

The Proposal in Brief

Policy makers of both major parties recognize that the U.S. nuclear posture must change to reflect today's world and future challenges to national security. Congress has passed legislation calling for a reexamination of U.S. nuclear policy by 2009.¹

Four of the most seasoned architects of U.S. national security policy—George Shultz, secretary of state under President Reagan; William Perry, secretary of defense under President Clinton; Henry Kissinger, secretary of state under Presidents Nixon and Ford; and Sam Nunn, former senator from Georgia—have forcefully articulated the need for a new policy. They argue that the United States should embrace the goal of a “world free of nuclear weapons” as a vital contribution to preventing more nations, and eventually terrorists, from acquiring nuclear weapons.²

In fact, over the past decade, several nations have crossed the nuclear threshold by testing nuclear weapons, or are now suspected of having nuclear weapons programs. Some of these states are politically unstable or have high levels of corruption, increasing the risks that they will use these weapons and that terrorists will acquire them.³

The world will stay on this course as long as the United States and the other original nuclear powers—Britain, China, France, and Russia—consider nuclear weapons essential to their security. To avoid a new and more dangerous nuclear era, these states must drastically reduce the role that nuclear weapons play in their security policies. If they do not do so, they will lack the legal and political legitimacy they need to induce other nations to refrain from acquiring or further developing their nuclear arsenals.

The United States can, and should, take the lead in this effort. Indeed, the United States can proactively shape the nuclear future, rather than anticipate the worst and prepare to hedge against it. In so doing the United States can begin to clear a path to a world free of nuclear weapons.

Today's Nuclear World

The greatest nuclear dangers to the United States today are a Russian accidental or unauthorized attack, the spread of nuclear weapons to more nations, particularly unstable states, and the acquisition of nuclear weapons or the materials needed to make them by terrorists. U.S. nuclear weapons policy stands in the way of addressing these dangers—and sometimes even worsens them.

The official doctrines of both the United States and Russia are still mired in cold war patterns of thought. Almost two decades after the fall of the Berlin wall, both countries still maintain massive nuclear arsenals ready for nearly instant use. Although U.S. nuclear war plans differ in size and detail from those drawn up during the cold war, their basic structure remains unchanged.

Both the United States and Russia deploy several thousand nuclear warheads, of which 1,300 to 1,400 remain on hair-trigger alert, ready for launch within minutes of a warning of an incoming attack. The United States deploys roughly 4,100 warheads, and has about 1,250 additional warheads stored for potential future use, for a total of roughly 5,350 warheads.⁴ Russia deploys roughly 5,000 warheads and has about 10,000 warheads in storage, for a total of roughly 15,000 nuclear warheads.⁵ (To put this in context, one U.S. or Russian warhead could destroy an entire city, resulting in millions of dead or injured people.⁶)

While the risk of a premeditated Russian attack is almost zero, a mistaken, accidental, or unauthorized attack remains a possibility. Russia could deliberately launch its weapons in response to a mistaken warning of a U.S. nuclear attack—perhaps because of an error in Russia's warning system. And a failure in Russia's command-and-control system could lead to an accidental or unauthorized attack.

The U.S. policy of maintaining large numbers of highly accurate nuclear weapons that can be launched

promptly stands in the way of reducing this risk. So, too, would U.S. deployment of a missile defense system that Russia believes could intercept a significant number of its strategic missiles, thereby undermining its nuclear deterrent.⁷

In the longer term, the greatest danger to U.S., and indeed global, security stems from the weakening or even collapse of the international consensus to prevent proliferation. Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) requires the United States and the other four nuclear powers to take serious steps toward nuclear disarmament.

While the 2002 Treaty on Strategic Offensive Reductions (known as the Moscow Treaty) limits U.S. and Russian deployed strategic weapons to 1,700 to 2,200 as of December 31, 2012, it places no restrictions on stored weapons, or on deployed weapons that are nonstrategic. (Strategic weapons are those on long-range missiles or long-range bombers, whereas nonstrategic nuclear weapons are those on short-range missiles or short-range aircraft. Nonstrategic weapons are commonly referred to as tactical nuclear weapons, which are intended for use on the battlefield. However, nonstrategic nuclear weapons also include those used for missile and air defense.) Moreover, the Moscow Treaty expires on the same day that it takes effect.

The Bush administration announced in 2004 that the United States would reduce its nuclear arsenal “by nearly 50 percent” by 2012. The White House announced in December 2007 that these reductions would be completed by the end of the year—five years earlier than originally planned. Prior to December 2007, the U.S. arsenal contained roughly 10,000 warheads, of which roughly 5,000 were deployed and 5,000 stored as a “hedge” (to permit a rapid increase in deployed weapons, or replace any deployed warhead types that develop technical problems). The recent cuts substantially reduce the hedge, bringing the total arsenal to roughly 5,400 warheads, with the balance of roughly 4,600 now slated for dismantlement. The White House also announced that the United States would reduce the arsenal by a further 15 percent by the end of 2012—bringing the total to roughly 4,600.⁸ While this is a meaningful step, it falls far short of what is required by the NPT.

