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ROLL-UP-YOUR-SLEEVES NUCLEAR WEAPONS STRATEGY: THINKING THROUGH THE UNTHINKABLE

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Christopher Yeaw, Ph.D., Research Director for Nuclear Programs, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, NSRI

During the Cold War, a young Christopher Yeaw bicycled through his Connecticut neighborhood delivering newspapers. Before he tossed the papers onto neighbors' porches, he read the headlines. European missiles, neutron bombs and unthinkable potential destruction were frequent front-page topics. Nuclear science intrigued him. So, in middle school, he decided he would pursue a PhD in either particle physics or nuclear fusion.

In the mid-1980s, he found himself in college studying fusion as President Ronald Reagan was building up nuclear weapons for defense of the United States. "Then the Berlin Wall fell, and things changed overnight," he remembers. "By the time I graduated with a PhD, it was over!"

He knew it was important for the U.S. to shift its perspective and embrace a world with no immediate threat from great-power ideological enemies.

But the deterrent protective power of nuclear weapons is neither easy nor wise for a nation to give up.

In 1991 and 1992, the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives had removed nearly all U.S. tactical and theater nuclear systems.

"That might have been okay, but Russia modernized theirs instead," Dr. Yeaw explained. "They now have more than 2,000 modernized unconstrained nuclear weapons poised to exercise coercion against any nation on the European continent."

Through his career, Dr. Yeaw's knowledge and expertise in "all things nuclear" grew, and the government requested his assistance in a string of high-profile nuclear programs and initiatives, some at the very heart of national strategy and diplomacy. His roles have ranged from lead technical advisor and chief scientist to senior policy advisor for defense programs. He had a lead role in drafting the 2018 presidential Nuclear Posture Review and founded a nuclear weapons think tank.

One commander told Dr. Yeaw he had been hired because he had an immense wealth of knowledge across the entire nuclear enterprise, was an "active roll-up-your-sleeves participant," had earned the respect of his colleagues across the enterprise, and could build a team and get the job done.

These are the qualities he brings to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the National Strategic Research Institute (NSRI) at the University of Nebraska as research director for nuclear programs. As he coordinates research and facilitates relationships, as well as orchestrating strategies, proposals and plans with key stakeholders, he "gets to unleash the full potential of the University of Nebraska's research team."

Through the long vigorous days (and sometimes nights) of directing crucial institute missions, Dr. Yeaw said it's inspiring to see people using their gifts for the Great American purpose of advancing national and world security. He has collaborated with top researchers and senior officials at the highest levels of the U.S. government who have come to depend on him for frequent insights and recommendations that are quick, accurate, actionable and defensible.

As one NSRI client in a senior government position said, Dr. Yeaw's insight and breadth of experience is exceedingly rare.

"You can't put a price on his ability to be concise and clear with very high-level officials. Though this might sound like an overstatement, it isn't ... his work for us directly advances the peace and security of the United States, our Allies, and the world."

Dr. Yeaw's broad NSRI directorial role encompasses activities such as nuclear weapons research, intelligence and threat assessment, policy planning, decision-support, wargaming, and red teaming plans. With NSRI research teams and sponsors, he regularly delves into nuclear weapons design and thought leadership, technological support of science and engineering, education and training, and arms control.

When asked about the specifics of his work, the same senior government official said, "For OPSEC reasons, I cannot go into the details of our operations and subject matter, but suffice it to say that the work Dr. Yeaw is engaged in for us has enormous strategic implications ... implications that you would regularly hear about in the news."

Dr. Yeaw directly supports the mission of NSRI’s primary sponsor, the United States Strategic Command (STRATCOM). He serves as a founding member of the federal Defense Programs Advisory Committee (DPAC), supporting the STRATCOM mission-partner, the National Nuclear Security Agency. In the past, he served as an expert on the STRATCOM Strategic Advisory Group panels, and most recently was appointed by STRATCOM to a “graybeards panel” to elucidate the NC3 mission need in 2019.

“We are not back to a bipolar Cold War,” he said, “but we are in a multipolar competition and the new competitors are the focus of the lion’s share of our high-level policy decisions.”

A whole new set of headlines to read.

Dr. Yeaw believes NSRI’s nuclear work is vital to the United States’ ability to respond appropriately to this multipolar competitive scenario.

“Other great powers in the world have been watching us very carefully,” he said. “Over the last 30 years, we have understandably been involved in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency while they have been racing in an effort to gain ascendancy in nuclear forces. The United States is finally waking up from a great power slumber, and we no longer have any margin, either for delay in our nuclear modernization program or for sluggishness in thinking through 21st century strategic deterrence.

“STRATCOM has done a remarkable job refocusing the command’s attention to the core issues in their mission, and NSRI stands ready, with experts, resources, research, innovations and policy experience, to help our nation’s defenders think through the unthinkable and devise solutions to keep our nation safe.”

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