

An Interview with Gen John E. Hyten

Commander, USSTRATCOM

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General John E. Hyten is Commander of US Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM), one of nine Unified Commands under the Department of Defense. USSTRATCOM is responsible for global command and control of US strategic forces to meet decisive national security objectives, providing a broad range of strategic capabilities and options for the President and Secretary of Defense.

SSQ: What do you see as the top three challenges for USSTRATCOM?

General Hyten: Challenge number one is, are we ready to execute our mission right now? So readiness must remain the first challenge. But, being “ready” means more than the nuclear business. It means being ready with a decisive nuclear response, it means being ready in space, ready in cyber, ready in global strike, and ready in missile defense. All of the elements—are we ready tonight if the worst day in our country’s history starts.

The second priority is the need to be ready tomorrow. That means modernizing our forces. I talked about the nuclear modernization piece during the USSTRATCOM Deterrence Symposium, but we have a very similar challenge with space modernization. Our current space infrastructure is not built for the contested space environment that exists today, so we have to modernize our space capabilities. Similarly, cyberspace abilities need to be modernized because cyber is still being created and is evolving rapidly. Finally, our missile defense capabilities must be improved. So my second priority is to make sure the commander who comes after me is as ready as we are now.

USSTRATCOM’s third priority is to make sure we always take care of our people. About a decade ago, the ICBM business was almost broken. The morale was low and we lost focus on the most important element of our business, and that’s the nuclear enterprise. And that’s when we started having problems. But, if you go out into the field now you will find a force that is unbelievably motivated and ready. Sometimes I think caring for people is really priority one, because without people we don’t

have anything. When the entire security of the nation is at risk, being ready has to be job one. Because if for some reason that readiness goes away, then all of us have a problem.

SSQ: When you look at the breadth of the USSTRATCOM mission, what threats concern you most?

General Hyten: I've talked about the threat that concerns me most: can we go fast enough? Somewhere we lost the ability to rapidly adapt and stay ahead of our adversaries. It's an indictment of every one of us, because we're all part of the buying process. It's a threat of ourselves. That's where my head goes first. People always expect me to talk about an adversary, but that's my biggest concern, because we are ready today for any adversary we would face. I have ready forces on alert right now that can handle any threat that comes against the United States. And I have no doubt that over the next three years we're going to work and we'll stay ready. But, can we go fast enough to make sure it stays that way in the future?

When I look at our adversaries, the biggest concern has to be Russia because it is still the only existential threat to the United States. And then below that, it depends on the specific question, because China, North Korea, Iran, and violent extremism all become great concerns depending on what part of our enterprise you consider. North Korea jumps out right now because they're the most uncertain. China jumps out for what they're doing in space. Iran jumps out for what they're doing with missiles, and violent extremism for the fight that is around the world today, in scattered places. So all of them, depending on the specific question or issue. But, it starts with, we have to go fast enough and we've got to make sure we always take care of Russia.

SSQ: When you compare those threats to capabilities, are you satisfied with the current state of the nuclear force?

General Hyten: The current state of the nuclear force is just fine. It's ready. It's on alert. It's ready to perform. The Airmen in the missile fields, the Sailors in the submarine force, the Airmen that operate the bombers and the tankers—they are all ready, right now. The equipment they have is ready right now and they can do the job right now. The equipment they have is ready right now, but the equipment is quite old. This goes back to my priorities. First priority is, can we do it today? And we always have to be, so whoever the commander is, from now for the next 20

years, that's going to be the top priority. I have a job to make sure that I advocate for resources and capabilities to make sure the commander 20 years from now is as ready as we are today. And unless we modernize our forces, that commander will have a problem. That can't be allowed to happen.

SSQ: The Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) and the Ballistic Missile Defense Review (BMDR) are both in progress right now. What are your expectations for those reviews?

