

# **US Nuclear Policy: A Mixed Message**

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Four years ago, a newly elected President Barack Obama reenergized the international arms control community with a speech in Prague that committed the United States to “take concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons” and “reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy” to “put an end to Cold War thinking.”<sup>1</sup>

The speech was seen as a stark contrast to the Bush administration’s nuclear policies, which had pursued development of new nuclear weapons and an expanded the role for them.

Yet Obama also reminded: “Make no mistake: As long as these weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies” including Japan. “But we will begin the work of reducing our arsenal.”<sup>2</sup>

The Prague agenda was incorporated into the Nuclear Posture Review published by the Pentagon in April 2010.

Four years after Prague, after Barack Obama has been re-elected for a second term, it is appropriate to take stock of the progress made to fulfill these promises.

## **Reducing the Numbers of Nuclear Weapons**

On the first pledge, reducing the number of nuclear weapons, the Obama administration moved quickly by signing the New START Treaty with Russia. Although the treaty does not require destruction of a single nuclear warhead, it requires both countries to reduce the number they deploy on long-range ballistic missiles at any given time to no more than 1,550, a reduction of nearly 23 percent compared with the Moscow Treaty limit of 2,000 operationally deployed strategic warheads. Yet both countries may keep the 450 offloaded warheads in storage for re-deployment in a crisis.

More significant is the treaty’s limitations on strategic delivery vehicles (launchers), which are limited to 700 deployed and another 100 in storage. This has no direct effect on Russian deployed forces because it is already more than 200 deployed launchers below the treaty limit, but it will have to destroy 100 non-deployed launchers before 2018.

The United States, on the other hand, is still above the treaty limit for both warheads and launchers and does not plan to begin reducing until later in the decade. Until now, the United States has focused on eliminating so-called “phantom” launchers, that is bombers and silos that count against the treaty limit even though they do not carry nuclear warheads anymore.

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Starting in 2015, the U.S. Navy will begin reducing the number of missile tubes on its fleet of 14 ballistic missile submarines (SSBN) from 24 to 20. That will reduce the number of deployed sea-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) to no more than 240, but it will apparently not reduce the number of warheads that are deployed on the submarines under normal circumstances. The Air Force will follow by reducing the number of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) from 450 to probably around 400.

As mentioned above, the New START Treaty does not require destruction of a single nuclear warhead. Nor does it require either country to reduce the size of its nuclear weapons stockpile. Nonetheless, both the United States and Russia are reducing their nuclear stockpiles anyway as a result of retirement of outdated weapon systems.

Since the Prague speech, the United States has unilaterally reduced its nuclear weapons stockpile by approximately 460 warheads, from 5,113 in 2009 to some 4,650 today.<sup>3</sup> Most of this reduction comes from the unilateral retirement of the nuclear Tomahawk Land-Attack Missile (TLAM/N) and the dismantlement of all of its W80-0 warheads.<sup>4</sup> Some Japanese officials reportedly urged the United States to keep the weapon, but the Japanese government officially rejected these claims, and the NPR determined to retire the TLAM/N because it was redundant.

More reductions will follow in the next years due to the navy retiring excess W76 warheads for the Trident II D5 SLBM. It is possible that the B83 strategic will also be retired, and three types of B61 bombs will be retired a decade from now after production of the new B61-12 bomb is completed. By the mid/late-2020s, this may result in a U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile of 3,000-3,500 warheads, or 30-40 percent smaller than when the Prague speech was held in 2009.

### **Reducing the Role of Nuclear Weapons**

Progress on the second pledge, reducing the role of nuclear weapons to put an end to Cold War thinking, has been much more modest and opaque.

The 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) determined that “the United States is now prepared to strengthen its long-standing ‘negative security assurance’ by declaring that the United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations.”<sup>5</sup>

“In making this strengthened assurance,” the NPR explained, “the United States affirms that any state eligible for the assurance that uses chemical or biological weapons against the United States or its allies and partners would face the prospect of a devastating *conventional* military response...”<sup>6</sup> (Emphasis added).

