

Toward an Integrated US Nuclear Weapons Policy: Address US Security in an Interconnected World

Final Report of the US Nuclear Policy Review Project 2008

Executive Summary

Background

On two occasions since the end of the Cold War, two incoming administrations have used Nuclear Posture Reviews (NPRs) to review, update, and modify their US strategic nuclear weapons policies. Posture reviews are certainly not the only vehicle by which US nuclear policies or operations are determined and implemented. The NPR process, however, is a way by which a US administration can put its own stamp on this key area of national security and—at least at the declaratory level—set strategic priorities for internal policymaking and planning guidance while sending political signals for domestic and international consumption.

Undertaken by the US Department of Defense, the two extant NPRs conducted under the Clinton and G.W. Bush administrations (released in 1994 and 2001, respectively) capture the perspective of contemporary decision makers at the time. The next NPR, due to be completed by December 2009, provides an opportunity to set the framework for a new US administration when a new consensus about the role and utility of nuclear weapons is sorely needed.

This paper, the result of an 18-month project examining US nuclear and strategic policies, recognizes that for many reasons the strategic environment of 2008 and for the foreseeable future will be significantly different than it was in 1994 or even 2001, and that a correct assessment of US nuclear and strategic policy will have to adjust outcomes accordingly. The following assessment is based on the recognizable characteristics of the current and foreseeable strategic environment, providing recommendations in accordance with those circumstances that are aimed at enhancing strategic security for the United States and the global community.

The Current and Foreseeable Environment

At the broadest level, two key insights about the global threat environment will inform the next NPR. First is the recognition that significant global security threats are eluding resolution solely by means of the use of military force in the twenty-first century, especially in instances when the use of force has been attempted unilaterally. Second is the growing trend that has rendered traditional applications of US military power into an ever smaller subset of American national strategy and power projection.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan stand as prime examples of these realities. The remarkable success that the US military achieved in removing the Taliban and Saddam Hussein and in overthrowing the regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq has been eclipsed by the subsequent failure to bring about safe, secure, and progressive societies, as measured by political and practical developments. In both cases, the United States demonstrated its ability to pursue its immediate goals against these adversaries with decisiveness and freedom of action. Over time, however, decisions to intervene unilaterally engendered unexpected costs. The US currently finds itself increasingly isolated as it bears the burdens of unexpectedly protracted military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, where it also is the target of deepening hostility from the very populations its intervention sought to aid. Where there has been some progress in achieving stated objectives, considerable efforts have been required to adjust US tactics on the ground—resorting to broad objectives of conflict resolution and nation building that have integrated many foreign policy tools, such as diplomacy and development, which go well beyond the real or threatened use of force.

Any perceived military utility of nuclear weapons has declined significantly; so much so that in 2008, the United States and other nuclear weapon states increasingly agree that the use of nuclear weapons is most likely to result from the failure to prevent terrorism. To the degree that nuclear weapons continue to have utility among the major powers, it is in a political context—as an existential deterrent.

If the entirety of the strategic problems surrounding the unilateral use of force and the over-reliance on force as a foreign policy tool stood alone, the outcome might be characterized as not good, but at least acceptable. Perhaps the United States could live with more costly or time-consuming approaches to achieving its goals. In that circumstance, the need for change for efficiency's sake would be balanced against the perceived benefits of staying with a familiar set of approaches.

However, the political calculus changes when combined with new nuclear pressures. In the face of this new calculus, the maintenance of the status quo will not perpetuate or guarantee US security. Rather, continuing current policies will corrode US security. US strategic policy must adjust accordingly, even if the new policies present a significant departure from the past. The nuclear trends that demand a new approach to strategic security include:

- Some existing nuclear weapon states are moving to reduce the salience of their nuclear weapons while others are at or moving toward a higher salience, shifting their nuclear forces further to the forefront of their strategic and overall foreign policies.
- Nuclear proliferation—of militarily useful nuclear material, infrastructure, and know-how—is increasing to new states and threatens to move beyond states to nonstate actors, whether intentionally or inadvertently.
- A more robust dispersion of civilian nuclear technology and materials, driven by the global need for new and dramatically larger sources of cheap and carbon-neutral energy,

has the potential to result in a significantly more robust global nuclear environment, with the inherent possibility of diverting civilian applications to military ones.

