

THE NUCLEAR POSTURE REVIEW: SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

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Foreword

The United States Nuclear Strategy Forum has been established for the purpose of contributing to a better understanding in Congress and by the interested public of the rationale, purposes, and directions in U.S. strategic policy introduced by the 2001 Nuclear Posture Review and subsequent Department of Defense and White House initiatives.

As part of its educational agenda, the U.S. Nuclear Strategy Forum will examine and report on the spectrum of issues associated with the implementation of the NPR, including its implementation under a range of possible future political-military contexts and conditions.

The Forum shall be available to the Congress for hearings and briefings, as requested. It shall provide a means for the Congress to be advised by those who have experience establishing and articulating U.S. strategic policy and managing U.S. weapons and strategy.

Finally, the United States Nuclear Strategy Forum will seek to provide the means for cross-fertilization between generations of strategic force and policy experts, including those who guided the West successfully through the Cold War, and those who will inherit this legacy.

*Congressman Curt Weldon
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THE NUCLEAR POSTURE REVIEW: SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

The Bush administration's 2001 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) was a watershed event in U.S. strategic policy. Despite its title, the scope was much broader than nuclear matters. It was a strategic posture review, the Pentagon's first strategic policy initiative to depart fundamentally from a Cold War-era policy orientation focused overwhelmingly on the Soviet strategic nuclear threat, nuclear deterrence, and management of the U.S.-Soviet "balance of terror." The first post-Cold War NPR, drafted in 1994, had retained the central assumption that the primary U.S. strategic concern was managing the hostile relationship between the two great nuclear powers.¹ In contrast, the 2001 NPR set in motion far-reaching changes designed to align U.S. strategic policy with the different realities and threats of the post-Cold War security environment.

Very early in his first term, President George W. Bush emphasized that the new strategic environment, including in particular the emergence of hostile states with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the improvement in U.S.-Russian relations, demanded changes in strategic policy. "[W]e must seek security based on more than the grim premise that we can destroy those who seek to destroy us. This is an important opportunity for the world to rethink the unthinkable, and to find new ways to keep the peace," he said. "Deterrence can no longer be based solely on the threat of nuclear retaliation."² The NPR responded to this call. Although the NPR was intended to address the dramatically different post-Cold War security conditions,³ much of the criticism leveled against it has been based on criteria for strategic forces inherited from Cold War deterrence axioms, adages, and definitions. It has been claimed that the NPR rejects deterrence, blurs the distinction between conventional and nuclear forces, places greater emphasis on nuclear weapons, calls for new nuclear weapons and testing, lowers the nuclear threshold, spurs nuclear proliferation, and continues Cold War modes of force sizing. Yet, these are all errors of fact or interpretation, based on entrenched strategic maxims pertinent to a strategic environment that no longer exists.

¹Douglas J. Feith, statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on the Nuclear Posture Review, February 14, 2002, p. 1 (hereinafter Feith testimony).

²Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "Remarks by the President to Students and Faculty at National Defense University," Washington, D.C., May 1, 2001, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/05/20010501-10.html>.

³"United States Department of Defense Briefing Slides," January 9, 2002, slides 4-5, <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Jan2002/g020109-D-6570C.html> (special NPR briefing presented by Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy J. D. Crouch); Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, "Adapting U.S. Strategic Forces," in *Annual Report to the President and the Congress*, 2002, chap. 7, p. 1, http://www.defenselink.mil/execsec/adr2002/html_files/chap7.htm; Feith testimony, p. 2.

At least some of the more vitriolic critiques of the NPR appear to be inspired less by substance than by partisan politics, including the use of nuclear fears to generate public opposition to the Bush administration. For example, during the recent presidential campaign, Dr. Helen Caldicott, founder of Physicians for Social Responsibility, offered the following decidedly partisan observation: “My prognosis is, if nothing changes and Bush is reelected, within ten or twenty years, there will be no life on the planet, or little.”⁴ In addition to such crude partisanship, there has undoubtedly been considerable honest misunderstanding of the NPR’s substance. This article is intended to help clarify the themes of the NPR within the bounds of appropriate public discussion of a document that remains classified.

Enhancing Deterrence, Not War Fighting

A frequently expressed but nonetheless wholly mistaken assessment of the NPR is that it rejects deterrence in favor of nuclear war fighting. For example, Ivo Daalder observed that, “[t]hroughout the nuclear age, the fundamental goal has been to prevent the use of nuclear weapons. Now the policy has been turned upside down. It is to keep nuclear weapons as a tool of warfighting rather than a tool of deterrence.”⁵ Actually abandoning deterrence as a U.S. strategic goal would have been more than a dramatic shift in U.S. strategic policy; it would have been a profound mistake. The NPR, however, did no such thing. This is not a matter of interpretation. In extensive open testimony on the NPR, Undersecretary of Defense Doug Feith, Assistant Secretary of Defense J. D. Crouch, and Administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration John Gordon all described deterrence throughout their respective remarks as a fundamental goal of U.S. strategic policy.⁶ Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s unclassified foreword to the NPR emphasizes that much of the NPR’s policy direction is designed to “improve our ability to deter attack” while reducing “our dependence on nuclear weapons” to deter.

