

Nuclear Posturing

A Roundtable Discussion

Although the danger of a global thermonuclear war dissipated when the Soviet Union disintegrated, the threat posed by nuclear weapons remains monumental. The consequences of just one nuclear weapon exploding in a populated area are almost too horrifying to contemplate. Yet we live in a world with thousands of nuclear weapons and enough weapon-grade fissile material for thousands more. Nuclear proliferation, nuclear terrorism, and the possibility of interstate nuclear war are issues that have profound implications for both the security of the United States and the world in general.

The United States will play a pivotal role in the evolution of nuclear issues as the twenty-first century unfolds. U.S. policies on issues such as nuclear arms control, nuclear testing, and national missile defense will tremendously affect the course of events. With this in mind, the *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* and the Center for Peace and Security Studies (CPASS) convened a panel of distinguished experts representing a wide range of views on the future of U.S. nuclear policy. In the following transcript of that event, the three panelists first present their views on the Bush administration's Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), and then conclude with comments on missile defense.

-Michael Brown

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GAFFNEY: To help situate this discussion, I think it is helpful to divide the universe of people who study nuclear weapons into three broad categories. The first category of people doesn't think the United States needs nuclear weapons. Although I do not happen to agree with it, this is an estimable position. Its logic argues for eliminating our nuclear weapons capabilities, and encouraging others who might have them to do the same and those who might be thinking about getting them to refrain from doing so.

A second category includes those who recognize the reality of nuclear weapons: that there are nuclear weapons and that there will continue to be nuclear weapons. Although they recognize that we

that you need to be serious about a nuclear deterrent. Just having nuclear weapons does not give you a credible deterrent. I believe, and I think this community of individuals, which includes the Bush administration, also believes, that it is essential to take steps to ensure the safety, reliability, and effectiveness—and therefore the credibility—of our deterrent force. There are a number of implications that flow from this view.

First and foremost, we need to test nuclear weapons, at least periodically. The simple truth is that nuclear weapons are arguably the most complex pieces of equipment ever designed by man. Part of that complexity is that these devices have microscopically small tolerances for

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do need to have a nuclear deterrent, there are differing views within this group about how many nuclear weapons we need. What is troubling about this second category is that some who hold this view believe that we do not need to worry about factors like the reliability of nuclear weapons, their safety, and our ability to credibly threaten to use them. I find this to be an illogical, reckless, and untenable position.

There is a third category, in which I find myself. This group believes that we do need nuclear weapons; there is no dis-inventing them. The world is unfortunately awash with nuclear technology. When I use the term nuclear weapons, I mean everything from relatively primitive atomic weapons to advanced thermonuclear designs. This third group believes

changes in the character of materials, wiring systems, and other aspects of their composition. When you put this kind of equipment in close proximity with radioactive material, it changes over time. Things become brittle or undergo physical changes that can affect how they perform. When we set out to design a deterrent force, we did so with a projected lifespan of about ten years. Most of our nuclear weapons are well past their design lives. Therefore, we have become increasingly unsure of how they would perform.

This affects the credibility of our present deterrent force. Since without testing we cannot modernize our nuclear forces, we have prevented—for at least a decade—the kind of improvements to our nuclear arsenal that might enable it to adapt to changing threats. For example,

we currently face deeply buried, very hardened facilities in Afghanistan, which are invulnerable to attack even by precision-guided conventional weapons. They are only vulnerable to nuclear weapons capable of penetrating some amount of earth and creating the proper shock waves necessary for destroying these facilities. We do not have such a weapon in our inventory today.

So, testing and enhancing our ability to meet changing threats is an important part of a credible nuclear deterrent. Having a nuclear weapons complex that can support the maintenance and design of new nuclear weapons is also an important part of a credible deterrent. This means we need both the human and physical infrastructure necessary to ensure the safety, reliability, and effectiveness of existing designs, and to introduce new ones.

