

New Strategic Experiment

- [Arms Control Today](#)

Daryl G. Kimball

After a year of preparation, President George W. Bush announced his intention to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, and the Pentagon delivered to Congress its revised nuclear posture review. With these actions, the Bush administration has set into motion a radical new effort to deploy unproven strategic missile defenses and to “reduce” strategic nuclear arsenals without arms control agreements.

The administration’s ostensible goal is to provide a wider range of conventional and nuclear capabilities to respond to an increasingly unpredictable threat environment no longer dominated by Russia. But, in seeking greater flexibility, the administration’s approach creates new uncertainties and obstacles to efforts to reduce the dangers posed by residual U.S. and Russian nuclear stockpiles. Some of the proposals are clearly positive. The administration’s plan could lead to a common-sense reduction in the number of U.S. deployed strategic nuclear weapons, which now number 6,000. The posture review also calls for a greater emphasis on advanced conventional weapons rather than on nuclear weapons to deter threats.

However, in the absence of agreed constraints on nuclear arsenals, U.S. and Russian planned nuclear force reductions, even if fully implemented, could be easily reversed. By requiring a Cold War-sized force of 1,700-2,200 strategic deployed nuclear weapons, the posture review also falls short of the president’s worthy goal of moving beyond mutual assured destruction. If, as the Pentagon says, U.S. nuclear force planning is not driven by the “immediate” threat of attack from Russia, no more than a few hundred survivable nuclear weapons are needed to deal with plausible threat scenarios involving Russia or any other state. In addition, the Pentagon’s plan suggests that nuclear weapons can play a role in our response to non-nuclear threats—a notion that is unnecessary given U.S. conventional military superiority and dangerous because it may encourage other states to follow suit.

The administration also claims that introduction of strategic missile defenses will deter other countries from seeking long-range missiles and, if that fails, will defend against a limited future attack. The posture review makes the bold assertion that potential rogue-state missile attacks cannot be as easily deterred by the United States’ overwhelming offensive strike capabilities. These conclusions come despite the fact that the intelligence community considers U.S. territory to be far more vulnerable to attack involving weapons of mass destruction delivered by nonmissile means.

Advocates of missile defense claim that the absence of severe criticism from Russia, China, and Europe proves that the ABM Treaty withdrawal decision will not damage relations among the major powers. But, just as it is too soon to tell whether the United States will deploy strategic missile defenses, it is too soon to rule out a future Chinese or Russian military response. Russia’s relatively subdued reaction was based, in part, on the possibility that promised nuclear force reductions might be codified in a written agreement rather than through unilateral declarations.

Reaching such an agreement will be complicated by Bush’s plan to maintain a sizeable “responsive” force as a hedge against Russian rearmament or other new and unforeseen threats. The Pentagon-generated study calls for the storage—not the dismantlement—of many of the approximately 4,000 warheads that would be removed from operational status by 2012, which would allow for their redeployment within “weeks, months, or years.”

New Strategic Experiment

Published on Arms Control Association (<https://www.armscontrol.org>)

By creating a larger stockpile of unaccountable, nondeployed nuclear weapons, the Bush administration will achieve flexibility, but it will also compound Russia's concerns about U.S. capabilities and intentions. As a result, Russia may act on worst-case assumptions and retain a sizeable multiple-warhead-armed missile force and store, rather than dismantle, its nondeployed warheads. This could increase the difficulties of securing and safeguarding Russian nuclear stockpiles, which already include thousands of unaccountable tactical nuclear warheads and more than 1,000 metric tons of fissile material.

Despite a number of missed opportunities over the last three decades, the ABM Treaty helped facilitate agreements to limit and eliminate strategic nuclear weapons. Now, it is incumbent upon President Bush to demonstrate that lasting nuclear arms reductions can be accomplished in the absence of the ABM Treaty.

Over the next few months, the president will have a historic opportunity to secure a lasting agreement to verifiably remove from deployment and dismantle excess warheads, exchange detailed information on weapons holdings, and augment cooperative threat reduction programs. Without such an agreement, the security benefits of Bush's planned reductions will remain limited and reversible. As a result, the administration's experiment with nuclear weapons policy could perpetuate—not reduce—Cold War nuclear dangers.

Source URL: <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002-01/issue-briefs/new-strategic-experiment>