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The rise of hostile rogue states supporting terrorism, and armed with weapons of mass destruction, ended most of the hopeful 1990's talk of a new world order, and highlighted the continuing U.S. need to deter attacks. Failing to deter future attacks involving chemical, biological or nuclear weapons could lead to casualties far greater than those the United States suffered on Sept. 11. How does the United States deter these new threats?

During the Cold War, the United States developed sophisticated concepts of deterrence. It was assumed that U.S. nuclear weapons surely would deter any rational Soviet leader. Confidence in the nuclear "balance of terror" was so high that some called it "existential deterrence."

But such Cold War notions about deterrence are of questionable value now because contemporary opponents and the stakes involved differ so dramatically from those of the Cold War.

We do not know, for example, whether the conditions necessary for deterrence are operating in North Korea or other rogue state sponsors of terror. Nor can we be confident that U.S. deterrent threats will be decisive in the decision-making of opposing leaders who might be willing martyrs, desperate gamblers, incommunicado, ignorant, self-destructive, self-absorbed or motivated by absolute, intangible goals.

President George W. Bush's 2001 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), a strategic review mandated by Congress, was a significant initial effort to assess how these dramatic changes in the strategic environment, including the introduction of new deterrence uncertainties, should transform how the United States deters.

But commentary on the NPR generally has missed or distorted beyond recognition important new directions it introduces in U.S. strategic policy.

One theme of the NPR, for example, is its emphasis on integrating a much broader range of deterrent options than the United States inherited from the Cold War, and having the flexibility to tailor its deterrent to a variety of contingencies.

In particular, the NPR concluded that while nuclear weapons may deter aggressors willing to take extraordinary risks and absorb great costs, they are unsuited to many contingencies for which the United States must be prepared in the 21st century.

The new policy direction seeks to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons and place greater weight on non-nuclear threat options. Yet most NPR commentary has suggested just the reverse.

The NPR also recognized that the immediate deterrence role for U.S. nuclear weapons may now be met with fewer deployed nuclear forces, and that nuclear requirements may recede still further as advanced conventional weapons and defenses mature. It prudently called for periodic assessments, in part to see if the promise of non-nuclear deterrent options is being realized.

In addition, the NPR recognized that the nuclear arsenal we inherited from the Cold War may have limited deterrence credibility and needs to be modified or upgraded. When winning “hearts and minds” and the postwar peace are priorities, deterrence threats based on the generally high nuclear yields of the Cold War arsenal may not appear credible, given the excessive civilian destruction likely to occur.

Another important thrust of the NPR is its movement away from the old Cold War standard for calculating nuclear deterrence requirements, i.e., maintaining a balance of terror with the Soviet Union, because of improved U.S.-Russian political relations. In light of this new relationship, the NPR concluded the United States could reduce its number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads by almost two-thirds.

Eliminating the East-West nuclear balance of terror as the benchmark for determining “how much is enough?” in deployed nuclear capability is a major departure from Cold War practice, but has largely been ignored in journalistic commentary on the NPR.

Finally, the NPR formally included as a U.S. strategic requirement capabilities for defending U.S. territory, population, forces abroad and allies. If not highly confident in deterrence, purposefully remaining vulnerable to the mass-destruction weapons of countries such as North Korea makes no sense.

In recognition of contemporary deterrence uncertainties, the NPR endorsed the deployment of defenses. Bush’s corresponding decision to deploy defenses against limited offensive missiles threats was announced on Dec. 17, 2002. This was, perhaps, the most visible reflection of the U.S. shift away from the Cold War’s balance of terror approach to deterrence.

These NPR initiatives reflect a major transformation in U.S. thinking about deterrence, brought about by dramatic changes in conditions from those of the Cold War.

Clearly some reasonable and much-needed steps to better align U.S. deterrence policy to the realities of the new era include broadening U.S. deterrent threat options; emphasizing the deterrent role for non-nuclear options; questioning the credibility of the inherited Cold War nuclear arsenal for contemporary deterrence purposes; seeking an understanding of opponents’ intentions and the flexibility to tailor deterrence to specific requirements of foe, time and place; leaving behind the balance of terror as the measure of U.S. deterrent requirements; and placing a new priority on defensive capabilities.

It took 25 years of intense debate before the United States’ Cold War deterrence paradigm matured. There may not be 25 years to get it right for the 21st century. The United States needs to move forward as urgently and as thoughtfully as it is able. The Bush administration’s NPR was a major first step forward.