Rather than rejecting deterrence, the NPR emphasized the importance of improving it to counter post–Cold War security threats, including in particular those posed by WMD proliferation.⁷ The NPR addressed the fundamental challenge in this regard: the

⁴“Nuclear Weapons ‘Immoral,’ Say Religious, Scientific Leaders,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 2004.

⁵Quoted in Michael Gordon, “Nuclear Arms: For Deterrence or Fighting,” *New York Times*, March 11, 2002.

⁶Feith testimony; “Special Briefing on the Nuclear Posture Review,” January 9, 2002, http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2002/t01092002_t0109npr.html (presented by Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy J. D. Crouch) (hereinafter Crouch NPR briefing); John A. Gordon, statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee, February 14, 2002 (hereinafter Gordon testimony).

⁷Donald H. Rumsfeld, foreword to *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Jan2002/d20020109npr.pdf> (hereinafter Rumsfeld foreword).

circumstances of the contemporary security environment introduce even greater uncertainties into the functioning of deterrence than existed during the Cold War, undermining its predictability and reliability. Recognizing this uncertainty marks a significant shift in perspective regarding U.S. strategic policy, with far-reaching implications.

During the Cold War, the balance of nuclear terror and its promise of mutual destruction were widely believed to ensure the predictable, reliable functioning of deterrence against any sane Soviet leadership. President John F. Kennedy's national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy, reflected this overwhelming confidence in deterrence in his seminal 1969 *Foreign Affairs* article. He wrote that, "[i]n the light of the certain prospect of retaliation there has been literally no chance at all that any sane political authority, in either the United States or the Soviet Union, would consciously choose to start a nuclear war. This proposition is true for the past, the present, and the foreseeable future. For sane men on both sides, the balance of terror is overwhelmingly persuasive."⁸ Bundy believed that the mutual fear of nuclear destruction was so powerful that nuclear deterrence had become existential and that any residual uncertainty about rational behavior served to buttress the reliable functioning of deterrence.⁹ Under this rubric, mutual societal vulnerability to nuclear attack was seen not simply as a regrettable condition, but as the guarantee of deterrence stability.

Because the nuclear balance of terror was believed essentially to guarantee the reliable functioning of deterrence, the only material strategic policy question remaining was how to manage that balance to preserve deterrence stability. The Cold War answer became enshrined as the very definition of how to practice strategic deterrence: maintain a massive nuclear retaliatory capability, but eschew strategic offensive or defensive capabilities that could destabilize the balance of terror by limiting the damage that might result from a superpower nuclear exchange. Such capabilities included ballistic missile defenses (BMD) that might defend against launched missiles and accurate intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) warheads that might comprehensively threaten the opponent's missiles in their silos.

In a deterrence concept where stability came from mutual societal vulnerability and a balance of terror, these types of forces were deemed destabilizing. They were categorized as being for war-fighting purposes vice deterrence because they threatened to undercut that fundamental vulnerability. These Cold War definitions became powerful tools by which to measure the deterrent effect of strategic forces. Based on these categorizations, government agencies endeavored to conduct "stability impact" studies of prospective strategic forces. Organizing forces into such categories—deterrence/stabilizing or war fighting/destabilizing—was a Cold War, balance-of-terror construct with little meaning outside of that context. Nevertheless, these categories

⁸McGeorge Bundy, "To Cap the Volcano," *Foreign Affairs* 48, no. 1 (October 1969): 10.

⁹"The Bishops and the Bomb," *New York Review*, June 16, 1983.

remain entrenched in popular discussions of the subject as terms of art and as the measures of merit for strategic forces.

The Significance of Uncertainty

The 2001 NPR emphasized that, in the post–Cold War security environment, the balance of nuclear terror is not an adequate basis for strategic policy and the uncertainties surrounding deterrence undermine its predictable functioning.¹⁰ This conclusion was central to the NPR’s subsequent logic and guidance. The basis for concluding that the predictability of deterrence has suffered in the post–Cold War era is not predicated on the presumption that rogue leaders are inherently irrational, as some have alleged.¹¹ Although the road to power in rogue regimes can be brutal and instill or reinforce a propensity for risk-taking, true irrationality and delusional behavior appear relatively infrequently in state leaders.¹²

Rationality in decisionmaking, however, is not the only necessary condition for deterrence to function predictably and reliably. Rather, a demanding set of additional conditions must be in place, including an opponent who is well informed, makes decisions based on broadly identifiable cost-benefit calculations, values that which the United States can threaten, and ultimately is cautious in the face of that threat. Predictable deterrence also requires mutual familiarity, understanding, and even empathy, as well as reliable, reasonably accurate channels of communications.¹³

These characteristics essentially were assumed to be sufficiently in place vis-à-vis Moscow during the Cold War for deterrence to function predictably and even existentially. This assumption was optimistic, even in the case of U.S.-Soviet relations. In the case of U.S. relations with diverse rogue states, the demanding conditions

¹⁰Rumsfeld foreword, p. 2; Feith testimony, pp. 2–3.

