U.S. Nuclear Posture:
One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

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I would like to comment on the direction of U.S. nuclear weapons policy. Although the Bush administration typically is secretive about such matters, quite a bit is known as a result of the leak of the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) about a year ago.[2] The NPR's recommendations mirror those found in a report published by National Institute for Public Policy just before the administration took office,[3] which should not be surprising as several senior administration officials participated in the NIPP report, including Stephen Hadley (deputy national security advisor), Robert Joseph (special assistant to the president for counterproliferation), Linton Brooks (administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration), and William Schneider (chairman of the Defense Science Board).

On the positive side, the administration stated early on that Russia should be viewed as an ally rather than as an adversary or a potential adversary, and that the U.S.-Russian nuclear relationship should be restructured accordingly. The administration supported significant reductions in nuclear forces and signed the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) last May, which will reduce the number of deployed strategic warheads to 2,200 by 2012.

This treaty has some curious features, however. The limit of 2,200 warheads takes effect on December 31, 2012, which is the same day that the treaty expires. In addition, the Treaty contains no verification or transparency measures. If the two sides agree they presumably could use the procedures in the START Treaty (which is set to expire in 2009) to verify compliance with the new limits, but these procedures would have to be extended significantly. The administration has also stated that, in contrast with START, submarines in overhaul will not be counted under the limits; if we include these, the limit would be closer to 2500 strategic warheads.

A major disappointment was the refusal of the Bush administration to agree to dismantle some or all of the thousands of nuclear warheads that will be removed from deployment as a result of SORT. The United States and Russia had agreed during the Clinton administration to do this as part of START III, and the nuclear weapons laboratories had done much technical work on verifying warhead dismantling. Although the number of deployed strategic weapons will decline from about 6,000 today to 2,200 under SORT, the total number of U.S. warheads,

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[2] Excerpts of the Nuclear Posture Review, dated 8 January 2002, are available at http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/npr.htm.
[3] Keith B. Payne, Rationale and Requirements for U.S. Nuclear Forces and Arms Control, Vol. I: Executive Report (National Institute for Public Policy, January 2001); available at http://www.nipp.org/Adobe/volume%201%20complete.pdf.

including nonstrategic and reserve warheads, could remain as high as 10,000. The total number of Russian warheads could be as high as 20,000. Many of the reserve strategic warheads could be rapidly redeployed on ballistic missiles and bombers. Indeed, the NPR refers to this breakout potential as a "responsive force," which could be used to more double the size of the U.S. strategic force.

The administration has claimed that the size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal is no longer linked to the size of the Russian force; that this is a "capability-based" rather than a "threat-based" force. I confess that I have no idea what this means, but I do know that it is impossible to justify the size and posture of U.S. deployed and responsive forces except by reference to Russia, inasmuch as no other country possesses more than a few percent of U.S. holdings of nuclear warheads.

The administration also claims that it has moved beyond the SIOP—the single, integrated operational plan—and its focus on large attacks against Russia, but the NPR describes targeting policy with language that has been used for over 30 years:

> "to hold at risk what opponents value, including their instruments of political control and military power, and to deny opponents their war aims. The types of targets to be held at risk for deterrence purposes include leadership and military capabilities, particularly WMD, military command facilities and other centers of control and infrastructure that support military forces."

In addition, the U.S. continues to maintain two-thirds of its submarines at sea and all of its intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) on alert. A fraction of the submarine-launched ballistic missiles and virtually all of the ICBMs can be launched within a few minutes of a decision to do so. The NPR makes clear that these operational practices will continue. The administration's nuclear war plans are likely little more than a scaled-down version of the SIOP under the last Bush administration, with options for prompt counterforce attacks against Russian nuclear forces, command and control, and leadership targets.

A key feature of the Bush NPR is that it implicitly assumes that the U.S. nuclear posture is largely, if not entirely, decoupled from the nuclear policies of other states—that there is no feedback loop in which other countries react to U.S. nuclear policies. Administration officials sometimes say that they simply are doing what is in the best interests of the United States, regardless of what the leaders or citizens of other countries prefer. This sounds good, but the failure to take into account the reactions of other states is the classic "fallacy of the last move." This has caused the Bush administration to miss key opportunities and, in some cases, to take actions that are likely to increase threats to the security of the United States over the long run.

