

June 7, 2024

**Arms Control Association Annual Meeting Keynote Remarks – Rep. Garamendi (CA-08)**

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for the opportunity to join you today. To Daryl and the Arms Control Association: thank you for your continuing work for a safer world and for this event. And to all of you joining: thank you for being a part of this critical dialogue.

In these unsettled times, events like this are important. They provide a forum for honest discourse and an opportunity to cut through the rhetoric of fear and doomsaying that too often pervades our nuclear policy. Unfortunately, dispassionate, calm voices are regularly drowned out by the loudest, most fearful voices.

Last year, at this event, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan outlined three goals: prevent an arms race, reduce the risk of misperception and escalation, and ensure the safety and security of people from nuclear threats. He emphasized that these were the “same goals, new strategy” and that “effective deterrence means we have a ‘better’ approach, not a ‘more’ approach.”

While these are fine principles, I am concerned that, in practice, we are moving in the direction of “more” and not “better.” Instead of developing cost-effective systems that provide security while defusing tensions, we have fallen into the fallacy that more missiles make us more secure. Nothing could be further from the truth.

It’s well past time for our voices, the voices of restraint and risk reduction, to be heard in the nuclear arms debate. The United States, the Russian Federation, and the People’s Republic of China are locked into an extraordinarily dangerous nuclear arms race. All three countries are rapidly increasing their nuclear firepower with new and more capable bombs, more long-range missiles, new stealth delivery systems, bombers, submarines. And all of this totally dependent on the newest field of warfare: space. All three countries depend upon their space assets to observe, detect threats, and communicate the commands to act.

Today, we must call out the failures of our current approach to nuclear modernization and demand that we treat arms control and de-escalation with the same dedication and focus we give to our nuclear weapons development. It is long past time to develop a strategy that sets priorities, recognizes limitations, and strives for a safer future.

Before diving into the specifics of how Congress is approaching our nuclear weapons systems, I think it is important to step back and consider the broader context. Since their development almost 80 years ago, the destructive capability of nuclear weapons has terrified and shocked, but also led governments to pursue their own arsenals and develop the capacity to destroy our civilization multiple times over. Governments justified expanding stockpiles with convoluted theories of nuclear deterrence that often defy common sense.

It wasn't until arms control programs and treaties were established that Russia and the United States de-escalated this spiral of stockpiling bombs. Through four decades, progress was made, and the number of deployed and existing nuclear bombs was reduced, and even the most adversarial countries agreed that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought." Yet, despite this understanding, we continue to maintain and modernize our arsenals with a belief that these weapons dissuade others from employing theirs. The threat of nuclear conflict remains, and with it, life on our planet ending or becoming dramatically changed.

It would be useful to remind people of the arms control agreements and the leaders that negotiated them. I'm sure that some of my congressional nuclear warriors would be surprised to see that their most ardent nuclear security heroes negotiated the reductions and controls.

I recognize the nuclear threats posed by countries like North Korea, Russia, and China. I do not deny the challenging security environment we face. I am fully aware of the Taiwan/China threat, as well as China's military buildup and South China Sea expansion. The North Korean regime is dangerous and could precipitate a conflict at any moment. I condemn Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, irresponsible nuclear saber-rattling, and dangerous nuclear exercises.

Despite these serious threats, we must be wise in preparing our defense and response. Aggression should not be our first thought when faced with threats, uncertainty, and misunderstandings. Therefore, I strongly support efforts by the US and Chinese governments to engage in meaningful dialogue that results in specific, concrete actions to reduce the risk of miscommunication or escalation.

As we navigate these complex geopolitical landscapes, it is imperative that we pause and reflect on the strategies guiding our nuclear policy. Strategy must be more than a word thrown on top of grandiose statements. True strategy is making the hard choices to align our country's limited resources with our unlimited aspirations.

The greatest problem facing our nuclear strategy today is that we fail to realistically consider that balance, revisit our assumptions, adjust course when programs fail, and figure out new paths forward. Once approved, weapons programs persist, even when they nearly double and triple their budget. No one stops and says, "Enough."

Too often, we allow these debates to be driven by military calculations and how "experts" would fight a nuclear war. But we must not forget that in a democratic society, the military is the extension of the political and not the other way around. When it comes to programs and strategies that threaten our very existence, we, as a whole society, must decide what costs we should bear and what risks we must take. Our nuclear strategy must be balanced and rational, allowing for deterrence and defensive actions while encouraging collaboration for a more peaceful future.

