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A New Agenda for Nuclear Weapons

George W. Bush promised on the campaign trail "to leave the cold war behind" and "rethink the requirements for nuclear deterrence." Last November, he unveiled an arms reduction proposal that purports to do just that. It would have the United States reduce its strategic nuclear arsenal over the next ten years from its current level of 7,200 warheads to between 1,700 and 2,200 warheads. Equally important, the United States would achieve that goal not by negotiating a new Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) agreement, but through unilateral action.

Bush's desire to create a "new strategic framework" is laudable. His willingness to slash the U.S. arsenal unilaterally should help revive an arms reduction process that stalled in the early 1990s. Secretary of State Colin Powell recently said that the administration would work with Russia to codify these cuts in a "legally binding" agreement. But it is not yet clear whether that agreement will impose binding ceilings on both sides' forces and thereby make the force reductions irreversible (as Moscow desires) or merely codify the U.S. and Russian intent to unilaterally cut their forces (as many in Washington prefer). Moreover, rather than moving beyond "cold war logic," the Bush proposal perpetuates it by embracing the same targeting strategy that has guided Pentagon planning for decades. A true post-cold war agenda for nuclear weapons would take to heart President Bush's injunction that "Russia itself is no longer our enemy," reduce both the U.S. and Russian strategic arsenals to 1,000 or fewer weapons, and make any reductions irreversible in a formal, binding treaty.

The New Strategic Framework

The president's public statements, those of senior administration officials, and public announcements about the Pentagon's recently completed "Nuclear Posture Review" suggest that three bedrock assumptions guide the administration's thinking on strategic offensive nuclear weapons. First, nuclear weapons provide a broad range of benefits to U.S. defense and foreign policy. Most obviously, they deter attack by another nuclear-armed power. But nuclear weapons can also help deter others from attacking the United States with chemical and biological weapons; deter other great powers from launching or stop them from winning a major conventional war; destroy critical targets hidden deep underground; and give Washington additional influence in a crisis. As a result, the United States must retain a robust nuclear arsenal. Nuclear disarmament is not an option—now or ever.

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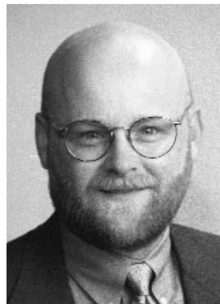

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On Nuclear Weapons,

Second, Russia is not America's enemy. The cold war ended more than a decade ago, yet the United States has failed to seize the opportunity to fundamentally transform relations between the two countries. Indeed, the Clinton administration's insistence on pursuing traditional arms control negotiations helped sustain U.S.-Russian political enmity. It locked both sides into the cold-war mindset that the relative balance of nuclear forces was still a central feature of their overall relationship. This had the perverse effect of stalling rather than accelerating efforts to make deep cuts in both sides' nuclear arsenals.

Third, and most important, the world outside our borders remains a dangerous and unpredictable place. The United States continues to face an array of hostile enemies: potential rivals for global or regional leadership, rogue states hostile to U.S. interests, and terrorists implacably opposed to American values. Moreover, the dynamic nature of world politics means that existing threats could escalate rapidly and new ones could materialize without warning. It follows, then, that the size and composition of the U.S. arsenal should be governed by the principle of "strategic adaptability," meaning the United States should retain the ability to adjust its offensive nuclear force posture—either up or down as well as by type—quickly and as events warrant.

These assumptions and the conclusions that flow from them explain the three characteristics that distinguish the administration's approach to nuclear weapons policy from its predecessors. First, the United States should be willing to change the size and composition of its nuclear forces unilaterally. The absence of a Russian threat and the potential that other threats could materialize mean the United States should no longer size its nuclear forces against Russia's. Rather, it should determine what force posture best serves U.S. interests and unilaterally move to that level of forces, without regard for what Moscow plans to do with its weapons.

