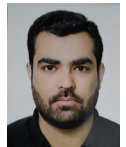


THE 2023 AMERICA'S STRATEGIC POSTURE REPORT: AN ASSESSMENT

Javed Alam

Research Associate, Centre for Air Power Studies



The rapid expansion and modernisation of Chinese nuclear and non-nuclear forces and Russia's military offensive against Ukraine have made the US rethink its strategic posture. The 2022 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) and National Defence Strategy (NDS) have already included China and Russia's nuclear modernisation as a strategic challenge to the US nuclear deterrence.¹

In this context, a second Strategic Posture Commission report (SPC) was released in October 2023. Section 1687 of the FY2022 National Defence Authorisation Act (NDDA) established a congressional commission on the strategic posture of the United States. The Commission consists of 12 former government officials. It is meant to review the strategic posture of the US, including the nuclear weapons policy, strategy, and force structure. The commission's report is the first to attempt to answer the problem of tripolar deterrence, defined by the former commander of US Strategic Command as "two nuclear-capable, strategic peer adversaries at the same time."²

Strategic Posture Commission report (SPC) released in October 2023 seeks to provide a road map for the American strategic posture. The report is straightforward in maintaining that the risk of military confrontation with China and Russia cannot be ruled out, and the undertone of nuclear war needs more attention.

The report seeks to provide a road map for the American strategic posture. The threat environment timeline is 2027-2035. The report is straightforward in maintaining that the risk of military confrontation with China and Russia cannot be ruled out, and the undertone of nuclear war needs more attention.³ The report is divided into ten chapters, including an introduction and conclusion. The highlights of the main chapters are as

follows:

The Stakes and Threat: 2027-2035

The commission's report is released at a time when international order is witnessing a flux. There is a war going on in Europe between nuclear Russia and non-nuclear Ukraine. The Chinese strategic and tactical posturing has become more aggressive over the years. Kim Jong Un of North Korea, a primary adversary of the US, passed a new law in October 2022 that codified its nuclear posture and, if interpreted broadly, included the provision of using nuclear weapons first to defend against an attack.⁴ The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), on the other hand, found uranium enrichment to 84% in Iran, another adversary of the US.⁵

The Commission's report has considered these aforementioned four states while projecting the threat environment through 2027-2035. The report believes that the 2018 and 2022 NDS recommendations remain shortsighted in addressing the 'qualitatively new threats'⁶ posed by the Russians and Chinese. The report has further highlighted the limitation of the 'one major war' sizing construct, a term used in 2022 NDS, and the increased reliance on US nuclear weapons for deterrence purposes without taking into consideration space-based and non-kinetic capabilities. The 2022 NPR noted, "In a potential conflict with a competitor, the United States would need to be able to deter opportunistic aggression by another competitor. We will rely in part on nuclear weapons to help mitigate the risk, recognizing that a near-simultaneous conflict with the nuclear-armed states would constitute an extreme circumstance."⁷ The Commission's report now treats the 2022 NPR's reference of 'extreme' as normal.

China

The commission is of the view that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) perceives the rule-based international order, more like a US-based order, as a hindrance to China's rise as a significant power. The commission sees China's fast-tracking investment and spending in conventional and nuclear military build-up as one of the prominent reasons that can harm US interests globally. While there is no reliable data available in terms of how much China spends on its nuclear weapons, a report published by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) estimated that in 2021, China spent US \$11.7 billion.⁸ Meanwhile, China's official number in its defence budget 2022 remained at \$229.5 billion, a nominal year-on-year increase of 7.1 per cent.⁹ However, the US government and military officials

The commission report reiterated NPR's predictions regarding estimating China's nuclear capabilities. The commission, however, has raised the issue of China's increased activities at its Lop Nur nuclear weapon test site, which seriously raises questions about China's pledge to a moratorium on nuclear testing.