We in Congress are part of the problem. We have bought into the assumption that more nuclear weapons will make us safer.

Ever-growing costs reflect the irrationality that has plagued our nuclear policy. In the name of “modernization,” we’ve taken on hundreds of billions of dollars of additional spending, and the nuclear accounts grow without question or scrutiny.

An example is the nuclear modernization efforts. The political price tag for New START was the modernization of all three legs of America’s nuclear triad. Proponents told us the multi-billion-dollar cost was necessary to ensure that we continue to have a viable deterrent. Today, we can and should debate whether every part of modernization is cost-effective and necessary for deterrence. We must also fully understand the reasons for the massive growth in the cost of all these programs.

Let’s turn to the new Sentinel ICBM, which is destined to replace the Minuteman III. It has incurred an egregious 37% cost overrun, making the program's cost almost 211% higher than the Air Force’s initial 2015 estimate. This has triggered a critical Nunn-McCurdy cost overrun, forcing a stop and a full statutory review. Despite the new estimated cost of \$130 billion, there are loud and clear reflexive signals that the Pentagon and Congress intend to plow ahead no matter the cost or the necessity. “We’ll do whatever is necessary.”

While this may be convenient, the law requires a complete and full review that addresses five critical steps. 1) The program is essential to national security; 2) there are no alternatives to the program that will provide acceptable capability; 3) the new cost estimates have been determined to be reasonable; 4) the program is a higher priority than programs whose funding will be reduced to cover the increased cost of this program; and 5) the management structure is sufficient to control additional cost growth. It is imperative that the Pentagon conduct a thorough examination to assess the necessity and feasibility of continuing the program in its current state. Equally necessary is that Congress engage in a full debate to assess the Pentagon’s rationale. Without public pressure, it is doubtful that any hearings will occur, and that’s why our Congressional Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control Working Group will hold its own hearing on July 24<sup>th</sup>.

For years, Congress has dictated in the annual NDAA that the US maintain a minimum of 400 ICBMs. A number founded not on logic but because “that’s what we have always had.” The number of ground-based ICBMs should not be set by the number of existing concrete silos but in the honest analysis of nuclear strategy. Such a review must consider the risk of a catastrophic mistake inherent in the Sentinel program. In the event of an attack, it is assumed that the first target is the well-known locations of the ICBMs. It’s a use-it or lose-it situation. Therefore, a “Launch on Warning” is the operational imperative. The President has only minutes to decide if the attack is real.

If the nuclear program is for deterrence, then the submarines, airplanes, and their missiles

offer sufficient firepower to dissuade an adversary. These systems have the benefit of stealth, and the President has the time to gather all information and then decide to use the nuclear response. If that weren't enough, we also have ample conventional weapons capability to deter potential adversaries.

However, the Sentinel program is not the only problem. The hidden costs of ground-based ICBM modernization are found in unexpected and little-noticed places like the "Energy and Water" appropriations bill. Did you know that it appropriates \$19.8 billion for "Weapons Activities," a \$2.7 billion increase from the previous year? So, what is the \$20 billion for? This year, the Department of Energy/NNSA requested a nearly \$3 billion down payment for the modernization of "plutonium pits," which are the hollow plutonium shells used to trigger the nuclear reaction. On its own, this number is astonishingly high, but it doesn't even include \$8 billion to build the production facility in Los Alamos and the second facility at Savannah River, which alone has a projected total project cost of \$18-25 billion, nearly 6 times the cost initially planned for construction. It will be the most expensive building in America. Oh, and there is the \$1.4 billion requested for stockpile sustainment, the \$1.1 billion dollars for the Sentinel warhead development at Lawrence Lab, which has grown by 63%, and the untold cost of the 6 other warheads and bombs that support the other nuclear modernization programs.

Even proponents of modernizing nuclear programs should be concerned about the high costs. The January 2023 GAO report found that the NNSA has not developed a comprehensive schedule or cost estimate and has not identified all necessary activities or milestones to achieve the required 80-pit-per-year production capacity. And why do we need to produce 80 pits per year when America already has over 4,000 plutonium pits in storage? Has anyone studied the potential of repurposing these pits for the new bombs? The bottom line is this: Senior officials at the NNSA admit they won't meet deadlines and have no idea what the ultimate cost will be.