At present, the only major threat to the security of United States—certainly the only thing that threatens the very survival of our society—is the Russian nuclear arsenal. Yet we continue to deploy U.S. nuclear forces in ways that magnify this threat. We keep a large fraction of our forces on high alert and target them against Russia's nuclear forces. The ability of the United States to preemptively destroy Russia's forces is higher than it has been since the 1960s. Russia knows this. Although Russian military planners think a U.S. attack is highly unlikely, they do not ignore the possibility. Indeed, they continuously guard against the possibility of preemptive attack by maintaining a large number of ICBMs, and reportedly even submarines in port, on

alert, ready to launch on warning of an attack. Thus, our daily survival relies on the integrity of Russian attack warning systems, command and control systems, and the integrity of the chain of command. The danger of this posture was revealed in 1994 when the launch of a harmless Norwegian sounding rocket triggered a Russian nuclear alert.

This is a crazy situation. Russia maintains a huge, alert, and lethal force because the United States maintains a huge, alert, and lethal force. No other potential threat could justify such a posture by either country, now or for the foreseeable future. Neither country believes that an attack by the other is plausible, aside from the fact that the other maintains a huge, alert, and lethal force. The security of both countries would be improved through reductions in alert status and other steps to reduce the counterforce capability of remaining deployed forces. Unfortunately, the discussion of dealerting in the leaked portions of the Bush NPR refers only to safeguards on U.S. nuclear forces and does not even acknowledge the coupling between U.S. and Russian postures.

The fallacy of the last move is also evident in the administration's push for a national missile defense (NMD) system. If other countries do not react to the deployment of U.S. NMD, then the system might improve U.S. security. But other countries *will* react, likely in ways that will result in a net decrease in our security.

Deployment of a U.S. NMD system will increase pressure on Russia to be able to launch its nuclear forces on warning of an attack, to ensure that a retaliatory strike could penetrate the defense. Today, in the absence of NMD, Russia might rely in peacetime on the one or two subs it has a sea, or the dozen or so mobile missiles on patrol. But if the U.S. deploys an NMD system with a hundred or more interceptors, that would not suffice.

Deployment of a U.S. NMD system would almost certainly cause China to field a larger ICBM force than it otherwise would—perhaps much larger. Today, China relies on a dozen or so ICBMs, which are reportedly unarmed and unfueled. The force is being modernized, but at a very slow pace. Based on statements by Bush administration officials, China has good reason to believe that a US NMD will be oriented against China. For example, shortly before becoming deputy national security adviser, Stephen Hadley argued that "the United States should have no need to deploy an NMD system against China. But if China continues to insist that it is free to use force against Taiwan, continues to deploy more ballistic missiles aimed at Taiwan and the United States, and continues to threaten to use those missiles against both, then the United States may simply have no choice."[4]

The demonstrated readiness of the Bush administration to use force and reluctance of the US to accept any limits on unilateral action will also influence Russian and Chinese nuclear planning, in ways that are unlikely to benefit the United States. But the greatest deficiency in the Bush nuclear posture, and the most glaring example of the "fallacy of last move," is the broadening of U.S. nuclear threats to other potential adversaries, who are not armed with nuclear weapons, in situations ranging from deterring or responding to chemical and biological attacks to destroying deep underground bunkers and other tactical uses.

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[4] Stephen J. Hadley, "A Call to Deploy," ***Washington Quarterly***, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Summer 2000), p. 106.

The Bush NPR cites the need "to develop concepts for follow-on nuclear weapons better suited to the nation's needs," and mentions new initiatives to attack mobile and relocatable targets; earth-penetrating warheads to destroy hard and deeply-buried targets; warheads to defeat stocks of chemical and biological agents; modifications to existing weapons to "provide additional yield flexibility," and new warheads that reduce collateral damage." It calls for a "revitalized nuclear weapons complex able to design, develop, manufacture, and certify new warheads in response to new national requirements."

The Bush administration's analysis focuses exclusively on the potential benefits of these initiatives for US action: enhancing our nuclear capabilities will bolster our ability to deter other countries from threatening our interests; and if deterrence fails, new nuclear weapons will give the US new military options. But the deterrent value of an expanded nuclear threat is marginal. Adversaries already know that the United States is armed with nuclear weapons; they must consider the possibility that, if they hurt us badly enough, the United States would respond with nuclear weapons. At the same time, adversaries also know that the use of nuclear weapons by the United States would be widely viewed as disproportionate, and so attempts to enhance the credibility of U.S. nuclear threats are inherently limited by the stakes. In many cases the stakes simply would not be high enough to make U.S. nuclear threats credible, no matter what types of warheads are in its nuclear arsenal.