While countries will make their own decisions about acquiring nuclear weapons, U.S. nuclear weapons policy can have a substantial impact on future nuclear proliferation. For example, in the past, the United States and other nuclear weapons states have pledged not to use their nuclear weapons against nations without them, giving those nations an incentive to not acquire their own nuclear weapons. However, U.S. policy today explicitly includes the option of using nuclear weapons against countries without such weapons—to either preempt or respond to the use of biological or chemical weapons. This actually serves as an incentive for nations to acquire nuclear weapons, to deter the United States from launching a preemptive attack.

U.S. policy also emphasizes maintaining a large nuclear arsenal indefinitely, contradicting the U.S. commitment under the NPT to pursue good-faith negotiations with the other nuclear powers to eliminate nuclear weapons. In fact, under its Complex 2030 and Reliable Replacement Warhead programs, the Bush administration intends to revitalize the U.S. infrastructure for developing and producing nuclear weapons, and replace the U.S. arsenal with four or more new types over the next two decades. This cycle of design, development, and production would continue indefinitely, to train new weapons designers and maintain the production complex in a ready state. These programs would also seriously undermine the nonproliferation regime and enhance the incentives for other countries to acquire nuclear weapons.

Ten First Steps

Even under the best of circumstances, developing an international consensus and an institutional framework for a global prohibition on nuclear weapons would take several decades. And limits on verification technologies and a corresponding lack of political confidence may make it difficult—at least initially—to prohibit all nuclear weapons, rather than setting a very low limit on the size of arsenals. Nevertheless, establishing prohibition as the goal—and seriously pursuing it—is essential to preventing more nations and eventually terrorists from acquiring nuclear weapons. The United States can make a critical contribution to national and international

security by working to establish the conditions needed to make progress toward this goal.

An essential first step is to declare that the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter and, as a last resort, respond to the use of nuclear weapons by another country. Such a new nuclear policy would directly enhance U.S. national security and promote nonproliferation—regardless of whether or when nuclear prohibition is achieved.

The United States should also unilaterally reduce its nuclear arsenal to a total of no more than 1,000 nuclear warheads. There is no plausible threat that justifies maintaining more than a few hundred survivable

nuclear weapons over the next decade or beyond, and no military reason to link the size of U.S. nuclear forces to those of other countries.

Nor does any plausible threat require the United States to retain the ability to launch nuclear weapons in a matter of minutes, or even hours. By increasing the amount of time required to launch these weapons, the United States would ease Russia's concerns about the potential vulnerability of its own nuclear deterrent. Russia would then have an incentive to adopt a safer nuclear posture for its own arsenal, greatly reducing the possibility of an accidental, unauthorized, or mistaken Russian attack.

The next president should take 10 unilateral steps to bring U.S. nuclear weapons policy into line with today's political and strategic realities:

1. Declare that the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter and, if necessary, respond to the use of nuclear weapons by another country.
2. Reject rapid-launch options by changing U.S. deployment practices to allow the launch of nuclear forces in days rather than minutes.
3. Eliminate preset targeting plans, and replace them with the capability to promptly develop a response tailored to the situation if nuclear weapons are used against the United States, its armed forces, or its allies.
4. Promptly and unilaterally reduce the U.S. nuclear arsenal to no more than 1,000 warheads, including deployed and reserve warheads. The United States would declare all warheads above this level to be in excess of its military needs, move them into storage, begin dismantling them in a manner transparent to the international community, and begin disposing—under international safeguards—of all plutonium and highly enriched uranium beyond that required to maintain these 1,000 warheads. By making the end point of this dismantlement process dependent on Russia's response, the United States would encourage Russia to reciprocate.
5. Halt all programs for developing and deploying new nuclear weapons, including the proposed Reliable Replacement Warhead.
6. Promptly and unilaterally retire all U.S. nonstrategic nuclear weapons, dismantling them in a transparent manner, and take steps to induce Russia to do the same.
7. Announce a U.S. commitment to reducing its number of nuclear weapons further, on a negotiated and verified bilateral or multilateral basis.
8. Commit to not resume nuclear testing, and work with the Senate to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.
9. Halt further deployment of the Ground-Based Missile Defense system, and drop any plans for space-based missile defense. The deployment of a U.S. missile defense system that Russia or China believed could intercept a significant portion of its survivable long-range missile forces would be an obstacle to deep nuclear cuts. A U.S. missile defense system could also trigger reactions by these nations that would result in a net decrease in U.S. security.
10. Reaffirm the U.S. commitment to pursue nuclear disarmament, and present a specific plan for moving toward that goal, in recognition of the fact that a universal and verifiable prohibition on nuclear weapons would enhance both national and international security.