Second, the United States should avoid traditional arms control negotiations, because, as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld contends, "arms control treaties are not for friends." Perhaps even more important, treaties by definition constrain the United States and limit its ability to adjust to unforeseen changes in the strategic environment. This aversion to binding constraints applies not only to treaties that set ceilings on force levels, but also to those, such as the Comprehensive Test Ban, that would limit the ability of the United States to develop new nuclear weapons.

Third, given the history of enmity between Russia and the United States, Washington should engage Moscow in discussions on developing ways to increase the transparency of each side's nuclear forces. Expanding existing procedures for verifying force reductions and sharing information about defense planning will provide predictability to military planners on both sides and allay any fears of a secret nuclear buildup. Greater transparency will promote mutual assurance between two former adversaries.

Destroy and Codify

Does the New Strategic Framework Make Sense?

The Bush administration rightly argues that nuclear weapons continue to have a role in U.S. security policy. Proposals for complete disarmament are seductive but ultimately dangerous. The knowledge of how to build nuclear weapons, and the desire to build them, cannot be wished away. Equally important, a world of very few nuclear weapons could be more perilous than one with many, because states may come to believe they can succeed with a disarming first strike. Still, the utility of nuclear weapons can easily be exaggerated. The half-century-old taboo on their use is a powerful testament to the fact that nuclear weapons will be used only in the gravest of circumstances. This diminishes any contribution, other than as a deterrent, that nuclear weapons can make in a crisis.

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Unilateral cuts in the size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal offer a potentially powerful tool to jumpstart the stalled U.S.-Russian arms reduction process. In 1993, Washington and Moscow agreed in the START II Treaty to reduce the number of strategic nuclear warheads on each side—then roughly 10,000 apiece—down to 3,000-3,500. In a March 1997 summit meeting in Helsinki, Presidents Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin agreed to use START III to cut their arsenals to no more than 2,000-2,500 weapons apiece. Yet domestic and international bickering has blocked final ratification of START II and progress on START III. Nearly a decade after the last U.S.-Russia agreement was signed, the United States still deploys 7,200 strategic nuclear warheads and Russia nearly 6,000. Unilateral American cuts could break this logjam. Within weeks of President Bush's November announcement that he planned to shrink the U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal down to 1,700-2,200 weapons, Russian President Vladimir Putin responded that Russia would reduce its forces to 1,500-2,200 weapons.

But unless codified and made irreversible, unilateral cuts could end up stumbling over domestic political obstacles. The administration believes that once it begins to cut nuclear warheads, a positive, tit-for-tat cycle of parallel reductions will take over. Our initial reductions will give Russia confidence to make its reductions which will in turn encourage us to proceed with further reductions and so forth. But the obverse is true as well. If one side fails to make its cuts or is perceived as failing to have done so, the process may come to a halt. Although the administration intends to reduce U.S. forces no matter what Russia does, Congress may refuse to fund any reductions that are not reciprocated.

This is not a theoretical concern. In the 1990s, Congress barred the Clinton administration from cutting the U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal to START II levels before the treaty entered into force—even though the White House and Pentagon strongly favored doing so. Members of the

Russian Duma have called for slowing down the retirement of Russian nuclear warheads in retaliation for the Bush administration's recent decision to withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. Underlying all of this is the reality that mistrust—and hence, the temptation to think the worst of the other—continues to linger in our relations with Moscow.

That is why establishing detailed procedures designed to create transparency is crucial. Clarity and predictability can help reinforce confidence. But negotiating these rules could be contentious, and a major issue is the degree to which they will be binding. The administration prefers informal understandings, although it says it is willing to put at least some transparency measures in a legally binding form. But there is still much opposition, notably in the Pentagon, to acceding to Moscow's insistence that any new arms agreement stipulate that the unilateral force reductions be truly irreversible.

The administration's reluctance to commit to placing binding limits on U.S. nuclear forces carries with it a significant potential weakness: if the United States gains flexibility, so does Russia. The administration is probably right that near-term budgetary woes will force Moscow to slash its nuclear forces regardless of what the United States does. But like the strategic environment, economic conditions can change. A future Russian government may be able to afford a larger nuclear arsenal and choose—perhaps because of worsening relations with the West, fear of a rising China, or a desire to enhance its own status—to build one. The United States almost certainly could match a Russian nuclear build-up, but without binding agreements the opportunity to keep a lid on a new arms race would be lost.

