, the B-21s. In terms of the land-based leg, that is our fleet of ICBMs. The replacement, the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent program that is currently in the kind of contracting/bidding process. And then at our sea-based leg, you have the SSBNs, our boomers, and the Columbia-class replacement.

Rebecca Hersman: A couple of related pieces that go with that, you have what we call the LRSO, which replaces the other air-launched cruise missile, the ALCM, which would be associated with our air leg. You also have a very important, and I think actually where there’s a lot of bipartisan agreement, a lot of modernization inside our NC3, that command and control system that needs a lot of modernization, cyber protection and otherwise. And then finally, the last big area that often gets missed is a lot of the nuclear weapons infrastructure. You have very old and dated facilities across the nuclear weapons complex itself that is engaged in a process of warhead replacement, refurbishment, life extension, stockpile stewardship, and has been doing that under pretty difficult infrastructural circumstances.
Rebecca Hersman: So you have all of these pieces all happening at once creating the infamous bow wave of spending, but none of these are particularly frivolous. The low-hanging fruit when it comes to money that’s easily plucked is, you know, there’s not much there. Most of the things that are small are also cheap. Most of the things that are big and really significant are also expensive, of long duration, and hard to figure out how to cut.

Kathleen Hicks: That’s a really helpful rundown. Let’s kind of go first at this issue of the triad, which is the long-standing U.S. approach to have three separate delivery approaches, some submarines, ICBMs, and bomber air-delivered capabilities on nuclear weapons. This has survived repeated reviews, but not without controversy. Adam Smith, who’s the chair of the House Armed Services Committee, said this year that the rationale for the triad, “I don’t think exists anymore.” Alex, talk to us a little bit about how we should think about the triad from a deterrence perspective and any other perspective you think is relevant for us to understand.

Alexandra Bell: Yeah, absolutely. I think when it comes to the triad, sometimes looking back at the history is important. Alex Wellerstein is a nuclear historian up at the Stevens Institute of Technology and did some interesting research finding that the capital-T triad wasn’t even a thing until the ’70s when we basically had started along the road of nuclear reductions. So it’s important to not treat it as some sort of divine plan from on high that we can’t ever take a hard look at and decide to make changes. It is not an infallible construction. I think that it’s important not to rubber stamp anything when it comes to nuclear spending.

Alexandra Bell: But the big question coming up now is the GBSD, so the planned replacement for the ICBM leg of the triad, and I think there should be a vigorous debate about this. I don’t think we should be afraid to have the debate down from is GBSD really the right thing to pursue? I’ve heard it jokingly referred to ”Do we really need to put Maseratis down those missile silos when we just put like a Ford Focus or a Toyota Corolla?” Like reliable, it’s going to do its job, but it doesn’t have to be as fancy as the GBSD. The other issue is we’ve only got a single bid on that particular contract. It brings up issues of good governance and cost overruns, and the last thing that we need is another F-35-type situation.

Alexandra Bell: But yeah, I don’t think we should be afraid to have conversations about whether or not the triad is still useful, whether it’s still necessary, and to have those arguments based on the facts and not political considerations of where the particular missile bases are. You know, anything that we should do should always be done in concert with Congress, with our allies. Nobody should be trying to pull one over on another branch of the government or on the American public. They’re the ones who are paying for these things after all.

Kathleen Hicks: So Rebecca Heinrichs, in contrast to the Adam Smith quote, we have the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review from the Trump administration in which the
NPR, holding forth consistent with Democratic and Republican administrations preceding it, claims, "Eliminating any leg of the triad would greatly ease adversary attack planning and allow an adversary to concentrate resources and attention on defeating the remaining two legs. Therefore, we will sustain our legacy triad systems until the planned, replacement programs are deployed." Do you think that's the right approach in the future? Can you see a way forward to a dyad or some other kind of arrangement?

Rebeccah Heinri...: I don't, and I could go back and I could pull the quotes from the Obama documents as well when it's decision to maintain the triad. I want to agree that I do think that there are no sacred cows. I think that these things should be debated and discussed and analyzed. And again, I think that the Obama administration did that multiple times throughout the president's two terms and concluded that it was unwise to go down to a dyad, and the security environment from then has only gotten worse, more challenging, more diverse. We want to leave a nuclear force. Every administration, I think, regardless of who's in the White House, wants to ensure that the President of the United States, who's going to have the ultimate authority, has maximum options. I'm not trying to tie the hands of the American president in terms of the options that they have, and so you want a flexible, robust nuclear deterrent at your disposal to answer to the threats that that can pop up.