My simple, straightforward amendment would change the current law requiring 80 pits per year to a lower number that represents the realistic number of plutonium pits our country needs and can feasibly produce. To some, this is seen as an "extreme radical position," and my proposal was voted down. Too bad the same Nunn-McCurdy law does not apply to the DOE, although I have included in this year's NDAA a requirement that the GAO review the feasibility of applying the Nunn-McCurdy law to the DOE.

Across the nuclear enterprise, costs are soaring, fears are growing, and it remains unclear what goals we are achieving. Yet, amidst soaring costs and escalating risks, it's imperative to reassess our nuclear priorities. Investing more of the modernization budget into diplomacy, arms control, and education could yield far-reaching benefits, fostering a stronger and more secure nation. Congress must fulfill its duty to allocate taxpayer funds responsibly, avoiding excessive expenses on wasteful nuclear programs that do little to enhance genuine security. Maintaining a "safe, secure, and effective deterrent" does not necessitate these costly modernization plans, especially given the pressing needs in other areas critical to national strength and stability.

The significance of arms control cannot be overstated. Prioritizing de-escalation isn't just an idealistic notion; it's a necessity. Arms races cannot be won. When we attempt to outpace our adversaries in weapon development, they inevitably respond in kind, draining our limited resources and fostering international instability as fear predominates and the world's most devastating weapons become a more likely option.

The critical role of arms control in preserving global stability and security is evident from history's many close calls. We can't afford to wait for another Cuban missile crisis to recognize the dangers of miscommunication and the failure to engage in dialogue.

I know that many of you in this room have spent years drawing attention to the importance of arms control, and I am grateful for your efforts. Like Sisyphus pushing the boulder up the hill, I know that it is often thankless work, fighting and clawing for progress only to see it roll back down again. But the work could not be more important, and, unlike that Greek myth, I do believe that we can get the boulder to the top of the hill and develop robust arms control regimes that will help us all to avoid an existential threat.

I believe there are three key pillars in this endeavor. First, sharing knowledge and fostering understanding are paramount. There are some in the room who have written compelling arguments calling public attention to the dangers of nuclear weapons. We cannot forget the horrors that nuclear weapons would inflict if they were ever used again. This work cannot be understated. It's been 40 years since *The Day After* aired, showing Americans and their leadership just how terrible such an event would be. It is a hard truth, but one we must face. We can't allow nuclear rhetoric to be divorced from its very real consequences.

Secondly, encouraging dialogue and fostering open communication channels are essential. The recent dialogues with China's political and military leaders is encouraging. We should accept China's offer to discuss "No first use" policy. We don't know where the discussion may lead, but it's an opening.

Lastly, garnering political support is crucial. Non-profits and advocacy groups have laid the groundwork; now, we must amplify their efforts and call on Congress to act. For too long, our focus on arms control has waned, and members of Congress have paid too little focus.

This is the moment to redouble our efforts. In a world marked by uncertainty and growing competition, building bridges and fostering understanding is more critical than ever. However, this effort must start at home. Inevitably, we must reconcile our infinite desires with our limited means. That means making hard decisions about how and where to spend taxpayer dollars. No other country in the world approaches its geopolitical environment by promising to win everywhere, against everyone, because such hegemony is not, nor ever was, possible. One needs only count the empires that have fallen in time to realize how such lofty visions detached from practical reality led to instability and decline.

Inevitably, we must reconcile our infinite desires with our limited means. That means making hard decisions about how and where to spend taxpayer dollars. Billions of dollars and at least a decade has been spent justifying weapons programs, instead of finding paths to peace. It's time we said, "enough."

We face real challenges in this world, but too often, hyperbole and fear are being used to drive our decision-making. Competition need not mean hostility. It is time we returned to reason and rationality. Together, we must confront the challenges before us, not by building ever more dangerous weapons, but by placing the same priority on effective arms control and risk reduction measures that we currently place on modernization. We may face challenges, but we still have the choice of which future we will pursue. We know the risks, we know the dangers that modernizations and the inevitable arms race could hold, but that's why it is so important we redouble our efforts toward making de-escalation real. Let us take this moment, this opportunity, to engage in a meaningful dialogue and choose the path towards a safer and more secure world.