Rhetoric vs. Reality

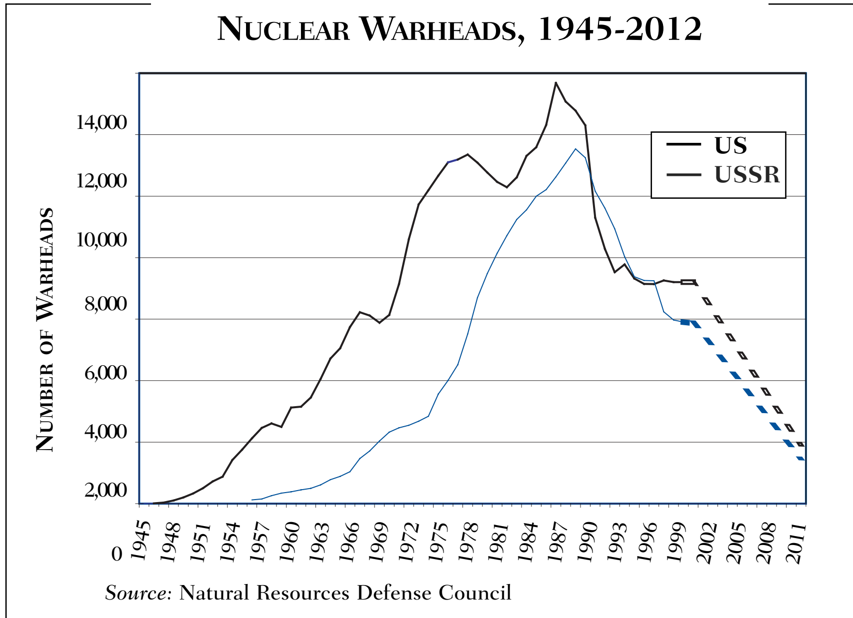
The Bush plan also falls short in its specifics. Although advertised as path-breaking, the cuts are at best comparable to those that Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin endorsed in Helsinki and in some respects could prove less far-reaching. Moreover, for all the rhetoric about having moved beyond the cold war, the strategic targeting considerations that determined Bush's proposed force ceiling of 2,200 weapons are steeped in old thinking—not least the continued acceptance of cold-war notions of what is needed to deter Russia from attacking the United States. Given what, in reality, is the limited scope of the proposed cuts, it is remarkable that the administration plans to take ten years to implement them.

Cutting Less Than Meets the Eye. Bush administration officials have presented the decision to reduce the U.S. arsenal to 1,700-2,200 weapons by 2012 as an "historic step." But the plan hardly represents a sharp break from past practice. First, the Bush administration gets its lower numbers partly by changing the long-standing rules used for counting strategic warheads. Previous administrations, both Democratic and Republican, counted all warheads that were deployed as forces in the active inventory, even if they were in the process of being refurbished or inspected and thus not capable of actually being delivered. The Bush administration's proposal, however, counts only "operationally deployed warheads." Because at any given time roughly 400 warheads are on weapons systems that are being overhauled, President Bush's

reduction target is actually slightly higher than the 2,000-2,500 level that the Clinton administration sought to achieve.

Second, while President Bush has pledged to retire roughly 5,000 weapons from today's operational inventory, he has not pledged to destroy them. In keeping with the idea of strategic adaptability, many of the retired warheads will in fact be placed in a "responsive force," ready to be redeployed in a matter of weeks or months if needed. As a result, even if the proposed reductions proceed as planned over the next decade, in 2012 the United States could possess as many as 8,500 deployable warheads (including tactical weapons). Provided that Russia reciprocates, removing warheads from delivery systems will have an important benefit for the United States—the decommissioned weapons will no longer be on alert and the nuclear fuse will thereby be lengthened. But the fact that we can return many weapons to high alert levels relatively quickly means we have not left the cold war far behind.