The United States must approach a new Nuclear Posture Review with these fundamental indicators in mind. Continuing to follow present-day approaches will not achieve a secure nuclear future for the United States and the global community. Mixing the declining utility of nuclear weapons, the accompanying shifts in the nuclear environment, and the lowered effectiveness of primary reliance on the unilateral use of military force—all of which are likely to be durable, overwhelming characteristics—the triple goals of US strategic policy must be:

- to prevent the use of nuclear weapons, whether by state or nonstate actors
- to reduce the political utility of nuclear weapons, both in the United States and among other nuclear weapon states
- to strengthen nonproliferation and counterproliferation in a strategically stable manner

In contrast, declared US nuclear policy as articulated in the 2001 NPR has as its dominant feature the maximization of freedom of action and flexibility, emphasizing a forward-leading posture that relies on Cold War notions of deterrence and the maintenance of a high salience for US nuclear weapons, while simultaneously strengthening nonproliferation and counterproliferation. The new Triad formulated in the 2001 NPR incorporates conventional and nuclear offensive strike forces into one of its three new legs. It blurs longstanding norms regarding negative security assurances that declared that nuclear weapons would be used only in response to a nuclear attack against the United States or its allies, by allowing the possibility of US nuclear strikes in response to a broad variety of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) threats. In addition, its formulation of a responsive infrastructure leaves the door open for the development of new warhead designs to achieve newly articulated nuclear missions and weapon characteristics.

In a strategic environment that should seek to lower the salience of nuclear weapons, this deliberate vagueness and imprecision could be interpreted in ways that prove destabilizing and counterproductive. It continues to entrench nuclear weapons as fundamental to state security, reinforcing this notion among other nuclear and nonnuclear weapon states. It removes the distinction given nuclear weapons as a special “class” of weaponry, putting them on a continuum with other instruments of military power and inviting perceptions that the nuclear use threshold has been lowered. It raises the possibility that new nuclear missions and capability could be developed by the United States, encouraging others to consider the same, and thus increasing, rather than decreasing, the overall salience of nuclear weapons.

Components of a New Nuclear Posture Review

The 2009 Nuclear Posture Review must align itself to the outlined strategic environment, and US strategic policy and posture must therefore be adapted in significant ways. This adaptation must begin with doctrinal changes that accurately reflect the new reality and provide a solid foundation for the appropriate operational plans and policies that will naturally follow.

Doctrinal Fundamentals

Consistent declaratory and doctrinal statements and policies within the 2009 NPR would:

- Acknowledge that US nuclear weapons are a weapon of last resort. As an interim measure in lowering nuclear weapons' overall salience, the NPR should declare that the only utility for them is as an existential deterrent. While this would largely reinforce existing policy, a clear statement would buttress common international norms that have been eroded by US rhetoric in recent years.
- Underscore the current US policy goal to pursue global nuclear disarmament and articulate a comprehensive roadmap for the future of the nuclear weapon stockpile consistent with that aim. Characteristics of this roadmap would include a stockpile that is safe, secure, and reliable, shutting the door to new nuclear weapon missions, characteristics, or testing.
- Reaffirm negative security assurances, in which the United States would pledge not to attack a nonnuclear weapon state except in the case of attack on the United States or its allies to whom it has made relevant positive security assurances.
- Reconsider—as a further negative security assurance— doctrine to reflect the reduced salience of nuclear weapons by moving to a “no first use” doctrine, by which the United States would commit to only using nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear attack.
- Disaggregate nuclear and conventional strategic strike plans, options, and operationalization, as currently structured under the current NPR. The current mixing encourages, or at least encourages the perception of, the consideration of US nuclear weapon use along a continuum of conventional strike options.