¹¹See, for example, George Lewis, Lisbeth Gronland, and David Wright, “National Missile Defense: An Indefensible System,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 117 (Winter 1999–2000): 128–129; Kenneth N. Waltz, “More May Be Better,” in *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed*, eds. Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), p. 14; Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p. 29; Stephen Walt, “Rush to Failure,” *Harvard Magazine* 102, no. 5 (May–June 2000): 35.

¹²See Robert Noland, “Presidential Disability and the Proposed Constitutional Amendment,” *American Psychologist*, no. 21 (March 1966): 232; Jonathan Roberts, *Decision-Making During International Crises* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1988), p. 186.

¹³See Robert G. Joseph, “Nuclear Deterrence and Regional Proliferators,” *The Washington Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 167–175; Keith B. Payne, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1996); Colin S. Gray, *Maintaining Effective Deterrence* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, August 2003).

necessary for deterrence cannot reasonably be assumed to pertain on a continuing basis. The United States can no longer take comfort in the Cold War belief that opponents will be deterred reliably and in predictable ways.¹⁴

The threat of widespread nuclear destruction, for example, may have reliably deterred the Soviet Union, and the United States will continue to have the capability to pose extremely lethal threats to many targets. One cannot assume with confidence, however, that such threats will deter contemporary adversaries in all cases. Avoiding threats to material values and physical targets frequently has not been the highest motivation in opponents' past decisionmaking, and the same is likely to be true in at least some post-Cold War contingencies. U.S. military threats simply may not be applicable to what an opponent values most, particularly when an opponent's primary motivations are intangible.

Yale professor Donald Kagan's unparalleled survey of the origins of war across centuries demonstrates how often extreme risk-taking is accepted in the service of intangible goals such as honor.¹⁵ What does this mean for deterrence and high-stakes decisionmaking?

Kagan answers that, "[o]n countless occasions states have acted to defend or foster a collection of beliefs and feelings that ran counter to their practical interests and have placed their security at risk, persisting in their course even when the costs were high and the danger evident."¹⁶ Although such decisions may appear irrational to a secular, Western pragmatist, they are most likely rational but driven by a value structure unfamiliar and even unimaginable to the Western observer.

Examples of decisions in which intangible or unimaginable goals outweigh reasonable caution abound, even in the face of explicit or potential nuclear threats. In 1945, Japanese war minister Korechiki Anami wanted to continue fighting following the first atomic attack, preferring to accept national destruction to the dishonor of surrender. In 1962, during the missile crisis, the Cuban leadership actually sought a nuclear war in the apparent belief that socialism would triumph amid the ruin. Two decades later, Leopoldo Galtieri led Argentina's military junta to invade and occupy the United Kingdom's Falkland Islands, reasonably confident in the mistaken belief that the United Kingdom, a nuclear power, would not respond forcefully. In his explanation of Argentina's stance to Secretary of State Alexander Haig, Galtieri said, "We cannot

¹⁴Nevertheless, some continue to cling to the comforting and convenient Cold War belief that, as long as the United States makes severe threats, deterrence will function reliably and predictably. See, for example, Roger Speed and Michael May, "Dangerous Doctrine," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 61, no. 2 (March/April 2005): 43-45; "In Defense of Deterrence," *New York Times*, September 2002.

¹⁵Donald Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), p. 8.

¹⁶Donald Kagan, "Honor, Interest, and the Nation-State," in *Honor Among Nations*, ed. Elliot Abrams (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1998), p. 1.

sacrifice our honor.... You will understand that the Argentinean government has to look good, too.”¹⁷ Each of these positions reflected an extreme sense of honor, or mission, or the mixture of ignorance, poor judgment, and folly all too commonplace in international relations. The Cold War’s balance of nuclear terror model of deterrence did not take this dynamic, which can lead to the unexpected failure of deterrence, into account other than to posit with blinding chutzpah and historical naiveté that it cannot happen if leaders are sane.

In the post–Cold War era, rogue leaders may well be fully rational, but deterrence will remain uncertain because it cannot reliably be predicted how those leaders will calculate goals, values, risk, and caution; interpretations of reasonableness for those qualities vary across time, place, and culture. Yet, the ability of U.S. leaders to structure and communicate a U.S. deterrent effectively depends on whether they understand how the opponent interprets what is reasonable. As proliferation places WMD in multiple rogues’ hands, the uncertainties surrounding the reliable functioning of deterrence assume greater importance. A single failure of deterrence against even a second-rate WMD power could lead to intolerable levels of destruction. The comforting belief that deterrence can be made to function reliably and predictably is no longer a reasonable basis around which to build strategic policy or define strategic forces.