now believe that China's defence budget is much higher than it projects in official numbers.¹⁰ The commission report is upfront in questioning the legitimacy of China's no first use (NFU) policy. As noted recently, the People's Liberation Army has started the implementation of the launch-on-warning (LOW) posture, referred to as early warning counterstrike. More importantly, the commission has noted that if a conventional military conflict gravely threatens the PRC's survival, it may proceed with the use of nuclear weapons.¹¹ The commission report reiterated NPR's predictions regarding estimating China's nuclear capabilities. The commission, however, has raised the issue of China's increased activities at its Lop Nur nuclear weapon test site, which seriously raises questions about China's pledge to a moratorium on nuclear testing.¹² Another critical issue which has made the commission question China's intention of peaceful rise is the latter's interest in lower-yield nuclear warheads, especially in the context of tactical targeting. The commission believes that China's recent developments and testing of the Fractional Orbital Bombardment System (FOBS)¹³ or Multiple Orbital Bombardment System (MOBS) have the potential of a preemptive strike on the US.

In terms of China's non-nuclear capabilities, the Commission has briefly touched on progress in space and counter-space, cyber, electronic warfare (EW) and chemical and biological weapons. China is a leading country regarding emerging space and counter-space capabilities and, since 2015, has conducted a significant reorganisation to integrate space, cyberspace, and electronic warfare systems. The establishment of the PLA Strategic Support Force in 2015 was done while considering the importance of information warfare.¹⁴ The commission believes China will further enhance its counter-space capabilities, including 'Kinetic-kill missiles, ground-based lasers/directed-energy weapons, orbiting space robots, and ground-based anti-satellite (ASAT) missiles.'¹⁵ Regarding cyber and EW capabilities, the report notes how China seeks these capabilities for disruptive and destructive purposes. Indeed, China's Military Strategy describes the primary objectives of cyber capabilities as: "cyberspace situation awareness, cyber defence, support for the country's endeavours in cyberspace, and participation in international cyber cooperation."¹⁶ The PLA also considers EW an integral part of its information warfare strategy. The commission has noted that China is developing jammers to counter the US and allied Synthetic Aperture Radars and Satellite Communications.¹⁷

Russia

The Russian war with Ukraine since 2022, according to the commission, is a "global inflection point"¹⁸ which tends to reshape the world order. The Commander of United States Strategic Command (CDRUSSTRATCOM), General Anthony Cotton, characterised the war as "an attempt [by Russia] to undermine the rules-based international order with conventional force backed by nuclear saber-rattling."¹⁹

Russia's nuclear inventory is the largest and quite diverse. In 2018, President Putin

unveiled a range of weapons systems, both nuclear and non-nuclear, meant for the modernisation process.²⁰ These weapons systems are now becoming part of Russia's nuclear deterrence structure. Russia's nuclear modernisation efforts are leading the way for the development of new heavy Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) such as SS-X-29 Sarmat, the new Dolgorukiy-class Ballistic Missile Submarines (SSBNs) along with Severodvinsk-class nuclear-powered cruise missile submarines (SSGN). Russia also looks to fielding nuclear-capable hypersonic systems such as the Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle, the Tsirkon land-attack cruise missile, and the Kinzhal air-launched ballistic missile. The Avangard has already been used in Ukraine with conventional payload.

The commission has reminded that Russia has cyber capabilities which can harm critical infrastructure such as underwater cables and industrial control systems. The commission has already noted Russia's EW capabilities in gaining a foothold over information.

The commission has noted Russia's emerging non-nuclear capabilities and the threat it poses to the US and its ally's interests at the global and regional levels. Regarding space and counter-space capabilities, the commission has noted that space is a warfighting domain for Russia and will become more important in future conflicts. Russia has already warned the US since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war that the quasi-civilian infrastructure, such as commercial satellites, may become a legitimate target if they are used for the purpose of armed conflicts.²¹ Further, Russia is moving apace in developing the next-generation Global Navigation Satellite System (GLONASS), which is already being used by Russia's military for military system deployments, troop movement, and precision-guided weaponry conveyance. More importantly, the commission is worried about the ramifications of Russia's anti-satellite programme, the 'Russian nesting doll', which can send a projectile to another satellite in US and allied spaces in Low Earth Orbits (LEO).²²