This has been widely interpreted by analysts and journalists as the NPR reducing the role of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear attacks. President Obama has even stated that he has reduced the role. “As President, I changed our nuclear posture to reduce the number and role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy.... We’ve narrowed the range of contingencies under which we would ever use or threaten to use nuclear

weapons.”<sup>7</sup>

National Security Advisor Thomas Donilon declared that the NPR has created a “new doctrine” that “reduces the role of nuclear weapons in our overall defense posture by declaring that the fundamental role of U.S. nuclear forces is to deter nuclear attacks” as opposed to deterring conventional, chemical and biological attacks.<sup>8</sup>

But it is yet unclear how and to what extent a reduction in the role has happened because of the NPR. The change that has happened occurred well before the NPR following the elimination of the Soviet and Warsaw Pact conventional threat to Europe and subsequent improvements in U.S. and allied conventional capabilities and counter-weapons of mass destruction capabilities. The NPR supports continuing this development of further reducing the role of nuclear weapons by enhancing other capabilities, but explicitly identifies a continued role for nuclear weapons against non-nuclear threats:

“In the case of countries not covered by this assurance – states that possess nuclear weapons and states not in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations – *there remains a narrow range of contingencies in which U.S. nuclear weapons may still play a role in deterring a conventional or CBW attack* against the United States or its allies and partners. The United States is therefore not prepared at the present time to adopt a universal policy that the ‘sole purpose’ of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack on the United States and our allies and partners...”<sup>9</sup> (Emphasis added).

The U.S. strategic nuclear war plan is thought to be directed against six adversaries: Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, Syria and a 9/11-type scenario with WMD.<sup>10</sup> But all of these adversaries are exempt from the strengthened security assurance: Russia, China and North Korea have nuclear weapons; Iran and Syria do not but are not in compliance with their NPT obligations; and non-state actors are outside everything.

So it is not clear that the strengthened negative security assurances of the NPR have any effect on how the U.S. military is planning for the potential use of nuclear weapons against the six adversaries in the strategic nuclear war plan. In fact, the strengthened negative security assurances were “deliberately crafted to exclude countries like North Korea and Iran which threaten our allies – or countries that depend on us – with a range of potential nuclear, biological, chemical and conventional threats.”<sup>11</sup>

It is more accurate to say that the prominence that nuclear weapons used to play in U.S. military planning has been adjusted since 1991, not because of a political decision to formally reduce the role, but because the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact disappeared and improved conventional capabilities meant that the nuclear weapons were no longer needed for some military tasks. The core mission that U.S. nuclear weapons serve – to deter nuclear, biological, chemical, and large conventional attacks, and, if deterrence fails, defeat the adversary on terms favorable to the United States and its allies – has not changed.

Even so, the NPR commits the United States to “work to establish conditions under

which [a ‘sole purpose’ role for nuclear weapons] could be safely adopted.”<sup>12</sup> And the Obama administration is nearing completion of an NPR implementation study to identify “potential changes in targeting requirements and alert postures that are required for effective deterrence.”<sup>13</sup> Once the review is completed, President Obama will select from a range of options and issue a new Presidential Policy Directive to the military for how it should adjust its planning for the potential use of nuclear weapons.<sup>14</sup>

### **Modernizing Remaining Nuclear Forces**

The third pledge, maintaining a safe, secure and effective arsenal, is progressing faster than the two first pledges. Since taking office, President Obama has significantly increased budgets for nuclear weapons and committed the United States to spend \$214 billion during the next decade on modernizing and maintaining nuclear forces and facilities. The modernization includes the entire spectrum of the nuclear posture:

- Designing a new class of 12 strategic submarines, each with 16 improved Trident II D5 missiles. Construction starts in 2021 with the first boat deploying on patrol in 2031.
- Design of 80-100 new long-range strategic bombers equipped with a new guided nuclear bomb (B61-12) and a new nuclear cruise missile (LRSO). Deployment from the mid-2020s.
- Develop a replacement option for the Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile, either as a life-extended version of the existing missile or a new one. Deployment from 2030.
- Life-extension and modernization of all warhead types in the enduring stockpile. The W76-1 is in full-scaled production with completion in 2018; Delivery of the first new guided and more accurate B61-12 bomb is planned for 2019; Production of a new common warhead from mid-2020s for use on both ICBMs and SLBMs.
- Addition of nuclear weapons capability to the new stealthy F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. Deployment from 2024.
- Construction of a uranium processing facility for production and maintenance of warhead secondaries; expansion of pit plutonium production capacity for warhead primaries.