Deemphasizing Nuclear Weapons

Rather than rejecting deterrence in the circumstances of greater uncertainty, as has been charged, the 2001 NPR emphasizes the need to strengthen deterrence and to provide protection against attack in the event deterrence fails.¹⁸ In his open discussion of the NPR, Undersecretary Feith emphasized the new uncertainties and the consequent need to strengthen deterrence. He said, “The continuities of the past U.S.-Soviet relationship have been replaced by the unpredictability of potential opponents who are motivated by goals and values we often do not share nor well understand, and who move in directions we may not anticipate ... brutal leaders who have few institutional or moral constraints and are motivated by an extreme hatred of the United States and the personal freedoms and liberties we hold dear.” These post–Cold War conditions do not permit confidence that “opponents will be deterred in predictable ways.”¹⁹

¹⁷For a more detailed account of each of these cases, see Keith B. Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), pp. 40–57.

¹⁸Crouch NPR briefing; Rumsfeld foreword, p. 3; Feith testimony, p. 3. See also National Security Presidential Directive 23, December 16, 2002, p. 2 (unclassified).

¹⁹Feith testimony, p. 2.

The NPR identified several avenues to strengthen deterrence in this new strategic environment. For example, it pointed to the need to understand the intentions and capabilities of opponents better so that the United States can “tailor its deterrence strategies to the greatest effect.”²⁰ Under Secretary of Defense Stephen Cambone emphasized this point in open testimony, stating that “[d]eterring future adversaries will require a detailed understanding of their goals, motivations, history, networks, relationships, and all the dimensions of human political behavior, on a scale broader and deeper than today’s.”²¹ Improving our understanding of potential opponents cannot guarantee deterrence, but it can help reduce the prospects for first-order errors and surprises.

The NPR also emphasized the need to possess a wide spectrum of capabilities—conventional and nuclear, offensive and defensive—to support the tailoring of credible deterrence strategies better against a diverse set of potential contingencies and opponents²² and, in the event deterrence fails, to help protect the United States and its allies and friends against attack. Secretary Rumsfeld, for example, observed that “[a]ctive and passive defenses will not be perfect. However, by denying or reducing the effectiveness of limited attacks, defenses can discourage attacks, provide new capabilities for managing crises, and provide insurance against the failure of traditional deterrence.”²³ The Cold War’s approach to deterring the Soviet Union simplified this problem considerably: the security threat was from a single entity; the basic solution was deterrence; the mechanism for existential deterrence was the balance of terror; and the balance of terror was built on the threat of massive, offensive nuclear retaliation. When deterrence was believed to function existentially, there was no compelling need for a defensive hedge against its failure. When the opponent was a nuclear superpower and the stakes were survival, the credibility of U.S. nuclear threats was less subject to question.

Yet, what happens when the post–Cold War opponent is a relatively unfamiliar regional power and the stakes for Washington are far less than survival? In such cases, will it be apparent if deterrence is feasible or if the opponent is willing to “risk it all” in pursuit of some intangible, possibly unimaginable goal? Might U.S. nuclear deterrence threats be insufficiently credible? Might not conventional threats be more credible and defenses contribute to a useful hedge against deterrence failure and to deterrence itself? The NPR pointed to the need for the United States to have this broader range of deterrent

²⁰“Adapting U.S. Strategic Forces,” p. 4.

²¹Stephen A. Cambone, statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee, April 7, 2004, p. 5.

²²“Adapting U.S. Strategic Forces,” p. 2; Feith testimony, pp. 3, 5, 7; Crouch NPR briefing.

²³Rumsfeld foreword, p. 3.

tools to tailor deterrence strategies better across a broad range of opponents and circumstances and to provide a defensive hedge.²⁴

Subsequent political commentary grossly misinterpreted the NPR's emphasis on integrating nonnuclear and defensive capabilities in a "New Triad" of strategic forces. Critics used the logic and labels from outdated balance of terror notions to charge the NPR with abandoning deterrence, promoting war fighting, and blurring the distinction between conventional and nuclear weapons, placing greater emphasis on the latter.²⁵ Employing archaic Cold War categorizations and maxims and related balance of terror parlance, they assessed the NPR as promoting war fighting vice deterrence. On the assumption, for example, that deterrence remains broadly existential and an effect of societal vulnerability, critics continue to define defenses as unnecessary and incompatible with deterrence. In contrast, the NPR called for ballistic missile defense deployment to contribute to deterrence and to help provide a defensive hedge against uncertainties and the inherent possibility that deterrence could fail.