U.S. and Russian Offensive Nuclear Warheads, 1945-2012



Source: Natural Resources Defense Council

No Change in Targeting Philosophy. In proposing to cut the U.S. arsenal to 1,700-2,200 warheads, President Bush failed to say why the cuts shouldn't be even deeper. He has repeatedly said that the United States and Russia are no longer enemies. No one worries about the British and French strategic arsenals, and China possesses fewer than two dozen long-range missiles. So why not go to even lower numbers if the Russians are willing, which they repeatedly say they are?

The reason is that while President Bush has said that "the premises of cold-war nuclear targeting should no longer dictate the size of our arsenal," they in fact do. Today, as during the cold war, the Russian threat drives nuclear weapons planning. U.S. nuclear strategy continues to presume that successful deterrence requires that the United States be able to limit the damage it might suffer in a nuclear war by attacking, possibly even preemptively, some 2,200 targets in Russia alone—including 1,100 nuclear force targets, 160 leadership targets, 500 conventional force targets, and 500 war-supporting industry targets. While these targeting requirements will go down as the size of the Russian nuclear arsenal shrinks, Bush's residual force of 2,200 weapons is still based on the purported need to hold a large Russian target set at risk. Thus, at the same time that President Bush proclaims his trust in Russia—even to the extent of dismissing the need for negotiating binding ceilings—U.S. nuclear targeting strategy remains wedded to old assumptions about Russia as our enemy.

A Nuclear Agenda for 2002

President Bush's proposed nuclear weapons cuts fall well short of the rethinking of U.S. nuclear weapons policy that he promised during the presidential campaign. Rather than responding to the fundamental changes in Russia that have helped transform U.S.-Russian relations, his plans reflect the very cold-war thinking he has repeatedly, and rightly, disparaged. A true post-cold war agenda for U.S. nuclear weapons would go much further. Its primary goal would be to marginalize as much as possible the role that nuclear weapons play in U.S. defense and foreign policy. This goal is necessary not so much for moral or political reasons (though those are important as well), but it is above all of crucial strategic importance. Unlike the cold war years, the United States now enjoys unquestioned conventional military superiority. The one thing that can negate this advantage is the possession, threat, and use of nuclear weapons by others. General John Shalikashvili, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, made this point well in 2001: "Any activities that erode the firebreak between nuclear and conventional weapons or that encourage the use of nuclear weapons for purposes that are not strategic and deterrent in nature would undermine the advantage that we derive from overwhelming conventional superiority." Success in further marginalizing nuclear weapons in international politics is therefore of critical importance to Washington. The following steps will be necessary to do that:

Adopt a deterrent strategy that emphasizes guaranteed retaliation, not damage limitation. Throughout the cold war the Pentagon sought to develop a nuclear force posture that could theoretically limit damage to the United States in a nuclear war by destroying Soviet nuclear forces before they could be used. That policy drove U.S. force levels well above 10,000 weapons. In a world in which Russia is a friend and no other potentially hostile country has more than a few dozen warheads, the United States need only maintain nuclear forces sufficient to make clear to all that it can retaliate with devastating effect against anyone who dares attack it or its interests. As McGeorge Bundy, national security adviser to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, recognized more than three decades ago, "in the real world of real political leaders…a decision that would bring even one hydrogen bomb on one city of one's own country would be recognized in advance as a catastrophic blunder; ten bombs on ten cities would be a disaster beyond history; and a hundred bombs on a hundred cities unthinkable." We have long lived in Bundy's real world—and we certainly do so now.