General Hyten: While both are under way, I would say the Nuclear Posture Review is probably a little ahead of the Ballistic Missile Defense Review, but they're both in good shape. US Strategic Command is involved in both of those efforts and we understand where they are. I don't want to share where I think the reviews are going to go because those are the policy of the administration. The president of the United States has the final vote, and he hasn't voted yet.

So we're putting together all the work that needs to be done, both on the nuclear side as well as the ballistic missile defense side. Our recommendations will be presented to the administration and ultimately to the president for a decision. I don't want to assume where either one of those reviews will end up. I'm pretty confident that we will end up with a very strong approach to nuclear deterrence, which will include modernization of our forces.

SSQ: Would you characterize the NPR or BMDR changes as evolutionary or revolutionary?

General Hyten: I would say evolutionary. I don't think when it comes to our nuclear deterrent, there's a revolutionary change about to happen. It won't include space and cyber, but coming out of the Nuclear Posture Review we will broaden our discussion of what strategic deterrence really is in the twenty-first century. The nuclear enterprise is the backbone of strategic deterrence and where deterrence starts. But now we need to build on that and create a multi-domain deterrence structure that delivers integrated effects. Integrated effects means we'll bring all the capabilities of US Strategic Command against any adversary, anywhere in the world, in any domain, at any time.

SSQ: The Russians have effectively violated the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. What should the United States do now?

General Hyten: Since Russia violated the INF Treaty, I believe it is in our nation's best interests to somehow work to bring them back into compliance. That includes a range of options, with our partners and allies, and all the instruments of US government power. I give my recommendations to my leadership, who is the secretary of defense. The secretary of defense, the secretary of state will give their recommendations to the president. The president has the opportunity to make a number of decisions based on our recommendations and he will.

But my desire, and I think the desire of our country right now, is to bring the Russians back into compliance with the INF Treaty because it provides a certain amount of stability we need in the intermediate-range nuclear force regime. It's the same with the New START Treaty. I support the New START Treaty, particularly the force levels in the New START Treaty because that allows me a clear idea of what it takes to deter Russia. My first job is to provide strategic deterrence. If I know specifically what the Russian capabilities are, and it's verifiable under a treaty, then I know the force I have to have prepared and ready to provide that deterrence. If that goes a different direction, then it becomes a much more difficult problem for US Strategic Command and all our forces.

Our job as a nation—not just my job, but our job—is to bring them back into compliance. I'll give my military recommendations and the State Department will give their recommendations and the president will decide the way forward. That will also be part of the Nuclear Posture Review.

SSQ: Very recently you ordered some changes to the organization of USSTRATCOM. Can you share some of the details and explain why you made those changes?

General Hyten: We are making these changes to arrive at a simpler structure. When I took command in November 2016, I sat down with all my commanders—18 of them. And I had four-stars, Navy admirals on my left, Air Force generals on my right; and all my task force and functional component commanders around the table. The agenda had all my component and task force commanders talking to me, but not the four-stars. I realized that all the component commanders and task force commanders worked for those four-stars. So I asked myself, why aren't they the components, and I'll just ask them and they can reach out to the guys that already work for them and fix the problem?

We started working through this restructure, and it became part of a larger effort to make sure everybody that works in this command

understands it's a war-fighting command with a normal structure. And that means we should have a war-fighting construct. A war-fighting construct means we'll have an air component, a maritime component, a space component, and right now, a missile defense component, pending the outcome of the BMDR. But it's just a war-fighting structure. Everybody who comes into this command comes from a background accustomed to having an air component, a maritime component, a land component—it is a familiar structure.

The only part that is a little different is the space component, since space is part of the command. We need somebody focused on space, and I have a four-star in Colorado Springs in the job I used to be in, that wasn't the component. He's the one who knows more about space than anybody and all the space professionals for the most part work for him.

So we're just structuring to focus on war fighting when we come in every morning. It is simpler. I understand why the old structure may have made sense 15 years ago. But to me, the way the world has changed and the threats out there right now require us to focus on war fighting.

SSQ: When you thought about making these organizational changes, were there some missions that needed to be moved into USSTRATCOM or maybe separated from USSTRATCOM?