Rebeccah Heinri...: GBSD is the one that I think is the most controversial. It comes down to that. It's one that Chairman Smith has specifically called out as something that he's not fully on board with in the past. I'm not sure where he is exactly today, but he has even alluded to recently, because of the coronavirus pandemic, that we're going to have to tighten our belt even further when it comes to defense programs. And so I am a little bit concerned that that's going to be something we're going to have to look at again. I would just note that, again, the Obama administration made the same point, Trump administration, that we're just out of margin.

Rebeccah Heinri...: And so GBSD, I could talk about the concerns that I have about how this thing was bid. I think that there's an argument there, but I want to focus on the policy and the necessity of the program. And the reason we have GBSD that we're looking at now is because it does respond to the threats that we're concerned about, the air defenses now and in the future, in which the Minuteman III, if we continue to recapitalize it, it's going to be troublesome, based on the security environment that it won't be as effective. And so we want to have a new ICBM that's able to handle the threat environments that will get us through to 2070, I think is the line.

Rebeccah Heinri...: And then my last point there is if we stay with Minuteman III again, we're going to get to a point where there's a dip in the number of intercontinental ballistic missiles we can actually have deploy, which means we're going to have to look at things like MIRVing, if we're going to keep it up at that number. I've heard that concern over and over again, that if we're going to
maintain numbers, we want to avoid that. You know, when we made the Minuteman IIIs, we produced them in big chunks, and so as these chunks start to expire, you're going to be missing a lot of capability, and we're going to have to do different things that, that I think the arms control community in particular isn't going to be happy with. So I think it makes the most sense for cost and to maintain a credible triad, which is where we have agreed upon we need now, is to make sure that all of these programs remain on time and on target.

Kathleen Hicks: Rebeccah, I'm going to stick with you. We talked a little bit on the previous episode about Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons, but the Trump administration also or relatedly perhaps, also pursued additional, first the W76-2 low yield weapon for the SSBN, so submarine-launched cruise, and then the potential for the W93 warhead for a Trident II again to be maritime. So two, one a return system, if you will, one a new system approach on non-strategic nuclear weapons. Bluntly, do you think this is part of the trade space with Russia? Do you think these are vital as you just gave a strong position on the triad? Do you think these non-strategic-nuclear-weapons approaches are equally vital? How would you weigh them into the nuclear modernization program?

Rebeccah Heinri...: I think that they're vital. I think that there's maybe just less ... I hit that GBSD point really hard because it's the one I'm most concerned about. The reason that I think that those particular programs are so important is because, again, the analysis inside the Pentagon concluded that the Russians were in a very concerning way behaving ... Not just the kinds of nuclear weapons that they're building and deploying, but the statements coming out of Russian officials, that there was a concern that the Russians were lowering the nuclear threshold, and that they could potentially use a low-yield nuclear weapon in a purely conventional conflict. And if the United States did not have a credible response option that would make sense in response to what the Russians would do that perhaps the United States and NATO would sue for peace, this escalate to de-escalate concept.

Rebeccah Heinri...: And that's what these particular systems were responding to, to try to further complicate the Russians, give the United States credible response options to deter the Russians and disabuse them of the notion that it would ever make sense to use any kind of nuclear weapon regardless of yield against the United States or a NATO ally. So I think that they are important. You know I was pleased to see that the Trump administration was able to make good on some of that in a very quick manner in terms of deploying the low-yield nuclear weapon, the W76-2, fairly quickly in good order, and I think that it's a good thing.

Kathleen Hicks: So Rebecca Hersman, the pressure, particularly with COVID, but pressure was already high on the defense budget. The Trump administration was already signaling strongly that it’s in accordance with the caps, the budget caps. It can’t currently grow in FY21, the next fiscal year we’re looking at. Who knows? That all may change, but how do you weigh these nuclear
modernization priorities that's sort of across the four you laid out, but I'd ask you to particularly focus on this issue of the non-strategic nuclear weapons, and then the triad modernization. How will they fare and what do you think the priorities should be?

Rebecca Hersman: Right. So you know it's interesting. Let's just take on the lower yield capability. I think the debate on that gets particularly tangled. There's not much cost savings there. They've kind of animated a very emotional debate, but it's one thing to just draw out, and I think it will fit with a broader point, debate either in Asia or with our Asian allies and our European allies does not fall down the same way it does here in terms of these ideological divides. The reality is in the NATO context and in Europe, they welcomed those capabilities. They bought into that basic logic and are signaling some anxiety about how that changes.