The NPR's introduction of nonnuclear forces into the strategic deterrence equation has nothing to do with rejecting deterrence in favor of war fighting or blurring the distinction between nuclear and conventional weapons. In fact, one of the underlying reasons for including nonnuclear and defensive forces in the new strategic triad is the continuing sharp and proper distinction between nuclear and conventional forces. If the United States really were to blur the distinction, that is, if it treated nuclear weapons as it did conventional weapons, the credibility of the nuclear deterrent might be less open to question. Nuclear deterrence presumably would be as credible as conventional deterrence if the United States acknowledged no distinctions. The NPR did not choose to blur those distinctions as a way to strengthen credibility. Instead, it preserved the firewalls between nuclear and conventional forces and called for a greater emphasis on advanced nonnuclear and defensive forces to help strengthen U.S. deterrence credibility against post-Cold War threats.

²⁴Crouch NPR briefing; Admiral James O. Ellis, statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Nuclear Posture Review, February 14, 2002, p. 7.25.

²⁵See, for example, Dianne Feinstein, "Policy May Lead to Danger, Not Safety," *Miami Herald*, January 15, 2004; "Parsing the Nuclear Posture Review," *Arms Control Today*, March 2002, pp. 15–21; Speed and May, "Dangerous Doctrine," pp. 39–49; Carl Levin and Jack Reed, "Toward a More Responsible Nuclear Nonproliferation Strategy," *Arms Control Today*, January/February 2004, pp. 9–14.

Enhancing Deterrence, Not Usability

An additional avenue for strengthening deterrence identified by the NPR was the possible U.S. need to “adapt its nuclear forces” to the deterrence requirements of the changing strategic environment.²⁶ It should not come as a surprise that the nuclear arsenal designed to deter the Soviet leadership in a balance of terror might not be best suited to deter post–Cold War threats. Accordingly, the NPR called for the capability to “modify, upgrade or replace portions of the extant nuclear force or develop concepts for follow-on nuclear weapons systems better suited to the nation’s needs.”²⁷ One potential problem with the extant nuclear arsenal, identified by Secretary Rumsfeld, is that it combines relatively modest accuracy with large warhead yields.²⁸ Large-yield weapons were compatible with the Cold War’s balance of terror, when massive nuclear firepower was thought to be the basis for deterrence. Today, however, an arsenal of largely high-yield weapons of moderate accuracy may leave a gap in the U.S. deterrent. It may not be sufficiently credible in the eyes of some regional opponents if they believe that their provocation could sidestep the U.S. deterrent threat, given the extreme U.S. reluctance to countenance the high levels of civil destruction typically associated with large-yield weapons.

Measures that today’s opponents are taking to shield their weapons and leadership could also undermine the credibility of the current U.S. deterrent. North Korea, for example, appears to have dug tunnels deep underground to escape the reach of extant U.S. nuclear weapons. In such cases, some hardened opponents might doubt the deterrent’s credibility and be emboldened to aggression. The NPR pointed to the potential for low-yield, precision nuclear options and the ability to hold hard and deeply buried targets (HDBT) at risk to improve the U.S. deterrent capability and credibility under these circumstances.²⁹

Some misconstrued this NPR initiative as rejecting deterrence because Cold War maxims postulated that only nuclear forces designed for holding societal targets at risk can be for deterrence, while other types of forces, particularly those designed to hold military targets at risk, are for war fighting. In the post–Cold War environment, however,

²⁶Gordon testimony, p. 5.

²⁷“Adapting U.S. Strategic Forces,” p. 5.

²⁸See Julian Borger, “Bunker Bomb Will Bust Test Ban,” *Guardian*, March 11, 2002 (comments by Rumsfeld); Linton F. Brooks, statement before the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, April 4, 2005, pp. 2–3.

²⁹Tom Scheber, “The ABCs of the NPR” (unclassified briefing, 2003).

nuclear capabilities capable of holding hard and deeply buried targets at risk and minimizing the threat to civilians may be critical to maintaining a credible, effective deterrent. The NPR's call to be able to adjust the U.S. force structure accordingly was not a rejection of deterrence, but an effort to help strengthen deterrence at much lower nuclear force levels and in a new strategic environment.³⁰ This NPR initiative did not place greater emphasis on nuclear weapons, mandate new nuclear weapons, call for nuclear testing, or reject deterrence in favor of war fighting.³¹ Instead, the NPR emphasized that improved relations with Russia and expanded nonnuclear and defensive capabilities reduced U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons and provided the opportunity for prudent, deep reductions,³² pointing for the first time to "opportunities for substituting non-nuclear strike capabilities for nuclear forces and defensive systems for offensive means."³³ The NPR concluded that the new relationship with Russia permitted the United States to reduce by approximately two-thirds the number of deployed strategic nuclear weapons³⁴ and that, as nonnuclear and defensive capabilities advanced, the requirement for nuclear weapons might reduce further still.³⁵