Operational Outcomes

A new US Nuclear Posture Review must implement these doctrinal statements and policies throughout the plans, procedures, and operations of the nuclear weapons complex. Corollary operational policies should include concrete evidence of commitment to the new underlying doctrine.

Perhaps the most basic operational policy in a new NPR that would give evidence to a commitment to further reducing the salience of its own nuclear arsenal would be to continue reductions in the overall US stockpile. The current commitment to an actively deployed strategic stockpile of approximately 2,000 weapons is unnecessary.

Throughout the history of nuclear arms control, the United States has tied its own strategic reductions to similar reductions on the part of Russia. While Russia is not the threat that the Soviet Union was—the United States should feel a greater sense of independence in setting its own strategic posture—it is also true that the continued high level of US and Russian nuclear arsenals lends itself to reciprocal action on reductions. Accordingly, the 2002 Moscow Treaty sets strategic operationally deployed warhead levels between the

United States and Russia at 1,700 to 2,200 by 2012. However, in 2008, these warhead levels are already anachronistic and encourage Russia to maintain an artificially robust nuclear stockpile. The United States should initiate a new strategic dialogue with Russia to move beyond the Moscow Treaty and to explore how additional significant reductions can be achieved in a mutually reinforcing manner. One thousand nuclear weapons in the total stockpile on each side could be a useful starting point for discussion.

A forward-leaning US nuclear arsenal, characterized by high alert status for deployed weapons, encourages other nuclear weapon states to mirror US policy and increases the likelihood of accidents and the misinterpretation of events. Therefore, the removal of all remaining “hair-trigger” alert plans and procedures from the deployed force would make a significant contribution to strategic stability and the lowered salience of nuclear weapons.

The currently-in-force Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) agreement articulating strategic reductions between the United States and Russia, along with a set of accompanying verification provisions, is set to expire in 2009, leaving the United States and Russia with no nuclear weapon verification mechanisms between them. The START verification regime has been an important confidence-building measure between the two countries and the lack of any remaining analogue is unnecessarily destabilizing. The United States should engage Russia on the extension of the START verification regime beyond 2009.

In 2008, the United States is the only nuclear weapon state that stockpiles its nuclear weapons on foreign soil. As an integral part of Cold War strategy—aimed to counterbalance overwhelming Soviet conventional superiority in Europe—the remaining US nuclear weapons deployed in Europe serve no military purpose and needlessly raise tensions among even our European allies. In consultation with Europe, to reassure our European allies regarding our security assurances, and with Russia, the United States should pursue the timely removal of all remaining nuclear weapons from European soil.

The current NATO strategic concept maintains nuclear weapons as the cornerstone of NATO strategic security and stability. In accordance with the declining utility and salience of nuclear weapons in US and the European nuclear weapon states, the new NATO strategic concept, scheduled for articulation in 2009, should reflect these new strategic realities and the changed global security environment.

As China continues to broaden and deepen its engagement with the global community, its participation in strategic dialogues becomes all the more critical. The United States should encourage a relationship with China that includes a shared understanding of a secure nuclear future, involving decreasing salience of nuclear weapons and a strengthened non-proliferation regime.

Since the 1999 US Senate vote rejecting ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), tremendous steps have been made to address the two significant technical concerns articulated at the time: how to assure a safe, secure, and reliable US nuclear stockpile without the resumption of nuclear testing, pursued through the Stockpile Stewardship

Program; and the verification of compliance with the treaty, based on an extensive global monitoring system. Several senior-level scientific studies have recommended that, given the actions and progress of the intervening decade, these technical reservations have been satisfied. Therefore, a new US administration should consult with the US Senate on CTBT ratification. To ensure ratification, the president must spend political capital and personally reach out to senators who have doubts about the efficacy of the CTBT. It is not worth asking the Senate for advice and consent on the treaty unless the executive branch has laid the groundwork for favorable consideration of the treaty.

