

Conventional ICBMs

Time To Rethink Value of Quick, Long-Range Strike

Previously, Dvorkin had spoken about a 1995 incident in which a Norwegian weather rocket triggered an alarm in Russia. Dvorkin dismissed as nonsense concerns that Russian officials would misinterpret the launch of a few ballistic missiles and respond with a nuclear strike. The launch of even five U.S. missiles would not pose a problem, he said.

The other retired senior Russian generals agreed, and opined that development of conventionally armed ballistic missiles is the natural progression of technology and is being pursued in Russia.

■ Finally, a promising, near-term option — basing a small number of conventionally armed ICBMs at Vandenberg — is prohibited by START. However, START is scheduled to expire in December 2009.

U.S. and Russian officials have already begun discussions on a follow-on pact that would retain useful transparency measures and discard many of the outdated and irrelevant treaty provisions. This prohibition is one that is no longer relevant and favored by no one.

Modifications to existing, intercontinental-range weapons provide the only options in the near term to provide prompt, long-range, conventional strike for high-stakes, time-critical scenarios. With the conventional Trident option off the table, and START's scheduled expiration near, conventionally armed ICBMs appear increasingly attractive. ■

countries of interest, such as Iran, would require overflight of Russia.

An additional concern is how Russian leaders would react if their launch-detection satellites spotted the heat signature of a missile launched from a U.S. ICBM field. Would uncertainty over whether the ICBM is nuclear or conventionally armed provoke a nuclear response from Russia?

Deploying conventional ICBMs at a coastal test site for ballistic missiles, such as Vandenberg Air Force Base in California instead of at an operational ICBM base, would alleviate many of these issues. However, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) prohibits operational basing of ICBMs at designated ICBM test sites.

So the conventional ICBM concept looked relatively unattractive a year ago. However, several events over the past year suggest a new look is warranted.

■ A May 2007 interim report from the National Academy of Sciences identified two types of missions for conventionally armed, long-range weapons. One would involve deploying a small number of weapons for time-critical scenarios, such as strikes to eliminate a high-profile terrorist leader or to

nuclear mission of four ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs).

The four SSBNs have since been modified to carry non-nuclear Tomahawk cruise missiles and to covertly transport special forces. It is natural, therefore, to consider whether retired Peacekeepers, or some of the remaining Minuteman ICBMs, should be modified to carry non-nuclear weapons.

Conventionally armed ICBMs allow a rapid response to serious threats thousands of miles from the United States and out of range of forward-deployed U.S. forces. The August 1998 attempt to kill Osama bin Laden at a training camp in Afghanistan using relatively slow cruise missiles is one example when a faster response might have been successful.

A 2005 Defense Department study of concepts for conventionally armed ICBMs revealed significant drawbacks. Conventional ICBMs would be most economical and quickly deployed if located at existing ICBM bases. However, conventional ICBMs at bases in Wyoming, North Dakota and Montana have operational disadvantages associated with booster drop-off over Canada and because missile trajectories to several

prevent the imminent transfer of weapons of mass destruction.

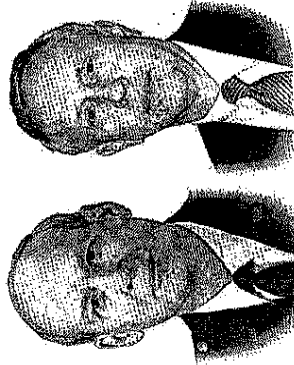
The second type involves using significant numbers of long-range weapons as the leading edge of major combat operations. Conventional ICBMs would be most appropriate for the first type of mission, which involves a relatively small number of weapons and for which the ambiguity issue (whether nuclear or conventional) would be less of a concern.

■ The administration's preferred near-term option for prompt, long-range weapons — modification of Trident submarine-launched ballistic missiles — has been blocked by Congress for the past two years. Recently, Congress appropriated \$100 million in 2008 for conventional prompt global strike but restricted funds from being used for the conventional Trident program.

■ In December, several retired senior Russian military officers met with their American counterparts in Washington to dispel misunderstandings regarding the nuclear weapon policies of each country. The Russian visitors included retired Maj. Gen. Vladimir Dvorkin, a senior researcher at the Center for International Security at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

When faced with a rapidly developing crisis, the president often asks military advisers about options for the use of force. The response sometimes provides disappointingly few choices.

With the United States facing a



By retired Gen. Lance Lord, left, the former commander of U.S. Air Force Space Command, and Tom Schieber, the vice president at the National Institute for Public Policy in Fairfax, Va.

diverse array of dangerous adversaries, a spectrum of flexible military options is needed.

In May 2001, President George W. Bush outlined a strategy for strategic forces for the emerging threat environment. One element included greater reliance on non-nuclear weapons — offensive (e.g., advanced conventional weapons) as well as defensive.

The strategy also called for an immediate cut in strategic nuclear forces, including the retirement of all 50 Peacekeeper intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and the withdrawal from the strategic

U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, speaking in Germany the first weekend in February, expressed concern about what he was hearing in capitals

But U.S. President George W. Bush expresses no confusion on the matter. Regardless of the consequences, the president insists that Iraq and Afghanistan are the same war. Both countries, he said

these two conflicts — on top of the nearly \$550 billion base budget for the DoD — he demonstrates just how damaging conservatives' repeated "war on terror" rhetoric is to our national security

munity boast a consensus plan for sustained reconstruction and development, embodied in the Afghanistan Compact, alongside a functioning parliament that is beginning to serve as a counterbal-

as positive and 73 percent view the Taliban unfavorably. Compare this with Iraq, where more than 80 percent of Iraqi respondents said they "strongly oppose" the presence of foreign troops in their

Afghanistan Is Not Iraq