General Hyten: The only issue that was really on the table was the nuclear targeting piece that was in the Joint Functional Component Command for Global Strike. When it comes to execution of the nuclear mission, that is executed by the president through the commander of STRATCOM and not through a component. So that targeting function needs to be in STRATCOM. I haven't made the final decision there yet, but the one thing I can tell you is it's going to come back inside the STRATCOM staff. And again, it's just going to be normalized.

SSQ: We don't hear much of anything on civil defense anymore. Should the United States focus more on it?

General Hyten: The Russians did a civil defense drill last year as part of their big exercise with 40 million Russian citizens. Not many people heard about that but you can't keep something like that secret. Forty million people were involved, responding to a simulated attack. The attack has to be from the United States.

This is a complicated question but an important one for our citizens. A big part of me, the American citizen part of me, loves living in a

country where people don't worry about that stuff. But there has to be a balance where the people understand they don't worry about nuclear attack because they support the readiness of the capabilities that allow them not to. That's the balance we have to find as we go forward.

So I don't want to scare people. I don't want to go back to the place where we're under imminent threat of complete destruction. I want my kids and your kids to be able to live a life where they don't worry about that stuff in the future. But I also want citizens to be aware that we have to have these capabilities and they have to be ready all the time. For our part, we need to educate the public that a large number of Americans and our allies spend their entire lives creating the environment where others can be free from that type of worry. So that's the balance I would like to get back to. We're not going to build giant, million-person civil defense shelters. The public needs to understand that they're safe and secure because we are ready for the worst day if it comes.

SSQ: If you could change three things within the DOD that affect USSTRATCOM, what would you change?

General Hyten: I would change the buying process we have. Note I said buying process, not acquisition process. One of my big pet peeves is when people hear my speech on modernization challenges they say I'm slamming the acquisition community. I'm not. It's the buying process that we have across the board. It's from budget to requirements to acquisition to test—every part of the process. Why I tell the story of the Minuteman I program is because the one thing Gen Bernard Schriever had that we do not have today is all the authority and responsibility to execute a program and a budget on the first of the year. When you have those two pieces, you have the ability to go fast. And oh, by the way, if you fail there is no doubt who's accountable. If you succeed, there's no doubt who's accountable. I would like to reestablish accountability back in the program, which would lessen a number of the bureaucratic layers we have built—not just in the Pentagon, but across our service structure, our buying structure, our contracting structure, everything. I'd like to put those authorities back in the right place.

People think I'm trying to eliminate the Defense Acquisition Executive but that is not the case. I want that oversight. I want the authorities out there in the field, but everybody has a boss. I'm not trying to eliminate bosses, but I would really like to get authority and responsibility back to the field. That's probably the biggest change I would make.

Next, I would have a budget on the first of the year every year. That would be enormously beneficial. And I'll just keep it at those two.

SSQ: Twenty years from now, do you envision the command being different than it is today? And if so, how?

General Hyten: Twenty years from now. Well, Cyber will have stood up as a unified command. I expect to have a very interesting command relationship with US Cyber Command because we're going to have to integrate the information component of our nation, and that's going to require a very tight partnership between Cyber Command and Strategic Command.

I also see 20 years from now a Space Command that's probably either under as a sub-unified command or a separate command. And we're going to have to figure out how to integrate those pieces together.

So I see some changes happening. It will be interesting 40 years from now to see whether all that stuff comes back together. But, in the near future the cyber and space elements—because of their importance—standing up and being focused on. Then the job of Strategic Command will be to integrate all that together to provide a strategic deterrent for the nation across all the capabilities that we have. But the mission will remain the same, with more modern capabilities, and I still see the priorities being the same.

SSQ: General Hyten, on behalf of the *Strategic Studies Quarterly* team and the entire SSQ audience, thank you for your time and for sharing your thoughts and ideas. We wish you all the best as commander of USSTRATCOM. **SSQ**

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