The entry into force of a verifiable Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT) prohibiting the production of military-usable fissile material has long been seen as a significant barrier to new nuclear weapon states, while placing no restrictions on US nuclear policy, given the large existing stockpiles of US sensitive nuclear material. A new US administration should enter into good faith negotiations on an international and verifiable FMCT. The new administration needs to recognize that India and Pakistan will likely resist ratifying the FMCT because of their growing arsenals and expanding stockpiles of fissile material. (France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States have declared a stop to fissile material production, and China is believed to have stopped production.) The president must be prepared to call on the leaders of these countries—allies of the United States—to join in global efforts to end the production of military-usable fissile material.

New Considerations for the 2009 NPR

Finally, a new US NPR should consider moving beyond past versions to address key issues in nuclear strategic policy that have previously been ignored.

First, as the United States encourages the other nuclear weapon states and the global community to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons, while pushing its own nuclear weapon policies into the strategic background, it must be careful to avoid simply substituting conventional capabilities for nuclear capabilities. Unilateral, offensive nuclear options meant to achieve dominance over other states are destabilizing, not only by virtue of their nuclear nature, but also due to their aggressive character that provokes reaction. International opinion and reaction is often more dependent, particularly in the short and medium terms, on US conventional posture than nuclear weapon policy. That reaction might be the pursuit of clandestine nuclear programs, asymmetric conventional capabilities, or opposition to the United States in important national, regional, and international political or economic fora. Replicating these aggressive nuclear policies with equally aggressive conventional policies and practices on the conventional side are unlikely to produce greater and more durable security.

Secondly, given that the supreme authority to authorize the use of nuclear weapons rests solely with the president, the lack of education and understanding at the most senior levels of the substance of operational plans and the range of options in the event that deterrence failed is disturbing. The failure to be informed not only about nuclear options in times of crisis management also means that the commander in chief cannot conduct over-

sight of doctrinal and operational policies, plans, and postures guiding US nuclear weapons. This failure must change.

The lack of congressional knowledge about nuclear operations and the assumptions underlying the decisions about what are said to be nuclear requirements and force postures also has resulted in the absence of oversight of US nuclear policy. New mechanisms should be considered to restore the balance in decision making among the branches of government by allowing the Congress to conduct its constitutionally mandated oversight role over nuclear operations—information that is currently denied. Given the sensitivity and complexity of these issues, consideration should be given to setting up a special oversight structure similar to that established for other sensitive areas of security (such as covert operations)—perhaps a joint arms control observer group that could evolve over time into a more formal structure, such as a joint select committee on strategic policy.

Conclusion

The current US administration has deferred many critical decisions about strategic policy to the next president, allowing US nuclear policy to follow in many of the same directions as it has since the end of the Cold War. Nuclear proliferation may have been declared as the number one security threat facing the United States and its allies, but measures to strengthen nonproliferation and counterproliferation continue to be insufficient, and US planning for a potential large-scale increase in global civilian nuclear use has been judged as counterproductive and self-serving.

A new US administration, even when saddled with a full docket of other critical foreign policy challenges, cannot put off these threats and challenges for another four or eight years and still ensure the safety and security of the United States. The history of US Nuclear Posture Reviews reveals that, rather than only filling a narrow niche of US foreign policy, they constitute a vivid snapshot of overall US foreign policy goals and priorities.

The 1994 NPR, coming soon after the end of the Cold War and undertaken by an administration considered weak on defense, took a cautious line that produced little substantive change. The 2001 NPR struck a much more aggressive tone that presaged the future of the administration that produced it—even though the substance and even the text of the review were largely completed prior to the attacks of September 11, which provided the fulcrum with which the administration was to leverage its foreign policy choices.

The 2009 NPR also will reflect the preferences of the next administration, reflecting its judgments about the global political landscape. Presidential leadership can move US strategic policy into the modern era and do much to restore a shattered consensus, building a new contract for the United States in the global community that shapes a safe, secure, and reliable nuclear future.

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