Rebecca Hersman: Now, do I think that could probably be managed in the context of a re-energized approach to our alliances and working closely with allies? Yes, but you wouldn't save a lot of money. But you would probably remove something, at least, that is a big political irritant in this space, and that's not without value. But it won't save you a lot of money. So then you get over to the big puts and takes. Now, this is hard. I mean, I recognize that we could really have huge pressure on the defense budget and that these modernization programs are not cheap, but these choices won't be minor. And I really think without having strong alliance management and substantial arms control to guide major reductions, it's going to be difficult to both reduce unilaterally and do so in such a way that preserves the safety, security, reliability, and effectiveness of the force, so that'll take me back to GBSD.

Rebecca Hersman: All right, I get it. It feels like the part that's expensive. It feels like the one that should be more flexible and we can reduce, but the numbers are a lot harder to squeeze out of that. We've experienced inside our nuclear force way back to 2008, 2014, of what happens when a part of the force is marginalized, when it is not supported with the appropriate resources, when it is not treated as fully fit for purpose and where you don't have the right resources going in and providing them the most effective equipment in a major weapon system that we can. And we had major problems inside the force.

Rebecca Hersman: So I don't think we can just continue to squeeze whatever blood out of the turnip or whatever on the missile force. Like it just isn't really there anymore. I've been down. I don't know if anyone else has actually been in one of these command modules. I mean, they can't properly close the blast doors. The equipment is malfunctioning. The system will not hold up. And it's not just about the missiles. It is about the infrastructure spread across all these states where those missileers have to go down and command these forces and where our maintenance crews have to go out and deal with crazy situations with ancient capabilities to keep everything running just right. And they do, but we can't just roll that forward forever. That is going to have
to be modernized in order to remain safe, secure, and effective. We can’t just salami slice it anymore.

**Kathleen Hicks:** Any savings that you could foresee? It doesn’t sound like it from what you’re describing.

**Rebecca Hersman:** I have a hard time seeing it. I mean, now that doesn’t mean if someone says, “Hey, it’s got to come from here,” you don’t figure out how to do it smarter, but I think you won’t really get ... You know, this won’t be one of those things where it’s like, “Let’s just do some acquisition reform and we get there,” right? This is hard choices. So I think if you’re going to lop off some major part of our infrastructure, we have to really look at what happens. If you get rid of the missile wing, we may have to look at how we deal with our bombers on alert. That’s not a minor issue. It’s also not a savings issue if you re-alert part of the force. There’s just a lot of really big trade offs, so I kind of hope we find somewhere else to look. And if we have to look here, I hope we do it in a manner that’s commensurate with major negotiated reductions on the part of at least Russia, but hopefully others.

**Kathleen Hicks:** So Alex, should we look here? And if so, what should we be doing?

**Alexandra Bell:** Yeah, absolutely we should be looking here. You know, there’s no reason why cost can’t be cut in the nuclear modernization budget and in a smart and rational manner that has bipartisan support. But every year for the past 10 years, we’ve been massively investing in nuclear modernization, and every year we’re getting, at least since this administration came up, push from NNSA and DOE saying, “It’s not enough money. We actually need more money.” And we’re doing that at the same time that the Trump administration has consistently been undercutting the State Department budget, under cutting the CDC budget, undercutting USAID and all of these things. And everything about COVID is just exposed that we’re not actually equipped to deal with the security threats that we’ve been facing in the 21st century, whether it’s mass pandemics or climate change and the devastating effects of the changing climate or economic downturn and interference in democratic processes.

**Alexandra Bell:** These are all threats too, and the idea that the nuclear modernization budget has to be put off to the side, I just think is irresponsible. You know, there’s ways to do this in a bipartisan fashion, but that’s important, too. The W76-2 is a perfect example of money that was just invested in something that Democrats as a whole in Congress were fundamentally against and so is the Democratic candidate. So if Biden is elected and comes in and says, “No, I don’t want to do the W76-2,” then we’ve just wasted a lot of time and money of an already overstretched system of labs. We shouldn’t be doing things that don’t have broad bipartisan buy-in. And that’s why a heavy debate on GBSD, a heavy debate on some of the smaller systems that are being modernized, on any new warhead development has to be had. It is not irresponsible, and it’s not naive to be asking these questions. There’s just not an unlimited supply of money.
Kathleen Hicks: So let’s end on this question to all of you that is suggested by what Alex just said, which is we’re going to have transition either to a second Trump administration or to a Biden administration in January of 2021. That administration is going to have some kind of nuclear policy. It’s highly likely to have some kind of nuclear posture review in which it will look at a lot of these questions around what deterrence means, how nuclear weapons weigh in, and what its modernization priorities are. What, from your perspective, is the number one, top nuclear policy or arms control issue that you want to see that administration come out on and quickly. And Alex, why don’t we start with you?

Alexandra Bell: Mmm.

Kathleen Hicks: You only get to pick one.

