Falling Short of Prague: Obama’s Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy

Hans M. Kristensen

Reviews of presidential nuclear weapons employment guidance can result in significant changes, but they rarely do. Nuclear guidance changes slowly, usually very slowly. Instead of forging radical new directions for nuclear policy, presidential guidance generally does little more than catch up with reality.

The Obama administration’s guidance, announced June 19, appears to fit the mold. Rather than to “put an end to Cold War thinking,” as President Barack Obama promised in his Prague speech in 2009, the guidance appears to continue Cold War thinking by reaffirming decades-old core principles and characteristics of nuclear-strike planning. The guidance makes relatively small adjustments to the U.S. posture in response to changes in the international environment after the Cold War and enhancements of non-nuclear military capabilities.

According to a nine-page Pentagon summary report for Congress on the revised nuclear weapons employment strategy, the new guidance “is consistent with the fundamentals of deterrence that have long guided U.S. nuclear weapons policy, but with appropriate changes to meet today’s strategic environment.”[1]

The main purpose of the new guidance is to translate the findings and conclusions of the 2010 “Nuclear Posture Review [NPR] Report” into instructions for how the military should plan for the role and structure of nuclear forces to deter potential adversaries from attacking the United States and its allies and partners with nuclear, chemical, biological, or conventional weapons and, if deterrence fails, how the military should employ nuclear weapons to defeat the adversaries on terms favorable to the United States and its allies and partners.

The Nuclear Forces

The most obvious achievement of the new guidance is the decision that the United States can secure itself and its allies and partners with “up to one-third” fewer deployed strategic warheads than permitted by the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). If pursued through “negotiated cuts with Russia,” this decision could potentially remove about 500 additional warheads from U.S. ballistic missiles.

Although the new guidance opens up the possibility of reducing the number of deployed warheads, it “does not direct any changes to the currently deployed nuclear forces of the United States.” It states that the United States will retain a triad of strategic nuclear forces deployed on land, aircraft, and submarines, backed up by nonstrategic nuclear-capable aircraft.

Removal and storage of up to one-third of the deployed strategic warheads would continue the recent trend of reducing the number of warheads on ballistic missiles, but it would not in and of itself require warheads to be destroyed and therefore would not make the reduction irreversible. The warheads most likely would become part of the “hedge” of stored warheads, which could be loaded back onto their launchers in a crisis. Their removal would not directly affect the number of nuclear weapons in the U.S. stockpile.
The U.S. military already has more warheads in the hedge than are deployed on delivery systems. The additional removal of deployed strategic warheads envisioned by the new guidance would further increase the size of that force. The hedge warheads serve two purposes: to increase the number of warheads loaded onto missiles and bombers if Russia or China were to significantly increase its arsenal and to ensure that there are sufficient quantities of one warhead type to compensate for technical failure of another warhead type or delivery system. Seen from Moscow, however, the growing hedge is a destabilizing trend that could enable the United States to deploy nuclear weapons in excess of New START levels and achieve a strategic advantage over Russia in a crisis.

The new guidance appears to attempt to reduce the size of the hedge. The Pentagon report states that the new guidance “codifies an alternative approach to hedging” that allows the United States to meet its requirements with fewer nondeployed warheads. It is a little unclear, but the guidance report implies that the United States needs to keep only enough nondeployed warheads to guard against technical failures, not additional warheads to increase the number of warheads loaded onto missiles and bombers in response to an increased threat from Russia or China: “A non-deployed hedge that is sized and ready to address these technical risks will also provide the United States the capability to upload additional weapons in response to geopolitical developments.” In other words, the hedge does not need to contain two categories of warheads, only one. Whether this “alternative approach” is cosmetic or would lead to real reductions in the size of the hedge remains to be seen.

A reduction of the hedge appears to require two changes. The first is the creation of a more “responsive infrastructure” of new and modified warhead production facilities to build additional warheads if needed. This plan from the 2010 NPR is under strain because of pressures on overall defense spending as well as significant program cost overruns that will delay and curtail construction.

Second, the new guidance calls for ambitious and very costly warhead life extension programs to build what the National Nuclear Security Administration calls “interoperable warheads” that can be used on more than one delivery system, reducing the overall number of warhead types in the stockpile. Although these interoperable warheads will use previously tested nuclear components from existing warheads, the parts would be used in new combinations and stretch the credibility of Obama’s pledge, as outlined in the 2010 NPR Report, not to build new nuclear warheads. Because these modified warheads will be different from the warheads they replace, the old warheads will have to be retained until the military has sufficient confidence in the reliability of the new warhead designs.