Regarding cyber threats, the commission has noted Russia's capabilities in espionage, influence and attack. The commission has reminded that Russia has cyber capabilities which can harm critical infrastructure such as underwater cables and industrial control systems. The commission has already noted Russia's EW capabilities in gaining a foothold over information. As pointed out by the commission, Russia's EW capabilities include disrupting adversaries' command, control and communication, along with intelligence capabilities.²³

Other Strategic Threats and Challenges: 2027-2035

The commission has highlighted four challenges which, if left unsupervised, will impact the US global standing soon. The first is the advancement of technology. The commission report is mindful of how rapidly technological development is happening around the

globe and has argued that the advances in generative AI, quantum computing, genetic engineering, nanotechnology, and hypersonic flight technologies will potentially generate strategic and existential threats. Second, the commission has reported a negative trend concerning nuclear proliferation because of the expansion of global nuclear stockpiles.

In terms of evaluating the prospects of arms control and counterproliferation with the adversaries of the US, the commission is of the view that the related policies, plans, and measures will likely witness a change in scope, scale, and complexity because of the development of the number of strategic technologies. The third threat pertains to the amalgamation of emerging technologies and state and non-state actors threatening the US homeland. Fourth challenge is the issues of warning and strategic surprises. The report has mentioned how the US strategic community found itself underprepared at a time of strategic surprises such as Pearl Harbour, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the 9/11 terrorist attack.

As China and Russia engage in activities directly or indirectly affecting the US global standing, the ability to anticipate surprises will become non-negotiable. Perhaps because the previous SPC report did not anticipate China's rise in a manner that would affect the US position at the global and regional levels, the current SPC sees this as another reason why strategic surprises require a vigilant perspective.²⁴

Strategy and Strategic Posture

The 2022 NPR of the US introduced the concept of 'integrated deterrence'. The 2023 SPC, however, expands the core tenets of the US defence strategy concerning the utility of nuclear weapons (Table 1).

Table 1: Illustration of the Expansion of Core Tenets of the US Defence Strategy

2022 Nuclear Posture Report	2023 Strategic Commission Report
1. Deter Strategic Attacks.	1. Assured Second strike.
2. Assure Allies and Partners.	2. Extended deterrence and assurance.
3. Achieve US objectives if deterrence fails.	3. Flexible response.
4. Tailored Nuclear Deterrence: Country-Specific Approaches.	4. Tailored deterrence.
5. Managing the Risks of escalation and miscalculation.	5. Calculated ambiguity.
6. Strengthening regional nuclear deterrence.²⁵	6. Hedging against risk.²⁶

Source: The table has been created by the author based on the information from - U.S. Department of Defense, "National Defense Strategy of The United States of America, 2022 Nuclear Posture Review, 2022 Missile Defense Review" (Washington DC: US Department of Defense, 2022), <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Aug/03/2003274088/-1/-1/1/2023-2027-Dod-Cyber-Workforce-Strategy-Implementation-Plan.PDF> and US Department of Defence, "America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States", October 2023, <https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/Strategic-Posture-Committee-Report-Final.pdf>.

To comprehensively deal with the threats emanating beyond the 2027-2035 period, the commission thinks that the defence strategy should have a “combination of forward-deployed conventional forces and their reinforcement, enabled by capabilities in space and cyberspace.”²⁷ The commission doesn’t want the implementation of a ‘one major war’ sizing construct, as argued in the 2018 and 2022 NDS. An integrated deterrence posture is what the commission is suggesting: the mating of conventional capabilities with US nuclear posturing.

While nuclear modernisation is already underway, the commission finds it unsatisfactory in terms of resource allocation to counter the emerging threat scenario. The US triad of strategic delivery systems- ICBMs, ballistic missile submarines, bombers, and the Nuclear Command, Control and Communications (NC3) system - is already facing issues related to legacy and upgrades. Table 2 suggests the recommendations the commission suggested about strategic and theatre nuclear force posture modifications on an urgent basis:

To comprehensively deal with the threats emanating beyond the 2027-2035 period, the commission thinks that the defence strategy should have a “combination of forward-deployed conventional forces and their reinforcement, enabled by capabilities in space and cyberspace.”