Individually, each of these projects represents a significant undertaking; combined, the scope is monumental. It essentially constitutes a complete overhaul of the entire U.S. nuclear posture to extend it through the rest of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – longer into the future than the nuclear era has lasted so far.

### **Conclusions**

Four years after President Obama galvanized the hopes and aspirations of the international community with a vision of putting an end to Cold War thinking and taking dramatic steps towards a world without nuclear weapons, only modest reductions in the

numbers and role of nuclear weapons accompanied by extensive nuclear force modernizations on the other hand paint a less convincing picture of a somewhat schizophrenic nuclear policy that can't seem to make up its mind: is the focus nuclear disarmament or continued deterrence?

The New START Treaty symbolized a “reset” in U.S.-Russian relations but despite important new verification measures, the treaty is modest, doesn't require destruction of a single nuclear warhead, and does not quite capture the ambition of the Prague vision.

Of course, the Obama administration is not setting the nuclear agenda alone, but has to maneuver between conservative arms control opponents in the U.S. Congress, Cold Warriors in Moscow, and a nuclear bureaucracy that is at best cautious about reductions.

“Putting and end to Cold War thinking” will take more than adjusting the fringes of the nuclear mission against regional adversaries but requires changing the core mission against Russia and China. Russia may be willing to agree to a follow-up treaty, but only if it significantly reduces the large numbers of U.S. launchers and so-called ‘hedge’ of reserve warheads that can be uploaded to increase the deployed arsenal if necessary. China has yet to engage in a formal arms control process but it is evolving and its nuclear weapons modernization seems to be slower than anticipated just a few years ago.

For allies, such as Japan, it is important that they support an active effort to reduce the numbers and role of nuclear weapons not just in words but also in deeds. The Obama administration is interested in reducing the numbers and role of nuclear weapon, but it needs the help of its allies. They must avoid letting their extended deterrence needs and deepened (but secret) consultation discussions become roadblocks to further reducing the numbers and role of nuclear weapons.

## ENDNOTES:

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<sup>1</sup> The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, *Remarks by Barack Obama, Hradcany Squarem Prague, Czech Republic*, April 5, 2009, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered/)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Hans M. Kristensen, “(Still) Secret US Nuclear Weapons Stockpile Reduced,” *FAS Strategic Security Blog*, February 26, 2013, <http://blogs.fas.org/security/2013/02/stockpilereduction/>

<sup>4</sup> Hans M. Kristensen, “US Navy Instruction Confirms Retirement of Nuclear Tomahawk Cruise Missile,” *FAS Strategic Security Blog*, March 18, 2013, <http://blogs.fas.org/security/2013/03/tomahawk/>

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, p. 15, <http://tinyurl.com/yh85v2n>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by President Obama at Hankuk University, Seoul, South Korea,” March 26, 2012, [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/26/remarks-president-obama-hankuk-university](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/26/remarks-president-obama-hankuk-university)

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Donilon, National Security Advisor, Keynote speech to 2011 Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference, March 29, 2011, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Thomas\\_Donilon.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Thomas_Donilon.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, p. 17, <http://tinyurl.com/yh85v2n>

<sup>10</sup> For status of the U.S. strategic nuclear war plan, see: Hans M. Kristensen, “US Nuclear War Plan Updated Amidst Nuclear Policy Review,” *FAS Strategic Security Blog*, April 4, 2013, <http://blogs.fas.org/security/2013/04/oplan8010-12/>; Hans M. Kristensen, “Obama and the Nuclear War Plan,” *FAS Strategic Security Blog*, February 25, 2010, <http://blogs.fas.org/security/2010/02/warplan/>

<sup>11</sup> Gary Samore, Coordinator for Arms Control and Weapons of Mass Destruction, Proliferation, and Terrorism, remarks to *International Perspectives on the Nuclear Posture Review*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 22, 2010, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/0422carnegie-samore.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, p. 17, <http://tinyurl.com/yh85v2n>

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Donilon, National Security Advisor, Keynote speech to 2011 Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference, March 29, 2011, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Thomas\\_Donilon.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Thomas_Donilon.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> For a review of the Obama administration’s NPR Implementation Study, see: Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, “Reviewing Nuclear Guidance: Putting Obama’s Words Into Action,” *Arms Control Today*, November 2011, pp. 12-19.