Some have also mischaracterized the NPR's call to strengthen the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent as lowering the nuclear threshold. The rationale behind this claim is that low-yield precision weapons that could limit the threat to civilians and civil structures near a target would be more "usable." As several commentators have observed, "The implication is that, if their resulting collateral damage can be substantially reduced by lowering the explosive power of the warhead, nuclear weapons would be more politically palatable and therefore more 'useable' for attacking deeply buried targets in tactical missions—even in or near urban settings, which can be the preferred locales for such targets."³⁶ The notion that low-yield precision weapons that could lower the threat to civilian society cannot serve deterrence purposes, but instead must lower the nuclear threshold, harkens back to the balance of terror approach to deterrence that saw stability as the product of mutual societal vulnerability. Under this theory, long-standing moral strictures for limiting the threat to civilians were subordinated to the goal of deterrence stability. In the post-Cold War era, however, when the stake at risk for the United States in a regional crisis is unlikely to be survival, the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent may rest not on how much damage to the

³⁰Gordon testimony, p. 5; Scheber, "The ABCs of the NPR."

³¹Crouch NPR briefing; Keith B. Payne, "The Nuclear Posture Review: Key Organizing Principles" (unclassified Department of Defense briefing on the NPR, July 30, 2002), p. 9.

³²See Rumsfeld foreword, p. 1; Payne, "Nuclear Posture Review," p. 6.

³³Feith testimony, p. 5.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁶Sidney Drell et al., "A Strategic Choice: New Bunker Busters Versus Nonproliferation," *Arms Control Today*, March 2003, p. 9.

opponent's society is threatened, but rather on how little. Moral considerations and the efficacy of deterrence may now merge.

In addition, this critique mistakenly conflates the perspective of the U.S. president with opponents' perspectives. The credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent to opponents is not synonymous with how usable the weapon appears to the U.S. president. A president's considerations regarding the actual employment of a nuclear response almost certainly would depend more on the nature and circumstances of an opponent's attack than any other factor. In fact, throughout virtually the entire course of the Cold War, from acute crises in Berlin, the Taiwan Strait, the Caribbean and the Middle East through shooting wars in Asia, when low-yield weapons were available to U.S. presidents, no evidence suggests that the availability of these weapons made any president less cautious about employing nuclear weapons.

There is no such thing as a single, objective nuclear threshold to be lowered or raised mechanistically. That notion, like others, is a construct of the Cold War's balance of terror. Today, the United States has multiple opponents with various perceptions of the U.S. nuclear threshold, and these perceptions may be far removed from actual presidential decisionmaking following a provocation. During the 1991 Persian Gulf War, for example, on the basis of expressed U.S. threats, Saddam Hussein was deterred by the belief that his use of chemical or biological weapons against coalition members would lead to a U.S. nuclear reply. Postwar memoirs and statements of the U.S. decisionmakers involved make abundantly clear, however, that the United States was not considering any use of a nuclear weapon at the time, even if Saddam had used WMD.³⁷ The heart of the debate is not the Cold War adage that low-yield precision weapons are militarily more usable from the president's perspective and thus more likely to be used, but that opponents may judge them to be more credible for deterrence when the stakes for the United States do not include survival. Low-yield precision weapons may help strengthen deterrence in this fashion.

The Nuclear Devaluation Myth

Another misunderstanding of the NPR's call to adapt U.S. nuclear forces to deter post-Cold War threats better concerns its potential effect on proliferation. Some critics of the NPR assert that U.S. initiatives, such as the request to examine the potential for holding hardened and deeply buried targets at risk, will accelerate nuclear proliferation. The rationale behind this assertion is that a U.S. nuclear initiative would signal to others, including North Korea and Iran, the continuing value of nuclear weapons and would

³⁷See the detailed account of this event in Payne, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age*, pp. 81–87.

spur them to proliferate. These critics claim that the United States is hypocritical to examine the potential for new nuclear capabilities while calling on North Korea and Iran to abandon their nuclear programs.³⁸

This linkage of a potential U.S. nuclear initiative to the motivation of others to acquire nuclear weapons derives from the old action-reaction dynamic thought to drive the U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms competition during the Cold War. It was believed that the Soviet Union paced its nuclear forces after the U.S. lead. If Washington pursued a nuclear capability, Moscow would feel compelled to follow suit; if Washington refrained, so too would Moscow.³⁹ U.S. action would lead to the inevitable Soviet reaction. Contending now that U.S. nuclear efforts will motivate rogue states to seek nuclear capabilities simply recasts and applies the action-reaction thesis to contemporary opponents and proliferation.