As a result of the long timeline for building the costly responsive infrastructure and gaining confidence in the reliability of new interoperable warheads, it may take a long time to achieve the reductions in the size of the hedge promised by the new approach.

In reality, many warheads in the current hedge probably could be retired much sooner because there is no real need to significantly increase the number of warheads placed on missiles and bombers in a crisis. The Pentagon is confident that Russia would “not be able to achieve a militarily significant advantage by any plausible expansion of its strategic nuclear forces” and that even a surprise first strike from a nuclear force significantly above the level mandated by New START “would have little to no effects on the U.S. assured second-strike capabilities that underwrite our strategic deterrence posture.”

Moreover, after two decades of successfully certifying the reliability of the warheads with significantly improved surveillance and maintenance capabilities and without nuclear explosive testing, the threat of a catastrophic technical failure suddenly rendering a significant portion of the stockpile inoperable seems to have declined significantly. Producing new interoperable warhead designs or significantly modifying existing warheads appear to be the only real factor that could decrease confidence in the stockpile.

**The Role of Nuclear Weapons**

Reducing the role of nuclear weapons has been an important pillar of the Obama administration’s
nuclear policy. A White House summary says that the new guidance “narrows U.S. nuclear strategy to focus on only those objectives and missions that are necessary for deterrence in the 21st century.”[4] Why the strategy would do anything else is not clear. The Clinton and Bush administrations used similar language.

The new guidance confirms that the “fundamental role” of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack and that the United States has a policy of making that role the “sole purpose” of U.S. nuclear weapons—eventually. It is not clear what conditions would have to be met to move to a sole-purpose policy, other than unspecified enhancements of conventional and missile defense capabilities. As such, the guidance reaffirms the conclusion by the NPR Report that “there remains a narrow range of contingencies in which U.S. nuclear weapons may still play a role in deterring a conventional or [chemical or biological weapons] attack against the United States or its allies and partners.”[5]

Defense Department and White House documents describe steps that have the potential to further reduce the role of nuclear weapons. They also direct the Pentagon to examine additional steps to give the president “more options by directing planning for non-nuclear strikes.” Yet, it is unclear how or to what extent this actually reduces the role that nuclear weapons serve.

The clearest initiative appears to be that the new guidance directs the Defense Department to undertake concrete steps toward reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy by, in the words of the Pentagon summary report, “conduct[ing] deliberate planning for non-nuclear-strike options to assess what objectives and effects could be achieved through integrated non-nuclear-strike options, and to propose possible means to make these objectives and effects achievable.” James Miller, the U.S. undersecretary of defense for policy, explains that the guidance “includes very deliberate guidance for planning for the use of non-nuclear capabilities.”[6] The White House summary describes the task as “strengthen[ing] non-nuclear capabilities and reduc[ing] the role of nuclear weapons in deterring non-nuclear attacks.”

The idea is that advanced conventional forces and missile defenses can take on some tasks and missions in some scenarios that are currently served by nuclear weapons. “Although they are not a substitute for nuclear weapons, planning for non-nuclear strike options is a central part of reducing the role of nuclear weapons,” the Pentagon guidance summary states. This vision is consistent with language in the Quadrennial Defense Review, Ballistic Missile Defense Review, and NPR reports.[7]

**Launch Under Attack**

Importantly, the guidance also directs the Defense Department to examine and reduce the role of the concept of “launch under attack” in U.S. contingency planning. Under this Cold War strategy, a country launches a nuclear response once it confirms that it is under nuclear attack. This strategy is potentially extremely dangerous because it compresses the time that national leaders have in which to make significant decisions that could lead to all-out nuclear war and immense destruction.

The main implication of the guidance’s shift in this area is that the White House, two decades after the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union, has finally acknowledged that “the potential for a surprise, disarming nuclear attack is exceedingly remote.” Yet, it is not clear how and how much the new guidance requires the military to reduce the role of this strategy. Although the Pentagon is required to examine and reduce the role of this strategy, Defense Department and White House documents state that the United States will retain the capability to launch under attack if necessary.

Reducing the role of the launch-under-attack strategy while retaining the ability to carry out such a strategy probably means that the Defense Department will rely less on the strategy for most of its nuclear planning. Indeed, the strategy seems to have little relevance in any but the most extreme war-fighting scenarios; nor does it matter much for deterrence as long as the United States maintains a sufficient, secure retaliatory capability. The key potential benefit of reducing reliance on the strategy appears to be extending the decision time for the commander-in-chief during a crisis.