I believe credible deterrence also requires a sufficient number of nuclear weapons. President Bush concluded even before coming to office that we could get by with somewhere between 1,700 and 2,200 strategic nuclear weapons. Not surprisingly, the Nuclear Posture Review that his administration conducted found that this was exactly right. I believe that this is too small a number. I do take some comfort in the fact that the Bush administration's NPR recommends that we retain a number of nuclear weapons in a reserve force, rather than destroy them. I think that this is a wise course of action. If you are going to reduce the number of nuclear weapons that are actively deployed, do not throw them away.

In short, I generally support what the Bush administration has done with the NPR. I think that, in contrast to the Clinton administration, the Bush administration is taking an adult, serious, and responsible approach to retain-

ing the number of nuclear weapons they think we need to have, and is making sure that they constitute a credible deterrent.

LINDSAY: Given Frank's comments, I should locate myself in his tripartite schema. If I understand him correctly, I belong in the second category—the irresponsible and reckless crowd. The Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) is a very complex document and our ability to talk about it is complicated by the fact that none of us has seen it. I think there are parts of the NPR that are quite laudable and pass a basic common sense test. Indeed, the NPR rightly argues that nuclear weapons cannot be dis-invented and that they are going to continue to play a role in American defense policy. There is also much to like in what President Bush has said about nuclear weapons. He has stated that he is willing to reduce the number of nuclear weapons and to move unilaterally to break the logjam in U.S.-Russian arms negotiations since he does not view Russia as an adversary. Yet, I still think that the NPR remains a flawed document.

I am less worried about the NPR for the reasons that have garnered headlines—that it will end the Nuclear Non-Proliferation treaty, upset the United Nations, and encourage calls for using nuclear weapons in places like Afghanistan. Many of these concerns are both premature and overblown. My concerns with the NPR lie with those aspects that the Bush administration has publicly touted. It seems to me that the NPR falls short of the president's repeated pledges to leave the Cold War behind. Rather, the posture review embraces many of the fundamental principles of Cold War strategic planning. At best, the NPR represents a missed opportunity. If luck does

not favor the United States, it may actually increase the dangers we face.

I see three specific flaws in the NPR. First, for all the hullabaloo about deep cuts, the proposed cuts are timid. The NPR cuts a lot less than many people

weapons destruction or dismantling. Even so, we won't get down to 1,700–2,200 operationally deployed warheads until 2012. As late as 2007, the United States will still have about 700–1,200 more warheads than it would have had if START

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would have preferred. The numbers that Frank noted, 1,700–2,200 weapons, were portrayed as a historic step by the White House back in the fall. The first thing to point out is that those numbers reflect an accounting trick that would make Arthur Andersen proud. Rather than counting all the warheads in the active inventory as past administrations did, the Bush White House changed the terms of reference by talking only about operationally-deployed warheads. If you compare the Clinton and Bush numbers using the same counting rules, the Bush numbers are either at the same level or slightly above the Clinton numbers.

One thing the president has not publicly addressed is why we cannot make deeper cuts. The United States and Russia are no longer enemies, China has only eighteen nuclear weapons, and I do not think Syria or Iraq or the rest of the Gang of Five are going to suddenly show up with hundreds or even tens of nuclear weapons.

Also, as Frank mentioned, we are not actually talking about destroying warheads. Many of the warheads that are retired will be put into a reserve force, which we can presume will be fairly large. What the administration is actually proposing is a grand de-alerting, not

II—the treaty that the elder George Bush negotiated—had gone into effect.

Flaw number two: The NPR puts too much faith in the benefits of flexibility. Flexibility means being able to adjust our offensive nuclear force posture either up or down, both by number and type, quickly, and as events dictate. This underlies the concept of keeping a reserve force. It also explains the administration's refusal to agree to binding limits on force ceilings in talks with Russia. The Russians want an agreement that delivers deep cuts that are verifiable and irreversible.

When proponents talk about strategic adaptability they only focus on the benefits without mentioning the costs. In the near term, budgetary realities are going to force the Russians to cut back no matter what. One thing to keep in mind, though, is that if we get to have a responsive force, so do they. Now is it reasonable to think that a country that does not have the money to maintain its nuclear arsenal will have the resources to adequately secure its responsive force? I am not worried about the weapons in the American responsive force; I am worried about those in the Russian responsive force.