And what if deterrence fails and a country used chemical or biological weapons against U.S. troops or U.S. cities despite threats of nuclear retaliation. Would the United States respond with nuclear weapons? I hope not, because most likely a nuclear response would not make military or political sense. Nuclear attacks against cities would almost certainly be regarded as immoral and illegal unless it could be shown that this was a proportional response and the only way to prevent additional catastrophic attacks against civilians.

The tactical military value of nuclear weapons is very limited, also. Deep underground bunkers are very difficult to destroy, even with nuclear weapons. The radioactive fallout from earth-penetrating nuclear weapons would create enormous military-operational and political problems for the United States, even if it did not create a humanitarian disaster. It is much simpler to attack the entrances and communications and power lines into these bunkers with conventional weapons. Nuclear weapons can be used to advantage on the battlefield only against large targets such as ports, or against large concentrations of military forces, such as carrier battle groups or large numbers of tanks. Every time in the last 50 years that the tactical use of nuclear weapons has been considered seriously—in Korea, in Vietnam, in Iraq—the United States has concluded it would be disadvantageous, and that our military objectives were better achieved with conventional forces. The use of nuclear weapons in any but the most dire circumstances would turn world opinion against the United States and destroy U.S. leadership and alliances.

The benefits of these initiatives to increase the usability of nuclear weapons are marginal, and are based on the premise that the United States will be the only country to threaten the use of nuclear weapons. But moves by the United States to enhance the usefulness and usability of nuclear weapons and to thereby expand U.S. nuclear threats are likely to increase pressures on other countries to acquire nuclear weapons—particularly countries that find themselves on the expanding U.S. target list. The public explanation by Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld for the difference in U.S. policy toward Iraq and North Korea—that we will attack Iraq because it might

acquire nuclear weapons but we will not attack North Korea because it already has a nuclear weapon—sets a very unfortunate example for other countries that contemplate coming into conflict with the United States.

This message applies beyond U.S. adversaries. After all, if the United States, by far and away the strongest military power, needs nuclear weapons to counter non-nuclear threats, then why does not every other country have even more need for nuclear weapons, particularly countries facing far more dire security threats or those that are not covered by U.S. security guarantees?

Nuclear weapons are, fundamentally, the great equalizer. As former Secretary of Defense Les Aspin said more than ten years ago, we are now the "equalizee."[5] U.S. conventional military power is completely unchallenged, and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future—except for nuclear weapons. No potential adversary or combination of adversaries will master anytime soon the combination of technologies required for modern warfare as it is now being practiced in Iraq and Afghanistan: real-time intelligence information being fed directly into systems for targeting and destroying a vast range of targets; pilotless aircraft loitering over areas waiting to attack particular individuals. But a large number of countries could, at least in principle, destroy one or several large U.S. cities with nuclear weapons.

The most significant security threat to our society and to most of our allies is nuclear weapons. The taboo on the use of nuclear weapon which has held since 1945 benefits the United States as much or more than any other country. Our nuclear posture should be based first and foremost on protecting and enhancing that taboo, and on the spread of nuclear weapons to additional states. Developing new nuclear weapons designed for tactical use moves in the opposite direction.

As Pakistan and North Korea demonstrated, nuclear weapons are not that difficult to acquire. Iraq may have been thwarted, but what about Iran? Many countries could build nuclear weapons in a few years or less if they decided to so, despite our best efforts to prevent it. Nonproliferation is largely a voluntary and cooperative game; for most part, we are able to act effectively against proliferators only to the extent that we can marshal widespread international support.

We must recognize that nonproliferation regime is a vast web of formal international agreements and informal cooperation. Despite a few notable failures, it has been highly successful and has greatly benefited the security of the United States. Cooperation among states with nuclear capability is vital to control the flow of nuclear materials and combat nuclear terrorism. This web of agreements and this level of cooperation cannot remain intact for long if the United States claims for itself alone the right to use nuclear weapons first, even against non-nuclear weapon states, and to develop and test a new generation of weapons for this purpose.

We are the most powerful nation on earth, but we are not invulnerable. Our security relies on assistance of allies and the protection of international restraints. In the long run, our interests are best served by an international system that is as law-like as possible, one in which the use of nuclear weapons by anyone or any country is beyond the pale.

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[5] Les Aspin, "Three Propositions for a New Era Nuclear Policy," commencement address at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1 June 1992.