A key question is how reducing the role of the launch-under-attack strategy will affect the alert posture of U.S. nuclear forces. Currently, nearly all 450 intercontinental ballistic missiles and 100 to
120 submarine-launched ballistic missiles are on alert with about 800 warheads, ready to launch five to 15 minutes after receiving a launch order. During the presidential election campaign in 2008, Obama said that “[k]eeping nuclear weapons ready to launch on a moment’s notice is a dangerous relic of the Cold War,” noting that President George W. Bush had promised to address the issue but had not done so. Obama pledged to “work with Russia to end such outdated Cold War policies in a mutual and verifiable way.”[8] To date, Obama has not followed through on this goal.

Odd as it may seem, the reduction of the role of the launch-under-attack strategy does not appear to affect the alert posture directly. The guidance review “did examine postures that involved some additional de-alerting,” according to Miller, but “found that additional steps in this regard would be difficult to verify on the other side, and more importantly could be destabilizing in a crisis as alert levels were raised back up.”[9]

According to Admiral Richard Mies, former head of U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM), the reason the alert posture is not directly affected by a reduction in the role of the launch-under-attack strategy is that U.S. forces are configured so that the United States has “the capability to respond promptly to any attack, without relying upon ‘launch on warning’ or ‘launch under attack.’”[10] Therefore, the decision by the White House to reduce reliance on the launch-under-attack strategy may simply be a case of the official guidance catching up with operational reality.

Reaffirming Counterforce

A particularly striking feature of the new guidance is its strong reaffirmation of counterforce attack—as opposed to countervalue attack—as the basis for U.S. nuclear strategy. A strategy based on counterforce attack employs nuclear weapons to destroy the nuclear forces and other military capabilities of an adversary or render them impotent. “The new guidance requires the United States to maintain significant counterforce capabilities against potential adversaries” and rejects less ambitious countervalue, or “minimum deterrence,” strategies. The 2010 NPR Report did not make an explicit case for a counterforce strategy.

Counterforce attack, which is the most dynamic and ambitious form of nuclear planning, requires more and better weapons to hold at risk the most difficult targets. Indeed, counterforce attack “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.”[11] Countervalue attack, on the other hand, is focused on the destruction or neutralization of selected enemy military and military-related targets such as industries, resources, or institutions that contribute to the enemy’s ability to wage war and therefore tends to require fewer and less accurate weapons.[12] Contrary to common perception, countervalue strategy does not require attacks on cities. Reaffirming counterforce attack as the basis of U.S. nuclear strategy works against the efforts to reduce the numbers and role of nuclear weapons because the forces needed to implement a counterforce strategy have to be bigger and better than those needed for a countervalue strategy.

Constraints on Nuclear Use

The new guidance formally places several constraints on the potential use of nuclear weapons. All are long-held components of overall U.S. policy, but it is unclear whether they are new to presidential guidance because earlier presidential guidance documents have not been made public.

The first constraint is a statement that the United States will consider the use of nuclear weapons only in “extreme circumstances.” Neither the Defense Department guidance report nor the White House summary describes what constitutes “extreme” or what those “circumstances” might be other than “to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners.” If “extreme” refers to the intensity or stakes of a crisis, then the constraint could potentially help strip away a role for nuclear weapons in some of the most limited scenarios against small regional adversaries or nonstate actors.

Another constraint is that the guidance makes it clear that all nuclear-strike plans must be consistent with the fundamental principles of the law of armed conflict and that the United States “will not
intentionally target civilian populations or civilian objects.“ Therefore, attacking cities is prohibited unless they contain very important military targets. Some cities do; Moscow and Beijing are probably both targeted under current plans. Even if STRATCOM decided to target a military facility in a city, planning would have to limit civilian collateral damage to the extent possible. Nevertheless, as numerous studies have demonstrated, nuclear attacks against purely military targets could have devastating effects on civilian populations.

A third constraint is that the United States will not carry out or threaten a nuclear attack against non-nuclear-weapon states that are in compliance with their obligations under the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. This negative security assurance has been part of U.S. nuclear policy since the 1970s, although the 2010 NPR modified it to reflect the demise of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. The NPR Report portrayed the modification as a significant reduction of the role of nuclear weapons, even though it had no apparent effect on nuclear planning against current adversaries. The negative security assurances are not mentioned in the White House summary, and the Pentagon guidance report mentions them only in passing.

