

ACA Director Addresses STRATCOM Deterrence Symposium

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What Are Nuclear Weapons For?

Reassessing and Reducing the Role of Nuclear Weapons in 21st Century U.S. Security Policy

Remarks of Daryl G. Kimball, Executive Director
for the First Annual Strategic Deterrence Symposium
U.S. Strategic Command, Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska
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On behalf of the nonpartisan, independent Arms Control Association, I want to commend U.S. Strategic Command and General Chilton in particular for creating this forum for discussion and for inviting nongovernmental experts to participate.

It is important because a reexamination and adjustment of the role of nuclear weapons in United States national security strategy is long overdue.

Although the U.S.-Soviet superpower competition that gave rise to the development, testing, and deployment of tens of thousands of nuclear weapons and thousands of strategic and tactical nuclear delivery systems ended nearly twenty years ago, many of the weapons and the policies developed to justify their possession and potential use persist.

U.S. nuclear weapons policy must be reoriented in order to help support and advance the comprehensive nuclear risk reduction agenda that has been outlined by President Barack Obama, which is urgently needed to address a wide range of proliferation challenges that are pushing the world close to a "nuclear tipping point."

Current Roles and Missions are Anachronistic and Obsolete

Since the early 1960s, the primary military mission for U.S. nuclear weapons has been counterforce, that is, the attack of military, mostly nuclear, targets and the enemy's leadership. The requirements for the counterforce mission perpetuate the most dangerous characteristics of nuclear forces, with weapons kept at high levels of alert, ready to launch upon warning of an enemy attack, and able to preemptively attack enemy forces.

U.S. nuclear weapons and the threat they might be used not only served to deter the Soviet Union and other Cold War adversaries from embarking on a course of action considered hostile or contrary to U.S. security interests, but they were also used to try to coerce Cold War era adversaries into taking more compliant diplomatic positions. In other words, U.S. policymakers viewed nuclear weapons as not only essential to a nuclear deterrence strategy but also a "compellence" strategy designed to coerce, or intimidate. Because policymakers and military planners considered the credibility and superiority of U.S. nuclear forces to be essential to these objectives, U.S. governments built up U.S. nuclear arsenals and delivery capabilities.

Unfortunately, even after two post-Cold War Nuclear Posture Reviews, the United States still has a nuclear force posture that calls for fewer operationally deployed strategic nuclear weapons but still essentially retains the same basic roles and retains all of the essential characteristics it had during the Cold War. Current doctrine calls for:

- a nuclear arsenal and readiness posture capable of delivering a devastating counterforce attack against Russia, China, and other potential regional nuclear-armed foes.
- the possible use of nuclear weapons to defend U.S. forces and allies against massive conventional military attacks; and
- the possible use of nuclear weapons to counter suspected chemical or biological weapons threats.

As a result the United States and Russia currently deploy more than 2,200 strategic warheads each on hundreds of strategic delivery systems. Many more strategic warheads are retained in reserve as a hedge against unspecified future security threats and the highly unlikely possibility of a catastrophic failure of one or more of the United States existing warhead types.

With the end of the Cold War and the development of new conventional technologies, the traditional purposes for U.S. nuclear weapons have become increasingly less relevant. It is also increasingly clear that yesterday's doctrines and the nuclear forces that derive from them make it more difficult to convince other states that nuclear weapons are a weapon of last resort that are not needed for their security.

However, justified U.S. fears of a bolt-from-the-blue Soviet nuclear attack once were, they no longer apply to our current world. Russia is seeking lower, verifiable ceilings on both deployed warheads and strategic delivery systems. Current and future U.S. conventional military power is more than sufficient to defeat any other conventional military aggressor.

Nor is there any conceivable circumstance that requires or could justify the use of U.S. nuclear weapons to deal with an unconventional chemical or biological weapons threat. As former Secretary of Defense William Perry said in April 1996 in reference to the suspected Libyan chemical weapons facility at Tarhunah, "[if] some nation were to attack the United States with chemical weapons ... we could make a devastating response without the use of nuclear weapons." Perry noted, "in every situation that I have seen so far, nuclear weapons would not be required for response."

U.S. nuclear doctrine should not treat nuclear weapons as a mere extension of the most powerful conventional forces. In the real world they are and must be treated separately. No U.S. President has seen fit to use nuclear weapons even in the midst of two protracted wars—Korea and Vietnam.