Yet, this arms race theory was inadequate to explain U.S. or Soviet motives during the Cold War,⁴⁰ and today it mistakenly attributes the same motivation and dynamic to rogue states. Rogue states seek nuclear capabilities for their own purposes, such as the ability to intimidate or attack their regional neighbors and to deter with nuclear threats an overwhelmingly strong U.S. conventional response to such actions. These nuclear aspirations do not require rogues to mimic U.S. nuclear programs qualitatively or quantitatively, nor do they need U.S. signals to appreciate the value of nuclear weapons for their own particular purposes. North Korea and Iran, for example, see considerable value in nuclear weapons. For these states, the signal sent by Washington, were it to refrain from the potential to hold hardened and deeply buried targets at risk, would have no dampening effect on the high value they already place on nuclear weapons. In fact, it could have the opposite effect by encouraging them to believe that tunneling deep underground can effectively put them beyond the reach of the U.S. deterrent.

In reality, to the extent that any U.S. action contributes to rogue motivations to seek nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War era, it does so outside the nuclear sphere entirely, via U.S. possession of overwhelming conventional forces that rogues can hope to trump only with WMD threats. This is their only theory of victory over the United States. As former Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen observed, "A paradox of the new strategic environment is that American [conventional] military superiority actually increases the threat of nuclear, biological, or chemical attack against us by creating

³⁸David L. Hobson, "Forward Thinking on Nuclear Policy," *Washington Times*, January 10, 2005, p. 14.

³⁹See Stephen Schwartz, "Don't Know Much About History," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 57, no. 4 (July/August 2001): 11; Walter Pincus, "The First Law of Nuclear Politics: Every Action Brings Reaction," *Washington Post*, November 28, 1999, p. B2.

⁴⁰See Keith B. Payne, "Action-Reaction Metaphysics and Negligence," *The Washington Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (Autumn 2001): 109–121.

incentives for adversaries to challenge us asymmetrically.”⁴¹ Former Indian army Chief of Staff General K. Sundarji pointed to this dynamic in his remark following the 1991 Gulf War, that a nuclear deterrent is necessary “to dissuade big powers” and that “[t]he Gulf War emphasized again that nuclear weapons are the ultimate coin of power.”⁴²

Unfortunately, were the United States to eschew the advanced conventional capabilities in which it excels—and that may actually contribute to rogue nuclear incentives—it would reject the very capabilities that help to reduce its own reliance on nuclear weapons. This *reductio ad absurdum* demonstrates again how ill fitting old Cold War axioms are for the post–Cold War period.

Moreover, the NPR’s emphasis on strengthening the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent is not hypocritical in light of U.S. nuclear nonproliferation goals. The credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent is essential to nuclear nonproliferation. The United States carries special responsibilities in this regard. Its extended nuclear deterrence commitments—its nuclear umbrella—permit friends and allies to forgo seeking their own independent nuclear capabilities or alternatives. This is perhaps the single most important inhibitor of the pace of global proliferation today, particularly as countries such as North Korea and potentially Iran move to become nuclear powers. Anticipating, for example, the stark proliferation consequences were Japan to conclude that it could no longer rely on the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent is not difficult. Senior Japanese commentators have stated that, if this occurred, Japan would have to find its own nuclear deterrent and protection.⁴³ If Japan were to move toward nuclear weapons, others in Asia would likely feel strong pressure to do the same. The NPR’s call to strengthen the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent is not contrary to nuclear nonproliferation efforts, it is essential to those efforts.

Calculating Force Requirements

A final common misunderstanding of the NPR is that it continued the Cold War practice of focusing on the Soviet Union—now on Russia—as the basis for determining the

⁴¹Department of Defense, *Proliferation: Threat and Response* (Washington, D.C.: November 1997) (quotation from introductory “Message of the Secretary of Defense”).

⁴²Quoted in Selig Harrison and Geoffrey Kemp, *India and America After the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment, 1993), p. 20.

⁴³“Japan Spells Out Nuclear Stance,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 29, 1993, p. A18. See Martin Stieff, “Japan Mulls Atomic Weapons to Deter Nuclear Neighbors,” *Washington Times*, November 10, 1993, p. A13; Patrick Garrity, “The Next Nuclear Questions,” *Parameters* 25, no. 4 (Winter 1995-1996): 92–111.

number of operationally deployed nuclear weapons.⁴⁴ Senior officials in the Department of Defense explicitly stated that the NPR's specified deployed force level of 1,700–2,200 warheads was not based on including Russia as an immediate threat and that a deep reduction in deployed nuclear weapons is possible because of the new U.S. strategic relationship with Russia.⁴⁵

Critics responded that excluding the old-style targeting requirements to deter Russia should reduce the number of operationally deployed nuclear warheads retained to far fewer than 1,700–2,200 and that the cumulative nuclear targeting requirements to deter all other potential enemies combined should not lead to such a force level.⁴⁶ According to these critics, the NPR must therefore have continued to reflect Cold War–era requirement calculations and not the improved U.S.-Russian relationship that officials claim. In response, the lower force levels they propose typically appear to be based on an intuitively derived number they judge to be sufficient for deterrence. One such commentator, for example, confidently claims that “having 100 nuclear warheads and a range of military and other targets that the president might threaten to attack or might actually authorize an attack on will deter others from using nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons or from even engaging in conventional attacks.”⁴⁷ These critics, however, mistakenly assume that the NPR similarly followed their Cold War mode of calculating force requirements per targets for deterrence. Consequently, they cannot reconcile, by their own calculations, the NPR's call for reductions to 1,700–2,200 deployed warheads with the new relationship with Russia.