Table 2: Alterations suggested by the SPC for Strategic and Theatre Nuclear Posturing

Strategic Nuclear Posture	Theatre Nuclear Forces
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preparation must be done to upload some or all the hedge warheads. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A forward-deployed or deployable nuclear delivery system for the European and Asia-Pacific.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A deployment plan of the Sentinel ICBM in a MIRVed configuration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensuring survivability against preemptive attack without force generation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase in the number of planned B-21 bombers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and deploy a range of explosive yield options, including low yield.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An increase in the planned production of Columbia SSBNs, the Trident ballistic missile systems, and the development and deployment of D5LE2. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nuclear delivery systems capable of penetrating advanced IAMD.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A plan to study the feasibility of placing a portion of future ICBM in a road-mobile configuration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A proper timeline for the delivery of operationally relevant weapons.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A road map to develop advanced countermeasures to adversary integrated air and missile defence (IAMD). 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promulgating a plan for the future bomber fleet to be on continuous alert status. 	

Source: The table has been created by the author based on the information from - U.S. Department of Defense, "America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States" October 2023, <https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/Strategic-Posture-Committee-Report-Final.pdf>.

Key Takeaways and Un-answerable Aspects of the Report

The SPC report comprehensively suggests the changes required to improve US strategic posture. The key takeaways and un-answerable aspects of the SPC report, keeping in mind the 2027-2035 threat environment, are as follows (Table3):

Table 3: Important Takeaways and Un-answerable features of the SPC Report

Takeaways	Un-answerable Aspects
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nuclear strategy is sound but needs more attention vis-à-vis additional weapons and industrial capacity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No recommendations to the President regarding nuclear employment guidance.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reorient nuclear strategy with an absolute focus on increasing the intensity and number of weapons. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Essentially, focusing on a broad category of targets if deterrence fails without explaining how increasing the number of weapons translates into preserving strategic stability.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish integrated deterrence and a 'whole of government' approach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is no explanation or plan of action on the implementation of the whole government approach.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recommendations for subjugation of nuclear arms control over nuclear buildup. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No thought to the domino effect on the arms race and a stimulus to other nuclear weapons states, specifically the current adversaries of the US.

Source: The table has been created by the author based on the information from - US Department of Defense, "America's Strategic Posture": The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States" October 2023, <https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/Strategic-Posture-Committee-Report-Final.pdf>.

Conclusion

The Strategic Posture Commission report comes at a time when the international system is going through a transition. The survey of threats and the recommendations to overcome these threats has been well undertaken by the SPC. However, the SPC report is also a medium of expression from Congress's side, which seems to be unhappy with the way President Joe Biden's NPR projected threats and recommended actions. Perhaps one of the most significant shortcomings of the SPC report is that it offers no coherent methodology to address the two-peer nuclear threat environment. The commission

One of the most significant shortcomings of the SPC report is that it offers no coherent methodology to address the two-peer nuclear threat environment. The commission believes the US national security strategy should have more robust offensive and defensive capabilities, thereby directly strengthening deterrence.

believes the US national security strategy should have more robust offensive and defensive capabilities, thereby directly strengthening deterrence. However, this line of thinking creates avenues for security dilemmas and arms races. A national security strategy with a prime focus on arms buildup without setting any arms control limits will be highly problematic for strategic stability.

Notes:

¹ US Department of Defense, "National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, Nuclear Posture Review 2022, The Missile Defense Review 2022", <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Aug/03/2003274088/-1/-1/1/2023-2027-DOD-CYBER-WORKFORCE-STRATEGY-IMPLEMENTATION-PLAN.PDF>. Accessed on November 19, 2023.

² Aaron Mehta, "STRATCOM Chief Warns Of Chinese 'Strategic Breakout,'" *Breaking Defense*, <https://breakingdefense.com/2021/08/stratcom-chief-warns-of-chinese-strategic-breakout/>. Accessed on November 20, 2023.