As General Colin Powell said in his 1995 autobiography: "No matter how small these nuclear payloads were, we would be crossing a threshold. Using nukes at this point would mark one of the most significant political decisions since Hiroshima."

The Adverse Effects of Current U.S. Nuclear Force Posture

So long as the United States hangs on to these obsolete Cold War nuclear missions and counterforce strategy and implies the potential use of nuclear weapons in response to conventional, chemical, and biological threats, U.S. nuclear weapons will be more of a liability than an asset in addressing today's highest national security priority: which is preventing the use of nuclear weapons and their proliferation to terrorists and additional states. Why is this the case?

A nuclear U.S. nuclear arsenal of many thousands of weapons does nothing to deter terrorists from using a nuclear bomb should they acquire one. Even with advances in nuclear forensics, attribution challenges make the threat of use of nuclear weapons against states that might in some way assist or facilitate nuclear terrorism impractical and imprudent.

In fact, the more nuclear weapons there are in the world, the more difficult it is to maintain adequate nuclear weapons security standards. Over time there is low-probability, but high-consequence risk that terrorists will get their hands on one.

Without significant reductions in the role and number of U.S. (and Russian) nuclear weapons, and without U.S. ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, our ability to harness the international support necessary to prevent nuclear terrorism and prevent new nuclear weapon states

will be greatly diminished.

Without these reductions and the test ban, many non-nuclear-weapon states will become less willing to agree to more effective IAEA safeguards, tighter constraints on the spread of sensitive nuclear fuel cycle technologies, tougher sanctions against violators, and improved interdiction efforts, among other steps.

There is another important reason for the United States to reduce its reliance and emphasis on nuclear weapons: so long as we do, other states with nuclear weapons—friends and foes alike— will or will be tempted to emphasize nuclear weapons into their own plans, policies, and practices, and seek to improve the capabilities and size of their nuclear forces and delivery systems. We should support measures, such as the CTBT, and pursue initiatives that would help prevent qualitative improvements in any nuclear arsenal—others or our own.

Quite simply, maintaining a large nuclear arsenal dedicated to perform a wide range of missions is unnecessary and contrary to the United States security interest. The number and role of U.S. nuclear weapons should be strictly limited to what is essential and unique.

Transforming U.S. Nuclear Policy: Moving to a "Core Nuclear Deterrence" Posture

In recent years, a growing number of national security experts and leaders, including President Barack Obama, have come to recognize the importance of dramatically changing the roles and missions of U.S. nuclear weapons in ways that:

- minimize the salience and number of nuclear weapons;
- advance concrete nuclear risk reduction steps consistent with the United States nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) disarmament obligations; and
- reinforce our commitment to eventually achieve a world without of nuclear weapons.

We can and should limit the role of our nuclear weapons to a core deterrence mission: maintaining a sufficient, survivable nuclear force for the sole purpose of deterring the use of nuclear weapons by another country against the United States or its allies. With secure forces, deterring a nuclear strike requires far fewer nuclear warheads and delivery systems than the current counterforce-oriented nuclear arsenal.

Thus, if the United States were to adopt a policy that explicitly limits the purpose of nuclear weapons to preventing their use by others, then it could drastically reduce its nuclear inventory to a total of no more than 1,000 weapons of all types—strategic, non-strategic, deployed, and nondeployed—within the next few years. As outlined in a 2005 Arms Control Association report by Dr. Sidney Drell and Ambassador James Goodby, the United States could quickly downshift to a strategic triad of:

- some 288 warheads on a fleet of three or more Trident submarines on patrol,
- 100 warheads on 100 land-based Minuteman missiles, and
- about two dozen nuclear-capable strategic bombers.

Comparable numbers of nondeployed warheads and delivery systems could serve as a "responsive" force.

Such a force and revised targeting strategy would be more than enough to leave no one in doubt that the United States retains the ability of devastating retaliation against any nuclear-armed state in the event they would initiate a nuclear attack against the United States or its allies.