Reduce U.S. nuclear forces to 1,000 strategic weapons. A shift to guaranteed retaliation as the basic premise of U.S. nuclear strategy would make it possible to cut the U.S. strategic arsenal far more deeply than President Bush has proposed. Richard Perle, a former assistant secretary of defense under President Reagan and now chairman of the Defense Policy Board, favors reducing U.S. forces "well below 1,000," while Reagan-era arms control negotiator Paul Nitze would go even further. Thus, a force of 1,000 weapons, deployed in highly survivable basing modes such as aboard submarines, would be sufficient to meet even the most demanding deterrence contingency. This is true even if the United States succeeds in its quest to build an effective missile defense. No other actual or potentially hostile nuclear state has

a missile defense that could deprive the United States of the ability to retaliate, and given the daunting financial and technological obstacles that confront any country seeking to build one, none is likely to do so for decades, if then. And truly deep cuts in strategic offensive forces would ease Moscow's fears that an eventual U.S. missile defense is aimed at Russia, thereby making it more likely that it would reciprocate, further reducing the number of missiles aimed at the American people.

Codify U.S. and Russian nuclear force reductions—including force ceilings—in a legally binding agreement that would provide for enhanced transparency, including on-site inspections. Unilateral reductions are useful for jumpstarting weapons cuts. But both the process of reductions and the resulting force ceilings should be fully binding to give not just Russia, but also the United States, confidence that statements of intent will in fact become reality. Uncertainty about current and future intentions and capabilities promotes suspicion and stimulates others to hedge, a process that ultimately feeds upon itself. Such predictability is even more important when the strategic equation is complicated by the deployment of missile defenses. For that reason, binding limits on defensive deployments will be as important as agreements on offensive forces. To paraphrase Ronald Reagan, trust but codify.

Complete the drawdown from current force levels to the new levels by the end of 2005. The Bush plan calls for storing rather than destroying the roughly 5,000 weapons that are to be retired, so why take ten years to make that happen? In the course of nine months in 1991-92, the United States removed more than 4,000 tactical nuclear weapons from active duty, the vast majority of which were deployed in Europe, South Korea, and aboard surface ships at sea. Dismantling strategic weapons poses somewhat greater challenges. Still, the unilateral cuts in strategic forces announced by President Bush could be accomplished by the end of 2005—rather than 2012.

Eliminate all non-strategic forces unilaterally and encourage Russia to do the same; codify this in a new agreement ensuring a transparent process. Even though the U.S. Army, Marine Corps, and the Navy's surface fleet no longer deploy nuclear weapons or are trained in their use, the United States still retains more than 1,600 tactical nuclear weapons in storage. The era in which such weapons performed a useful deterrent role has long passed. Even the 150 or so tactical bombs deployed in Europe with U.S. and NATO forces no longer fulfill any useful function at a time when NATO is inviting Russia to join its key deliberations, including talks on weapons of mass destruction. Eliminating these non-strategic weapons should also give Russia a powerful incentive to follow suit, and destroy the many thousands of weapons it still maintains in service and storage.

Destroy all non-deployed weapons in a transparent process; assist Russia in doing the same and help it safeguard nuclear materials removed in the process. Aside from the more than 7,000 warheads deployed with active forces today, the United States also retains many thousands of nuclear weapons in storage as a possible hedge against a resurgent military threat in Russia or elsewhere. However, unless such an adversary deploys a robust defense system—which

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again will be an exceedingly remote prospect for decades—there is no conceivable circumstance in which the United States will require more than one thousand nuclear weapons. Therefore, the remaining stock should be destroyed in a transparent process. Russia should be encouraged to follow suit so that the chances of diverting nuclear materials to dangerous ends can be minimized.

Ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Putting the CTBT into effect would reduce the nuclear proliferation threat by making it easier to detect clandestine nuclear explosions—the treaty creates a worldwide monitoring system with sensors in countries such as China and Iran that are closed to U.S. intelligence. The move would preserve U.S. nuclear superiority and deflect the main threat to its conventional superiority. Investments now being made in the Department of Energy's Stockpile Stewardship Program ensure that U.S. nuclear weapons will remain both safe and reliable. Should any questions arise about the effectiveness of the CTBT or its impact on the safety and reliability of the U.S. nuclear stockpile, the United States retains the option of withdrawing from the treaty upon giving six months notice.

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