Reviewing Nuclear Guidance: Putting Obama's Words Into Action

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The success of President Barack Obama's goal of reducing the role of nuclear weapons and setting out on a path toward their elimination is at a critical juncture. Two and a half years after his Prague speech reinvigorated the international community with a promise to "put an end to Cold War thinking" by "reduc[ing] the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy,"[1] Obama has ordered a review of the requirements for how the military should plan for the potential use of nuclear weapons.

The review is probably Obama's most important and perhaps last chance to change the role that nuclear weapons have traditionally played in U.S. national security strategy. The result of the review will be a broad rewriting of directives and analyses that are used to guide military planners in preparing the country's forces and strategic nuclear war plan. How different the new guidance will be depends in no small measure on how efficiently the president is able to steer the review through a morass of interservice competition, institutional inertia, Cold War mind-sets, defense contractor lobbying, and personal preferences.

Like all policy reviews, this one will trigger fierce battles among departments, agencies, and individuals who support or disagree with the president's vision. Some will argue that the United States can and should reduce its nuclear forces and that the nuclear mission and war plan, more than two decades after the end of the Cold War, still are dominated by Cold War thinking. Others will argue that the current force structure has served the United States and its allies well and that the world is too dangerous and uncertain to scale back forces and mission further until Russia and China become less adversarial.

Obama will need to maintain keen and persistent oversight to ensure that the review is being implemented according to his wishes. If he is not attentive or loses focus, the review will almost certainly be co-opted and diffused by various bureaucracies.

This is not a public process. Reviewing the basis for the strategic nuclear war plan is as secret as it gets. Traditionally, the war plan has had its own level of classification. When it was known as the SIOP (Single Integrated Operational Plan), it was SIOP-ESI, for Extremely Sensitive Information. The more recent versions are likely the same. Despite its importance, few in the White House or Congress have ever seen the plan, much less understand how it is created. Unlike the process the administration used in drafting its "Nuclear Posture Review [NPR] Report," there will be no unclassified document to inform the public debate or the international community. If the past is any indication, the only information the world will hear about the result of this review is a carefully leaked story to a major newspaper and a few general remarks by officials, if that.

Preparing for Further Reductions

According to national security adviser Tom Donilon, the Obama administration is "making preparations for the next round of nuclear reductions." As a consequence, the strategic requirements for the U.S. nuclear posture will need to be reassessed, including "potential changes in targeting requirements and alert postures."[2] General Robert Kehler, the head of U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM), acknowledged the administration's intention to "review and revise the nation's nuclear
strategy and guidance on the roles and missions of nuclear weapons."[3]

Outdated presidential nuclear guidance can be a hindrance to reducing nuclear arms and lead to wasteful spending on excessive force levels. During the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) III talks in 1996-1997, for example, it became clear that the presidential guidance dated back to October 1981 (President Ronald Reagan's National Security Decision Directive-13), a decade before the end of the Cold War. In November 1997, the Clinton administration issued an updated nuclear weapons employment policy (Presidential Decision Directive-60, or PDD-60) that reduced strike planning against Russia, but increased strike planning against China and so-called rogue states (or "states of concern," as they later were known) with weapons of mass destruction (WMD). However, the military's interpretation of PDD-60 still translated into a stockpile of 10,000 nuclear warheads. When the administration of George W. Bush sought to reduce the stockpile, it issued an updated nuclear employment policy (National Security Presidential Directive-14, or NSPD-14) in June 2002. That directive lowered the planning requirement against Russia, allowing for a stockpile decrease of nearly 50 percent while increasing planning against regional proliferators.

The force levels set by New START, which entered into force earlier this year, also are based on the Bush administration's guidance. "The force level that was agreed to and the assessments that were made... were based upon a series of deterrence objectives that have been in place for quite some time," according to Kehler.[4] In other words, the U.S. nuclear force level had been in excess of national security needs for some time, making it possible to trim the force level for New START without changing the guidance. Under the terms of the treaty, the new force level does not have to be reached until 2018. Thus, there is not an urgent need to update the guidance if no further cuts are made.