³ Madelyn R. Creedon, "America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States," *Armed Service House*, <https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/Strategic-Posture-Committee-Report-Final.pdf>. Accessed on November 20, 2023.

⁴ Kelsey Davenport, "North Korea Passes Nuclear Law," Arms Control Association, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-10/news/north-korea-passes-nuclear-law>. Accessed on November 20, 2023.

⁵ Francois Murphy, "IAEA says it is in discussions with Iran after the report of enrichment," *Reuters*, February 20, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iaea-says-discussions-with-iran-after-report-enrichment-2023-02-19/>. Accessed on November 20, 2023.

⁶ US Department of Defense, "US National Strategic Posture", 2023. Accessed on November 20, 2023.

⁷ US Department of Defense, "National Defense Strategy, Posture Review", 2022. Accessed on November 20, 2023.

⁸ "Squandered: 2021 Global Nuclear Weapons Spending," International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, p. 11, https://assets.nationbuilder.com/ican/pages/2873/attachments/original/1655145777/Spending_Report_2022_web.pdf?1655145777. Accessed on November 21, 2022.

⁹ Jon Grevatt & Andrew MacDonald, "China increases 2022 defence budget by 7.1%," *Janes*, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/china-increases-2022-defence-budget-by-71>. Accessed on November 21, 2023.

¹⁰ Peter Robertson, "China's Defense Budget Is Much Bigger Than It Looks," *Foreign Policy*, September 19, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/19/china-defense-budget-military-weapons-purchasing-power/>. Accessed on 21 November 2023.

¹¹ n.6., p.12.

¹² Ibid., p. 12.

¹³ Bleddyn Bowen and Cameron Hunter, "Chinese Fractional Orbital Bombardment," *Asia-Pacific Leadership Network*, November 1, 2021, <https://www.apln.network/analysis/policy-briefs/chinese-fractional-orbital-bombardment>. Accessed on November 22, 2023.

¹⁴ Defense Intelligence Agency, "Challenges to Security in Space," Centre for Strategic and International Studies, https://aerospace.csis.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/20190101_ChallengestoSecurityinSpace_DIA.pdf. Accessed on November 22, 2023.

¹⁵ n.6.,p.13.

¹⁶ Lyu Jinghua, "What Are China's Cyber Capabilities and Intentions?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 1, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/04/01/what-are-china-s-cyber-capabilities-and-intentions-pub-78734>. Accessed on November 22, 2023.

¹⁷ n.6, p.14.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁹ U.S. Strategic Command, "HASC-SF Subcommittee Fiscal Year 2024 Strategic Forces Posture Hearing," March 8, 2023, <https://www.stratcom.mil/Media/Speeches/Article/3325743/hasc-sf-subcommittee-fiscal-year-2024-strategic-forces-posture-hearing/>. Accessed on November 22, 2023.

²⁰ President of Russia, "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," March 1, 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56957>. Accessed on November 22, 2023.

²¹ "Russia warns West: We can target your commercial satellites," *Reuters*, October 27, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-says-wests-commercial-satellites-could-be-targets-2022-10-27/>. Accessed on November 23, 2023.

²² n.6., p.18.

²³ Ibid., p. 19.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 24

²⁵ US Department of Defense, "National Defense Strategy", 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/2022-National-Defense-Strategy-npr-mdr.pdf#page=33>. Accessed on November 24, 2023.

²⁶ n.6., p. 26-27.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 28.



Centre for Air Power Studies

The Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS) is an independent, non-profit think tank that undertakes and promotes policy related research, study and discussion on defence and military issues, trends, and development in air power and space for civil and military purposes, as also related issues of national security. The Centre is headed by Air Marshal Anil Chopra PVSM AVSM VM VSM (Retd).

Centre for Air Power Studies

P-284, Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi 110010

Tel: +91 11 25699130/32, Fax: +91 11 25682533

Editor: Dr Shalini Chawla e-mail: shaluchawla@yahoo.com

Formatting and Assistance: Ms Radhey Tambi, Ms Khyati Singh and Mr Rohit Singh

The views expressed in this brief are those of the author and not necessarily of the Centre or any other organisation.