Nuclear Weapons in Europe

The new guidance also provides some direction for nonstrategic nuclear weapons by concluding that “a forward-based posture should be maintained” in Europe, consistent with NATO’s 2012 Deterrence and Defence Posture Review, until NATO decides it is time to change the posture.

This is disappointing because it effectively surrenders U.S. nuclear policy to any European ally who might object to arms reductions or a withdrawal of the weapons from Europe. It also is curious because Obama declared in his Berlin speech in June that he would “seek bold reductions in U.S. and Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.”[13] He may seek them, but it takes only one ally to block them.

A commitment to retain a forward-based nuclear posture in Europe is even more surprising because the White House summary says that the analysis for the new guidance “did not set out to address weapons forward deployed in Europe in support of NATO.”

If the Obama administration truly is committed to seeking “bold reductions” of nonstrategic nuclear weapons in Europe, it needs to resolve these contradictions and refuse to settle for an approach that abdicates leadership to a few NATO allies or Moscow.

Conclusions

The new U.S. nuclear weapons employment guidance fails to put an end to Cold War thinking. Although it appears to contain some moderate steps to reduce the numbers and role of nuclear weapons, the guidance overall comes across as an overly cautious document with many of the core characteristics and principles that guided U.S. nuclear planning during the Cold War continuing to underpin planning in the 21st century.

On the reduction side, the guidance endorses a potential removal and storage of up to one-third of deployed U.S. strategic warheads; directs the Pentagon to continue to reduce the role of nuclear weapons, reduce the role of the launch-under-attack strategy in contingency planning, and examine increasing the role of non-nuclear weapons in strategic planning; and adopts an alternative approach to reducing the nuclear hedge.

On the status quo side, the guidance reaffirms counterforce strategy; retains a triad of strategic nuclear forces; retains the capability to launch nuclear forces under attack; continues the current alert posture; retains strike options against conventional, chemical, and biological weapons; retains nonstrategic nuclear weapons in Europe; reaffirms maintenance of a hedge of nondeployed warheads; and appears to endorse the production of modified interoperable warheads.

Despite the administration’s publication of a White House summary and a Defense Department guidance report, which to its credit are more than any previous administration has published about a nuclear guidance review, excessive nuclear secrecy means that the documents are so vague that
the administration has a difficult time illustrating how it has reduced the role of nuclear weapons. This factor, combined with the administration’s commitment to costly modernization of all the legs of the nuclear triad, nonstrategic nuclear forces, and the warhead production complex, will sustain rumors and suspicion that U.S. nuclear planning is more focused on retaining the status quo than on moving decisively to carry out the vision of significant nuclear reductions and disarmament described by the administration.

Granted, major changes in U.S. nuclear policy are unlikely to take place over the course of a single review. Many of the decisions in the new guidance appear to require the Defense Department to study how to implement changes in the role of nuclear weapons. Those changes will be influenced by the developments and views of other nuclear-weapon states, allies, and the U.S. Congress. For now, the guidance will inform revisions of two military documents: the defense secretary’s update of the Guidance for the Employment of the Force, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff’s nuclear supplement to the Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan. Flowing from that, STRATCOM will update the U.S. strategic nuclear war plan (OPLAN 8010-12).[14]

It seems clear that the United States still has a long way to go to put an end to Cold War thinking in its nuclear policy. In light of the global political and military changes since the end of the Cold War and to help stimulate further reductions in the numbers and role of nuclear weapons worldwide, the United States should shift its nuclear planning away from counterforce strategy and reduce the readiness of its nuclear forces to a more basic secure retaliatory posture. Obama’s election and Prague speech raised hopes that he would move decisively in that direction. Unfortunately, his nuclear guidance makes only modest changes, leaving to his successor the task of putting in motion the more fundamental changes that the United States needs to make.

Hans M. Kristensen is director of the Nuclear Information Project at the Federation of American Scientists.

ENDNOTES


10. Admiral Richard W. Mies, Statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee Strategic Subcommittee on Command Posture, July 11, 2001, p. 6, http://www.dod.mil/dodc/olc/docs/test01-07-11Mies.rtf. “Launch under attack” refers to a decision to launch U.S. nuclear forces after a nuclear attack against the United States is under way and has been detected. “Launch on warning” means U.S. forces would be launched before an adversary attack against the United States based on indications that an attack was imminent.