If there are negotiations on a new round of reductions, however, the administration needs to develop a series of force structure options, and that will require new guidance. "Reductions below the level that we have now are going to require some more fundamental questions about force structure," according to Gary Samore, the White House coordinator for arms control and WMD terrorism. Samore said the United States has "reached a level in our forces where further reductions will raise questions about whether we retain the triad or whether we go to a system that only is a dyad."[5] The triad currently includes intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), sea-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and long-range (heavy) bombers.

Shortly before stepping down from his position as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen offered a similar assessment. "At some point in time, that triad becomes very, very expensive... [A]t some point in time, in the future, certainly I think a decision will have to be made in terms of whether we keep the triad or drop it down to a dyad," he said.[6]

The Bureaucratic Labyrinth

The targeting review began this summer with Obama ordering the Department of Defense to develop options for reducing the number and role of nuclear weapons. It will end with publication of an updated or a new strategic nuclear war plan. Between those two points lie 12 to 18 months of working groups, studies, simulations, and the creation of guidance documents that culminate in the war plan itself.[7]

Along the way, scores of officials from the military services, federal agencies, and defense contractors will pore over existing guidance, planning documents, and war plans to determine Obama's intentions and how they might affect the posture. Emerging from this initial review process will be a series of options that that will be provided to Obama. He will either choose one or ask for modifications and revisions. Eventually, there will be a presidential policy directive (PPD) that describes his priorities on what the new nuclear weapons employment policy is.

That is only the beginning of the process. From the time the new PPD leaves Obama's desk, scores of civilian and military officials will begin to "translate" the guidance by adding their own interpretation of the president's words that may alter or even undermine his intentions.

This is the fate of almost any policy generated from top levels of the executive branch. Former
STRATCOM Commander Admiral James Ellis recalls that "[the] president's direction to me was less than two pages; the Joint Staff's explanation of what the president really meant to say was twenty-six pages."[8] In the words of Admiral James Miller, who was deputy director of the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff under President Richard Nixon, "It is in the implementation that the true strategy evolves, regardless of what is generated in the political and policy-meeting rooms of any Administration."[9]

Guidance for the Employment of the Force. The first step in implementing the PPD will be preparation of the Guidance for the Employment of the Force (GEF), a document created by the Office of the Secretary of Defense. The current GEF dates from 2008 and is a combination of the previous Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy and several other guidance documents. The GEF contains a list of specific strike options and targeting objectives against specific adversaries based on the presidential guidance. The options include Emergency Response Options, Selective Attack Options, Basic Attack Options, and Directed/Adaptive Planning Capability options. They range in size from employment of hundreds of nuclear warheads in a single strike against a broad section of an adversary's targets to the use of a few warheads against a few targets in a limited strike.

Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan. The second step is formulation of the Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan (Nuclear Supplement), or JSCP-N, which is produced by the Joint Staff and is based on the GEF and presidential guidance. The JSCP-N directs and initiates the deliberate joint operations planning process for development of operational plans by assigning planning tasks and nuclear strike forces to the combatant commanders tasked with nuclear operations.[10]

Command Guidance. The third step is the Command Guidance issued by the commander of STRATCOM. Based on the PPD, GEF, and JSCP-N, the Command Guidance instructs the Joint Functional Component Command for Global Strike (JFCC-GS) at STRATCOM how to modify the strategic nuclear war plan so it meets the new guidance. The JFCC-GS, formerly known as the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff, is the Component Command at STRATCOM that designs, maintains, and, if so ordered by the president and the STRATCOM commander, executes the strategic war plan.