If the United States were to adopt a core deterrence strategy, it could and should eliminate the requirement and plans for rapid launch in response to a nuclear attack. Instead, the United States should adopt a posture that is geared to giving the commander-in-chief far more time to consider his response to a nuclear attack or provocation. We should notify Russia of this policy and urge it to make similar changes in its policy and practices. This would significantly reduce the risk of accidental

or unauthorized launch. It is reckless that we remain dependent on the effectiveness of Russian command and control systems 24/7, 365 days a year.

With a core deterrence posture, U.S. policymakers would no longer make ambiguous statements regarding the possible use of nuclear weapons except in the event of the use of nuclear weapons by others. In other words, the U.S. officials should end the practice of stating that “all options are on the table” in response to lesser threats.

A core deterrence strategy would not require new types of nuclear warheads. To reinforce the United States commitment to reducing the role and missions of U.S. nuclear weapons, the United States should also declare that it will not develop or produce new design warheads or modified warheads for the purpose of creating new military capabilities.

Adoption of a core nuclear deterrence policy and deeper, verifiable U.S. and Russian nuclear force reductions would also open the way for President Obama to fulfill his goal of initiating “a high-level dialogue among all the declared nuclear-weapon states on how to...move toward meaningful reductions and the eventual elimination of all nuclear weapons.”

A core deterrence approach would also reinforce existing U.S. negative security assurances vis-à-vis nonnuclear weapon states and support our positive security assurances to allies in the event of nuclear attack upon them.

Those who suggest that deep U.S. nuclear weapons reductions would lead certain U.S. allies to consider building their own nuclear arsenals exaggerate the role of “extended nuclear deterrence” today and ignore the risks and costs of going nuclear. Many factors beyond sheer numbers of nuclear weapons mitigate against a decision by a U.S. ally to go nuclear, not the least of which is the diplomatic and conventional military support the United States can and would provide.

Implications for Maintaining a Smaller Nuclear Stockpile

So long as nuclear weapons exist, the United States will and can maintain its arsenal in a safe, secure, and reliable fashion. Contrary to the suggestions of some, the United States is NOT on the brink of losing the capability to maintain its nuclear weapons and political support for core stockpile stewardship activities is strong. In fact, the United States’ current capability to maintain its existing stockpile warheads is more than adequate and does not depend on a program of nuclear test explosions.

With sufficient multiyear funding the existing U.S. nuclear arsenal has been—and can continue to be—maintained and modernized through non-nuclear tests and evaluations, and as necessary, the replacement or remanufacture of key components to previous design specifications.

Since 1994, a rigorous certification process has determined each warhead type in the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal to be safe and reliable. Life Extension Programs have successfully modernized major warhead types in the arsenal and stretched out their effective service life for decades to come.

Future year budget requests should focus the resources of the nuclear weapons laboratories and the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) on core tasks, and the weapons labs must avoid unnecessary alterations to existing weapons through warhead life extension refurbishment. New evidence on the longevity of weapons plutonium has removed any urgency to engineer and manufacture new design replacement warheads.

A clear “no new nuclear weapons” policy, as outlined above, would help counter possible perceptions that an augmented stockpile stewardship program will lead to qualitative improvements in the military capabilities that could undermine a principle benefit of the CTBT to disarmament and the NPT, which is preventing the development of new and more deadly nuclear weapons.

Bottom Line

Yesterday’s nuclear doctrines and arsenals do not fit today’s realities. All of us here have a responsibility and duty help implement the steps necessary to dramatically reduce the number and salience of nuclear weapons by shifting to a “core nuclear deterrence” posture,” restore U.S.

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credibility on disarmament, maintain our enduring nuclear stockpile in the absence of nuclear test explosions, and open a conversation with the world's other nuclear-armed states on joint measures to reduce and eventually eliminate global stockpiles.

As President Obama said in a speech on Monday July 27, "... together, we must strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty by renewing its basic bargain: countries with nuclear weapons will move towards disarmament; countries without nuclear weapons will not acquire them; and all countries can access peaceful nuclear energy. A balance of terror cannot hold. In the 21st century, a strong and global regime is the only basis for security from the world's deadliest weapons."

Finally, as I advocate for a shrinking of our nuclear arsenal and the role of nuclear weapons in our military strategy, I want to express my respect and appreciation for those who serve the Strategic Forces Command. STRATCOM serves with dedication and distinction in carrying out the policy directions of civilian authority. If we are to succeed in moving to a safer world, your continuing high quality service will be critical.

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