Alexandra Bell: I think it’s a reinvestment in U.S. Leadership on arms control and non-proliferation, that the U.S. Puts itself back in the front with a clearly-articulated plan for how to go about verifiable and lasting controls over stockpiles of both vertical and horizontal proliferation. And that means heavy investments in the State Department. It means bringing in new, young people. It means challenging some of the status quo assumptions and being better integrated with the folks over at DoD about what we see as our long-term plans and what our long-term opportunities are.

Kathleen Hicks: Rebeccah Heinrichs.

Rebeccah Heinri...: Yeah. I will just say arms control is not my ultimate objective. Decreasing the number of nuclear weapons in the U.S. arsenal or the Russian arsenal is not my ultimate objective. My ultimate objective is to preserve the peace and deter the worst kinds of conflict in war. So I would like to see, a reminder that if Biden is the Democratic nominee, he was the vice president during the Obama administration, which supported the triad and supported nuclear modernization. And so I think that primarily the United States must make sure that we have a robust, credible, modernized, recapitalized nuclear deterrent. And so I would like to see either if it’s President Trump in a second term or a different president recommit to that and to understanding that our security must ultimately come from us, and that we shouldn’t rely on international organizations or these arms control regimes that we’ve constructed.

Rebeccah Heinri...: I would also note, too, just to fix up something that Rebecca Hersman said, and that is the most expensive things in the nuclear modernization budget are among the triad, which there is bipartisan support and which the Obama administration supported. There is nothing else to ring out. I think we’ve gotten to the point where there’s just no margin. And even if you consider the high watermark for costs, including Department of Energy and the DoD, it’s still about 5% of national security spending, I think is the high watermark that most people agree on, and so it’s not that expensive. If it is the country’s priority, then that’s not where we should look for spending.
There might be things that we disagree on, more controversial things we can have debates about. The W76-2 didn't cost barely anything, although it was very highly controversial. That's just something we can have a debate about that, but that's not really where we go to look for savings.

Rebeccah Heinri...: And then I would also just point out that if we want to try to get some kind of consensus on things like extending New START, you will not bring along people without having committed nuclear modernization. That was how we got the New START treaty through the Senate was out of a commitment to fully modernize and recapitalize the deterrent we have. And I think that you're going to lose a lot of people who are already a little bit squeamish about unconditionally extending New START considering all of the different provocations the Russians have been doing. So I think that that's essential for any kind of follow-on treaty discussion or anything if we're going to talk about with, you know, conversations with the Chinese, that Americans have to be confident that the force we have is as capable and modernized as what our adversaries are developing. And the Russians and the Chinese have a lot of new, exotic things, and we're still using a lot of old Cold War technology.

Kathleen Hicks: Rebecca Hersman, what's your priority?

Rebecca Hersman: My priority is going to be focused on the reinvigorated alliances. I think that is where, if we can turn to that listening tour, if we can understand which are the aspects of current policies that resonate, and if so, why? Before we just change them. Even if we do change them to do it in concert with them and in kind of close coordination, that's where we'll see, what are the trade offs between what you do conventionally versus inside the nuclear force? How do you actually reinforce extended deterrence? How do we provide assurance? How do we make sure we're working together across those lines?

Rebecca Hersman: We'll hear from them, I think, a priority on arms control. We'll hear from them a desire to reduce risks of arms racing. I think that will be very real. I think we will also hear from them a sense of vulnerability to premature or unilateral reductions that make them feel like they're hanging out and that they need to consider new options for themselves. I think when we look at that space, it may help us think about where are the trade offs between what you do conventionally versus inside the nuclear force? How do we keep nuclear risks at bay?

Rebecca Hersman: You know, at the end of the day, I still think the main serious risk of nuclear use comes from a country using nuclear weapons in anger either by virtue of miscalculation or deliberately. And that's what we have to try to restrain across the board. I think that's a bigger risk than nuclear accident at this point. So how do we do that? How do we do it in collaboration with our allies? I think that will actually soften our edges on all sides, to be honest. If we can kind of find a way to do that, I think we would find it moderating us
from both sides and maybe in a way that at least we would have friends along with us in the process.

Kathleen Hicks:  Well, Rebecca Hersman, Rebeccah Heinrichs, and Alex Bell, thank you all so much for helping us wade through this very complicated issue area.

Kathleen Hicks:  On behalf of CSIS, I'd like to thank our sponsors, BAE Systems, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and the Thales Group for contributing to Defense 2020. If you enjoyed this podcast, check out some of our other CSIS podcasts, including Smart Women, Smart Power, The Truth of the Matter, the Asia Chess Board, and more. You can listen to them all on major streaming platforms like iTunes and Spotify. Visit csis.org/podcasts to see our full catalog. And for all of CSIS's defense related-content, visit defense360.csis.org.