OPLAN 8010-08 (formerly SIOP). The fourth step is the production of the strategic war plan itself and its promulgation to the military services that maintain the nuclear forces for use by STRATCOM. The current plan is known as "Operations Plan (OPLAN) 8010-08 (Change 1) Strategic Deterrence and Global Strike." As noted above, the war plan was known as the SIOP during the Cold War. OPLAN 8010-08 (Change 1) went into effect on February 1, 2009, and remains the current plan.[11]

Options for Change

Each U.S. administration reviews the four aspects of nuclear policy (declaratory policy, acquisition, deployment, and employment). The Obama administration's review has the potential to be significant because it occurs at a point in the nuclear arms reduction process where changes begin to go beyond simply trimming Cold War force levels to requiring more-fundamental decisions about the nuclear force structure and mission in order to carry out the president's ambitious agenda.

The Prague speech declaration that the administration intends to "put an end to Cold War thinking" by "reduc[ing] the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy" is a rather high bar for the targeting review process to understand and implement. Although Obama did not specify what he meant by "Cold War thinking," the use of the term raises the question of exactly how the administration can reduce the role of nuclear weapons in ways that put an end to such thinking. If the administration is serious and receptive, numerous changes could be adopted.

Reduce Target Categories. One possibility is to reduce the number or categories of targets against which military planners are required to plan nuclear strikes. OPLAN 8010-08 is understood to include strike options against military forces, WMD infrastructure, military and national leadership, and war-supporting infrastructure. Not all categories are covered in all strike options; some may be focused on one or a few.

One or more of these target categories could be dropped or trimmed significantly. Nuclear planning in the 21st century will not be about winning nuclear wars by using nuclear strikes to deplete war-
fighting assets but more about ensuring the right kind of retaliatory capability to deter nuclear attack in the first place.

Reduce Damage Expectancy. The new guidance could lower the requirement for how much damage must be accomplished to ensure that a target is destroyed. As specified in weapons effects manuals and guidance documents, "light damage" means "rubble," "moderate damage" means "gravel," and "severe damage" means "dust."[12]

If the guidance requires that target X be severely damaged rather than moderately damaged, then either additional warheads will have to be employed, or the characteristics of the weapon will have to be changed to make it more accurate or give it a higher yield. Therefore, how the damage criteria are set will determine a great deal about the size and composition of the arsenal. If damage expectancy can be lowered, then the number and capability of the weapons can be reduced.

Reduce the Mission. Another option is to reduce the missions for nuclear weapons. Currently, nuclear weapons are used to hold at risk all kinds of WMD facilities and systems, military forces, leadership, and war-supporting capabilities of six adversaries. Surely, this list can be narrowed.

The NPR Report created a new doctrine, according to Donilon, "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.[13]

Yet, the report also declares that "there remains a narrow range of contingencies in which U.S. nuclear weapons may still play a role in deterring" an attack against the United States or its allies and partners involving conventional, chemical, or biological weapons. "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."[14]

A sole-purpose mission would end nuclear planning against half of the six adversaries in OPLAN 8010-08. The six are not identified, but thought to be China, Iran, North Korea, Russia, Syria, and a September 11-type attacker with unconventional weapons. Ending the requirement to plan nuclear strikes against conventional, chemical, or biological attacks would have the additional benefit of removing the contradiction with U.S negative security assurances, according to which the United States has pledged not to attack or threaten with nuclear weapons countries that are members of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and in compliance with the treaty.

To truly end Cold War thinking, the review would have to change the mission against the core adversaries, Russia and China.

Reduce the Number and Diversity of Strike Options. The guidance review could reduce the number of strike options that planners make available to the president. Post-Cold War nuclear war planning has been characterized by a proliferation of strike options precipitated by a renewed focus on proliferation of unconventional weapons to states of concern and a fear that they may share this technology with terrorist organizations.