What was the NPR's methodology for calculating force requirements? Although senior officials have publicly presented the basic elements of the calculations, the details of that answer are not fully available for public discussion. In general, the NPR's recommended force structure and number of deployed nuclear warheads was calculated to support not only the immediate requirements for deterrence, but also to contribute to the additional goals of assuring allies and friends, dissuading potential opponents from choosing the route of arms competition or military challenge, and providing a hedge against the possible emergence of more severe, future military threats or severe technical problems in the arsenal.⁴⁸ In light of limitations in the U.S. nuclear production infrastructure, maintaining such a hedge includes the need to retain the forces and force structure necessary to support the reconstitution of some nuclear capabilities if that becomes necessary. No contradiction exists between the NPR's

⁴⁴Morton Halperin, “Parsing the Nuclear Posture Review,” *Arms Control Today*, March 2002, p. 19–20; John Deutch, “A Nuclear Posture for Today,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 1 (January/February 2005): 49.

⁴⁵Feith testimony, p. 5; Rumsfeld foreword, p. 1.

⁴⁶Sokolski, p. 141; Halperin, pp. 19–20.

⁴⁷See Halperin, p. 20.

⁴⁸“Adapting U.S. Strategic Forces,” pp. 5–6; Feith testimony, pp. 3, 5; Gordon testimony, pp. 7–8; Payne, “Nuclear Posture Review,” p. 9.

deployed force levels and ending the Cold War practice of sizing U.S. strategic nuclear force levels against Russia as an immediate threat. Commentators who cannot get the NPR's numbers to compute are basing their calculations on the traditional Cold War formula. The NPR considers a broader set of goals, and it should not be surprising that this set of goals would generate force requirements different from those attributed to targeting requirements for immediate deterrence alone.

Keeping an Open Mind

The NPR's directions undoubtedly involve some potential trade-offs that deserve ongoing attention and consideration, and it calls for periodic assessments to provide such review.⁴⁹ One may rightly ask how necessary the NPR's initiatives are to strengthen deterrence. That question, however, has no formulaic answer, and Cold War axioms provide little insight. Ultimately, the answer depends on judgments about the risk that deterrence would otherwise fail and what the consequences of that failure might be. In considering this question, it is important to recall that perceptions of weakness can invite testing and provocation, and in an era of WMD proliferation, the consequences of even a single deterrence failure involving regional powers may be severe. In addition, some empirical evidence suggests that rogue leaders see and may seek to exploit the gap in U.S. deterrence capabilities that the NPR addresses. During the recent visit by a U.S. congressional delegation to North Korea, Representative Curt Weldon (R-Pa.) raised with senior North Korean military and political leaders the U.S. interest in a nuclear capability to hold hardened and deeply buried targets at risk. According to Weldon and other members of the delegation, this was the only U.S. military capability that the North Koreans appeared to respect or that "got their attention,"⁵⁰ suggesting its potential deterrent value.

To be sure, these and similar snippets of evidence do not prove deterrence will fail unless the United States develops low-yield weapons or the capability to hold hardened and deeply buried targets at risk. No such proof is possible for any military or political instrument. The future is not so predictable, and future deterrent effect cannot be so finely deconstructed. If the burden of proof can be met by demonstrating that potential gaps in U.S. deterrence capabilities exist, that new opponents seem to see those gaps, and that the threat these gaps could pose is serious, then moving to close those gaps now is only prudent. This is in large part what the 2001 NPR was about, including its

⁴⁹Payne, "Nuclear Posture Review," p. 12.

⁵⁰Curt Weldon, "Congressional Delegation to North Korea Trip Report" (presentation, Strategic Nuclear Forum, February 22, 2005).

expressed goal of adapting a much smaller nuclear arsenal to the new strategic environment.

Unfortunately, popular commentary on the NPR continues to reflect misunderstanding of its basic themes. Much of this misunderstanding reflects the tendency to view the NPR through lenses colored by axioms, definitions, language, and measures of merit inherited from the Cold War and to discuss it in the related vernacular. Past and now generally outmoded maxims about what constitutes stability, the categorization of capabilities as being either for deterrence or for war fighting, the concept of lowering or raising the nuclear threshold or of sparking an action-reaction cycle, and even the formula for calculating force requirements are all constructs suited to a time that has passed, an enemy that is gone, and an approach to deterrence peculiar to the Cold War. Those constructs became so ingrained during the Cold War that they have outlived the circumstances that spawned them. The Cold War prism now significantly hinders thoughtful consideration of post–Cold War strategic questions, yet new strategic threats demand our best thought. It is time to move on.

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