Flaw number three: it seems to me that the NPR seeks to increase rather than reduce the role of nuclear weapons in

American defense and foreign policy. My concern over this fundamentally separates me from Frank. You can see this in the NPR's support for using nuclear weapons against non-nuclear threats, and in its emphasis on developing more usable nuclear weapons. Rather than moving away from Cold War logic, this NPR is moving back toward it.

Are more usable nuclear weapons more credible? The deterrent quality of nuclear weapons does not lie in their usability, but in other more contextual qualities like the issue at stake, its value to both sides, and perceptions about willingness to strike, which are not functions of usability but of the risk profiles of those in charge of nuclear weapons.

Ultimately, the only real bar to a presidential decision to use nuclear weapons is the nuclear taboo. For fifty years, strategists have been coming up with ideas on how to make nuclear weapons more usable, and more thinkable, but it remains very hard to come up with a scenario in which a president would use a nuclear weapon unless the United States were directly attacked.

So, what should a post-Cold War nuclear posture look like? I think we need to go in the opposite direction of the NPR. Rather than increasing reliance on nuclear weapons—at least in theory, if not practically—the goal should be to minimize their role in American foreign and defense policy. This is not primarily for political or moral reasons, even though these are important, but for strategic reasons. The fact is that the United States enjoys unprecedented conventional superiority. The one thing that could undermine that superiority is the spread of nuclear weapons. It is in our interests to lock in our advantages.

The United States should reduce its arsenal to 1,000 strategic weapons, codify force-cut agreements with Russia, destroy warheads, limit our non-strategic forces, and ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). There are real advantages to testing, but there are costs as well. Chinese military planners would be very happy to see us begin testing again because this would open the door for renewed Chinese testing. Without testing, we cannot be sure of how well our arsenal will function, but this applies equally to all the other countries in the world. The point is that if we are going to have an intelligent, non-reckless, responsible discussion of these issues, we have to admit that tradeoffs exist.

PIKE: At the risk of oversimplification, I would like to suggest a slightly simpler typology, dividing the world between those who see nuclear weapons as part of the solution and those that see them as the problem.

The seriousness of nuclear weapons was really brought home to me about twelve years ago when I was at a conference in Europe. I started in Dresden, which is a really interesting German city because of the broad open spaces in the central part of the city. Then I went to Prague where all the buildings are close together, the streets are narrow and windy, and I was really struck by the differences between downtown Dresden and downtown Prague. The reason was that during World War II, heavy bombers leveled Dresden but couldn't reach Prague. If you go around central Europe, you can basically figure out what the range of the heavy bombers was because on one side of the line, cities were completely destroyed and had to be rebuilt, and on the other, the cities remained in their pre-war state.

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Considering the damage done by conventional weapons, next time you're out taking a walk, imagine what a small nuclear weapon would do to a city!

Despite the talk about small nuclear weapons in the Nuclear Posture Review, there is no such thing. There is no such thing as a small nuclear weapon just like there is no such thing as a small cup of coffee at Starbucks. If you go into Starbucks, coffee comes in three sizes: big, bigger, and biggest. People talk as though there are going to be these chihuahua-size nuclear weapons, cute little fluffy ones that you can stand back about fifty feet and watch explode.

Some people think we need these small nuclear weapons to take out new threats like the bunkers buried in the mountains of Afghanistan. The notion that you are going to be destroying a bunker with a small nuclear weapon presumes that the bunker is basically the size of a small room, that within the vast confines of a mountain we know exactly where that room is, and that if we put our chihuahua-size nuclear weapon into that room we would be able to take out the bad guys. However, bunkers that are too large to address with conventional weapons are enormously large, very deeply buried, and knowing where the doors are is not going to tell you the extent of the bunker. This is why the Department of Energy has basically said low-yield nuclear weapons are not going to be adequate to address this problem, and that the range of targets too big for conventional weapons but too small for a

full-yield nuclear weapon basically creates an empty set.