The Clinton administration's PDD-60 and the Bush administration's NSPD-14 each expanded planning against regional proliferators. "STRATCOM is changing the nation's nuclear war plan from a single, large, integrated plan to a family of plans applicable in a wider range of scenarios," Ellis said in 2003.[15] The new plan "provides more flexible options to assure allies, and dissuade, deter, and if necessary, defeat adversaries in a wider range of contingencies," Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Richard Myers later explained.[16]

The philosophy seems to be that more diverse threats require more diverse options and all are offered to the president. A frequently heard claim is that "you cannot take options away from the president," but of course, one can. U.S. legislation and policy have done so frequently in the past, for example by prohibiting indiscriminate attacks on civilians and removing options to use chemical or biological weapons.
Reduce Alert Levels. During the 2008 presidential election campaign, Obama's agenda included a pledge to work with Russia to take ballistic missiles off "hair-trigger" alert. For the first couple of months of 2009, the pledge was listed on the White House Web site. Once New START negotiations with Russia got under way, however, the pledge disappeared; the administration, as it indicated in the NPR Report, instead decided to maintain the current readiness level of nuclear forces. That was a complete policy reversal, although perhaps not a final one. As Samore explained earlier this year, as part of the target review, the White House is "expecting that options will be presented to the president that will look at the implications of changing the alert status and postures and what impact that would have on force size and structure."[17]

Predictably, some influential military and former officials have warned against de-alerting weapons, arguing that re-alerting them in a crisis would risk triggering escalation by causing an adversary to conclude that a first strike was imminent. Others have argued that nuclear forces on alert continuously pose a first-strike threat and that U.S. nuclear strategy already includes scenarios for increasing alert levels in a crisis and uploading thousands of reserve warheads.

The United States currently maintains an estimated 800 warheads on high alert, mainly on ICBMs and a handful of ballistic missile submarines, an important motivation for Russia to maintain a portion of its strategic nuclear forces on high alert as well. It is difficult to think of a feature of the current U.S. nuclear posture that symbolizes Cold War thinking more dramatically than the maintenance of strategic forces at high levels of alert. The ICBMs can be fired within minutes, and the submarines patrol at an "operational tempo" similar to that during the Cold War.

Short of fully de-alerting, a half step might be to remove the requirement for the military to plan for prompt launch of nuclear weapons, for example in a preventive attack or to limit the damage an adversarial attack could inflict. This change would significantly reduce the high requirement for the operational readiness of nuclear forces. The NPR Report described efforts to lengthen the decision time for nuclear use, a related but limited measure.

Reduce Damage Limitation Options. A classic Cold War mission is to seek to limit the damage an adversary's WMD forces can inflict on the United States and its allies by destroying the forces before they can be used. Although much less emphasis is placed on this mission today compared with the Cold War, the mission gained new life with the Bush administration's Global Strike mission in 2003, which planned for pre-emptive conventional and nuclear attacks against WMD targets in states of concern.[18] Removing the requirement to plan for damage-limitation options would essentially create a no-first-use policy without publicly committing to one.

Reduce From Triad to Dyad. The statements by senior White House and Defense Department officials that deeper cuts may require cutting one of the legs of the triad would, if implemented, require a major rewriting of the guidance and the strategic nuclear war plan that is derived from it. Targets previously covered by warheads on the amputated leg would have to be covered by warheads on the remaining two legs, or a decision would have to be made to stop holding those targets at risk. Moving to a dyad would require significant changes to the strike options within the war plan and the way forces are deployed.

Most analysts agree that the bombers are the most likely leg to be cut. The land-based and sea-based ballistic missile legs already carry most of the day-to-day deterrence mission, with bombers serving as a backup. Yet, a missile-only posture would retain the most offensive and potentially destabilizing characteristics of the arsenal and give up the bomber's capability to signal in a crisis or be recalled after a strike has been launched. If the goal is to move to deep cuts and reduce the role of nuclear weapons, then one of the ballistic missile legs will have to be cut.

Reduce Counterforce Planning. Another option is to reduce or end the counterforce mission of nuclear weapons. Counterforce is associated with the ability to attack military and leadership targets, with forces kept capable of launching on warning or pre-empting through high levels of alert.[19] Historically, a half-dozen or so factors formed a counterforce targeting strategy, beginning in the early 1960s and continuing in the decades that followed. The most important factor was the...
geopolitical context of the Cold War with sophisticated intelligence capabilities and ever more accurate ballistic missiles. The identification of countless new targets in the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact generated requirements for new warheads to cover them. Soviet efforts to harden facilities to withstand nuclear blasts further intensified the race for additional capabilities to sharpen U.S. nuclear counterforce capabilities.

