

Dealing With Long-Range Missile Threats: It's All About Russia

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Dealing With Long-Range Missile Threats: It's All About Russia

By Greg Thielmann, Senior Fellow, with Luke Champlin November 20, 2009

The nearly 2,000 nuclear warheads on Russian ICBMs and submarine-launched ballistic missiles constitute the sole near-term existential threat to the United States. The U.S. response to this threat has been to maintain the nuclear war-fighting posture adopted during the Cold War. Yet, this posture does not lead toward an improvement in U.S. security; it merely reinforces Russia's incentive to persist in its own anachronistic security calculus. The New START and a transformational post-Cold War Nuclear Posture Review would clear the path for major U.S. and Russian arms reductions, laying the foundation for a rejuvenated effort to halt nuclear nonproliferation and for engaging other nuclear-weapon states in arms control.

Highlights

- International political circumstances have changed radically since the end of the Cold War, but the posture of U.S. nuclear forces has changed little. These forces are still largely oriented toward deterring Russia from a nuclear attack against the United States or its allies.
 - In spite of significant numerical reductions in U.S. and Russian strategic arsenals and a much less crisis-prone bilateral relationship, both sides maintain hundreds of nuclear-armed ballistic missiles on high alert, poised to launch within minutes.
- The U.S. Nuclear Posture Review and the New START negotiations present opportunities to get off the strategic nuclear treadmill, but Russian strategic forces will not go away of their own accord because Moscow has realistic options for maintaining or exceeding the operational warhead levels of the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty. Negotiating further verifiable and irreversible nuclear reductions will be required to lock in lower levels of Russian strategic nuclear forces.
- China poses much less of a nuclear threat to the United States. Chinese nuclear forces cannot threaten the U.S. deterrent, and they do not require a large number of U.S. warheads to be countered.
 - Moreover, the slow growth of Beijing's minimal deterrent capability and the posture and training of Chinese nuclear forces underscore the "delayed second strike" strategy proclaimed in Chinese military doctrine.
- Neither North Korea nor Iran now threatens the U.S. homeland. Even worst-case scenarios posit that these two states could have only a few, very vulnerable ICBMs by the end of the next decade. Such contingencies would have no appreciable effect on the required size of the U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal.
- The global path to zero nuclear weapons passes first through a U.S.-Russian wicket. A willingness by the United States to make meaningful changes in its existing nuclear posture can facilitate negotiation of deep reductions in Russian nuclear forces and lead to progress on curbing the spread of nuclear weapons to additional states, as well as on engaging other nuclear-weapon states in arms control.

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