The Future

If the next president takes these steps, the United States will have greatly enhanced national and international security, while also setting the stage for negotiations to reduce the nuclear arsenals of other countries. Together with these nations, the United States can

then tackle the challenges entailed in negotiating and implementing verifiable, multilateral reductions to levels well below 1,000 nuclear warheads—thereby laying the groundwork for an eventual worldwide prohibition on nuclear weapons.

¹ Congress sent the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2008 to the president for his signature on December 19, 2007. It requires a new nuclear posture review to be completed in 2009, and specifies that it include an assessment of: “(1) the role of nuclear forces in U.S. military strategy, planning, and programming; (2) the policy requirements and objectives for the United States to maintain a safe, reliable, and credible nuclear deterrence posture; (3) the relationship among U.S. nuclear deterrence policy, targeting strategy, and arms control objectives; (4) the role that missile defense capabilities and conventional strike forces play in determining the role and size of nuclear forces; (5) the levels and composition of the nuclear delivery systems that will be required for implementing the United States national and military strategy, including any plans for replacing or modifying existing systems; (6) the nuclear weapons complex that will be required for implementing the United States national and military strategy, including any plans to modernize or modify the complex; and (7) the active and inactive nuclear weapons stockpile that will be required for implementing the United States national and military strategy, including any plans for replacing or modifying warheads.” H.R. 1585 ENR, section 1070. While President Bush has vetoed the bill over an unrelated issue, Congress will pass a modified version that retains this language.

² George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, “Toward a nuclear-free world,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 15, 2008, p. A13, and “A world free of nuclear weapons,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2007, p. A15.

³ India and Pakistan conducted multiple test explosions of nuclear weapons in 1998, and North Korea tested a small nuclear weapon in 2006. Iran is suspected of having a nuclear weapons program. It is building an enrichment facility to produce low-enriched uranium for nuclear reactor fuel, and this facility could also produce highly enriched uranium for nuclear weapons. Pakistan has an unstable government, and North Korea’s government could become unstable in the future. Pakistan and Iran have very high levels of government corruption. See Transparency International, “Corruption perceptions index,” 2007. Online at http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2007.

⁴ In December 2007, the United States announced that it had reduced its total arsenal by retiring warheads it had originally planned to retire by 2012. These warheads currently remain at Department of Defense (DOD) sites, but the Department of Energy (DOE) has been given authority over them, and they are slated for eventual dismantlement. A transfer of authority from the DOD to the DOE is usually accompanied by a transfer of the weapons to DOE facilities, but

the DOE does not have room to store these warheads at the Pantex facility, where it dismantles warheads.

The U.S. government does not make public the numbers of nuclear weapons in its arsenal. For an estimate of how these cuts affect the size of the U.S. arsenal, see Hans M. Kristensen, “White House announces (secret) nuclear weapons cuts,” Federation of American Scientists Strategic Security blog, December 18, 2007. Online at http://www.fas.org/blog/ssp/2007/12/white_house_announces_secret_n.php. See also White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “President Bush approves significant reduction in nuclear weapons stockpile,” December 18, 2007; U.S. Department of Energy, National Nuclear Security Administration, “NNSA releases draft plan to transform nuclear weapons complex,” December 18, 2007; and “US accelerates nuclear stockpile cuts: White House,” AFP, December 19, 2007, online at http://www.spacedaily.com/reports/US_accelerates_nuclear_stockpile_cuts_White_House_999.html.

⁵ For the Russian figures, see Federation of American Scientists/Natural Resources Defense Council, *Status of world nuclear forces 2007* (as of May 2007). Online at <http://www.nukestrat.com/nukestatus.htm>.

⁶ The different types of U.S. warheads have an explosive power equivalent to that of 100 to 1,200 kilotons of TNT. The weapons in the Russian nuclear arsenal have comparable explosive yields. The weapons that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki were much less powerful: they had an explosive power equivalent to 15 to 20 kilotons of TNT.

⁷ Whether Russia believed that a specific U.S. missile defense could undermine its deterrent would depend on its assessment of how many of its strategic missiles would survive a U.S. first strike, and how many of those missiles the U.S. defense system might be able to intercept. It would also depend on Russia’s assessment of U.S. confidence in its first-strike and defensive capabilities.

⁸ See Hans M. Kristensen, “White House announces (secret) nuclear weapons cuts.” Under the Moscow Treaty’s restrictions on deployed strategic weapons, the United States must transfer all retired warheads from bases with operational delivery systems, so the warheads will not be counted as deployed. If the United States continues to adhere to these restrictions after 2012, these 4,600 weapons would likely constitute 2,200 deployed strategic warheads, 2,000 reserve strategic warheads the United States considers as a “hedge” against unforeseen political developments, and 400 nonstrategic bombs.

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