The current central nuclear posture of the United States is widely understood to be primarily one of a counterforce attack with force-on-force planning for nuclear weapons used to destroy an adversary's nuclear weapons and other strategic assets. Because some of the targets are near or within population centers, however, countervalue targeting (sometimes called "city-busting") is an unintended consequence. In fact, even pure counterforce attacks are likely to kill millions of civilians.

The degree to which the requirements that resulted in nuclear counterforce are still operative will partially determine whether counterforce can be reduced or abandoned and replaced with something else. Maintaining a credible deterrent is frequently described as threatening with highly reliable nuclear forces the targets an adversary values most. However, things are never simple or static when it comes to deterrence; and few terms in discussions of nuclear weaponry are more misused, misunderstood, or distorted than "deterrence." Indeed, as the Cold War vividly demonstrated, the concept of deterrence has been used to justify excessive nuclear forces levels and dangerous strategies.

Deterrence can be limited and simple or, as it turned out, expansive and complex. Over the decades, the concept went through many transmogrifications, ending up late in President Jimmy Carter’s administration and then Reagan’s to mean that the Soviet Union could only be deterred if it knew that the United States could fight and prevail in a nuclear war. Central to that goal was that the Soviet leadership and its instruments of political control and military power be in the crosshairs and be declared vulnerable.

Today's nuclear capabilities and the thrust of OPLAN 8010-08 are the direct descendants of this Cold War counterforce race. "Counterforce is preemptive, or offensively reactive," STRATCOM concluded in a document prepared for the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 2002. "Every [nuclear, biological, or chemical] weapon that is destroyed before it is used... is one less we must intercept... or absorb... and mitigate." To end Cold War thinking, the Obama administration's targeting review must re-examine the need for nuclear counterforce to reduce the role of nuclear weapons.

Conclusion

Obama has an important opportunity to update the nuclear policy guidance for the U.S. nuclear force structure and employment policy in ways that would break from obsolete past practices, make future reductions possible, reduce the role of nuclear weapons, and improve U.S. and global security.

The current U.S. nuclear arsenal and the force structure planned under New START are far larger than required to deter a nuclear attack from Russia or any other nuclear-armed adversary on the United States and its allies. The oversized arsenal reflects the fact that U.S. military planners base targeting calculations on Cold War assumptions, including that U.S. forces must be able to destroy enemy nuclear forces and a wide range of other "strategic" assets in order to be credible. Consequently, previous nuclear policy reviews have only trimmed U.S. nuclear forces.

The guidance review should result in a smaller set of new strike options based on what is sufficient to deter the United States' potential nuclear-armed adversaries from initiating a nuclear attack on the United States, its allies, or its partners. The strike options should be based on a new approach to nuclear planning that significantly scales back the number and types of targets, the damage expectancy, the counterforce focus and force-on-force planning, and the operational readiness of the forces. This approach would significantly reduce the number of targets and missions and facilitate further reductions in the number of nuclear warheads and delivery platforms, while maintaining a secure and sufficiently credible nuclear deterrent.

Such steps would make the U.S. nuclear posture more consistent with the Obama administration's policy of significantly reducing the number and role of nuclear weapons and strengthening
nonproliferation. An added benefit would be to facilitate significant budgetary savings in the years ahead by reducing the costs associated with current, multibillion-dollar plans to modernize not only each leg of the U.S. nuclear triad, but also nonstrategic nuclear capabilities, nuclear warheads, and the nuclear production complex. Such reductions will, in turn, also help convince Russia that it is in its security and financial interests to pursue further, parallel reductions in its equally bloated nuclear forces. **ACT**

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**ENDNOTES**


13. Donilon, "Prague Agenda."


17. "Pursuing the Prague Agenda."


19. For a perceptive analysis of the formation of counterforce and the growth of the strategic arsenal, see Miller, *Stockpile*.