I am very skeptical of the notion that we need to have new nuclear weapons. During the Cold War, we went crazy and built 50,000 nuclear weapons, believing we needed them to repel the Communists. However, as Les Aspin correctly pointed out, at the end of the Cold War the polarity of nuclear weapons immediately reversed. It is no longer the case that the United States needs nuclear weapons to deter other countries; rather, other countries feel they need nuclear weapons to deter us. And this goes to my fundamental question: Are nuclear weapons part of the solution as Frank would suggest, or are they part of the problem as I would suggest? Is there any outstanding attribute of U.S. foreign policy that would not be improved if nuclear weapons could not be dis-invented? No. Is there any outstanding attribute of U.S. security policy that would be harmed or jeopardized if the number of nuclear weapons in the world were getting smaller instead of larger. I don't think so. This goes back to the question of whether we have gotten past the Cold War.

Even though we say that the Russians are no longer our enemy, deterring Russia is clearly the basis of our current nuclear policy. A Nuclear Posture Review based against anyone else would require a fraction of the weapons the Bush administration proposes to retain, and would never require the deployment speed that hair-trigger alert implies we need. The number of necessary weapons is a func-

tion of targets, and the world is a distressingly target-poor environment. The Chinese have just 100 cities, a small nuclear arsenal and military infrastructure, and there is no chance of them launching a rapid counterforce attack against us. As you start looking at Syria, North Korea, and Iraq, there are just not that many targets for which we need nuclear weapons, and none of them would require being blown up within a timeframe of minutes or hours or possibly even days. It is quite obvious then that Russia is still seen as an enemy and that the NPR is aimed at the Russian threat.

I do not think that we are going to be able to eliminate nuclear weapons any time soon. I am sure it is going to take us at least as long to climb down the nuclear mountain as it took to climb up. My fundamental concern is whether or not we are walking in the right direction. Are we moving away from reliance on nuclear weapons, toward strategies that reduce our reliance on nuclear weapons, and are we reducing the incentives for other people to possess or desire nuclear weapons? While we may be moving in this direction, we are not moving nearly as fast as I would like.

BROWN: One of the issues related to nuclear weapons that has been in the limelight for quite some time now is missile defense. What are your thoughts on missile defense, and what should be its role in the United States's nuclear strategy?

GAFFNEY: If we are interested in reducing our reliance on nuclear deterrence, the capability to prevent attacks by missiles, which remain a serious if not growing danger in a world where both nuclear and delivery technology are proliferating,

is very important. My only criticism of the Bush administration is that it is not moving fast enough in this direction.

LINDSAY: I've always found debates over missile defenses to be very disturbing because they tend to be conducted in a very theoretical way, as if you had a binary choice between defending or not defending. To me the real issue is what kind of missile defenses you build, what technology you use, and what the political fallout would be.

The Bush administration's policy seems to be to spend a lot of money on testing. I take their hesitancy as a positive sign because I see no evidence that they have any kind of system that works. In an odd way, President Bush's decision to abandon the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty has helped to clarify the issue, because we have moved away from the theoretical debate and toward more substantive issues. I hope that we build a missile defense that works and sparks a minimum amount of diplomatic and political fallout.

PIKE: As far as I can tell, the money goes in one end and nothing comes out the other end. We have invested in missile defense a multiple of the time and money invested in other programs that eventually did produce something, whereas nothing has come out of the missile defense program. For example, there are many people who are enthusiastic about space-based lasers, and the Bush administration's current plan is to have a flight test in about a decade. We have been working on this program for a quarter century now—since the Carter administration—and we are not one day closer to having this program operational than we were twenty-five years ago.

What would change my mind on this? If Frank and all his friends had a little picnic on the test-range during a live-fire test. The purpose would not be to test the hardware but to test their confidence in the missile defense equipment. I do not think they would ever do this, because they would be worried that the equipment might not work, because everything else that we build works some of the time—if we're lucky—but nothing works all the time. This raises another point: Would a situation ever arise where the president was not worried about nuclear retaliation because we had the peace shield? Any sane president is always going to worry that it might not work. I think that missile defense programs will continue to absorb money, inspire China to build up its nuclear arsenal, and cause India to put more effort into its long-range missile program in anticipation of the Chinese.