



Toward a New Deterrent

Analysis and Recommendations for the Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States

BY THE NEW DETERRENT WORKING GROUP*

INTRODUCTION BY VADM ROBERT R. MONROE, USN, RETIRED



Introduction

America's nuclear deterrent, which has kept us safe for over 60 years, is in grave danger of failing. Our nuclear strategy—still that of the Cold War—has little relevance to today's principal adversaries and threats. The nuclear weapons that make up our stockpile are also

virtually irrelevant and well beyond the end of their design life. Our experienced personnel are retiring, and our nuclear facilities are antique and deteriorated.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently stated that “no one has designed a new nuclear weapon in the United States since the 1980s, and no one has built a new one since the early 1990s. . . . The United States is the only declared nuclear power that is neither modernizing its nuclear arsenal nor has the capability to produce a new nuclear warhead.”¹ To make matters worse, if we start a modernization program immediately, pursue it vigorously, and resume essential underground testing, it will still take about two decades before we could begin replacing our stockpile. Thus, the relevant issue is not whether our nuclear deterrent is safe, secure, and reliable today, but what actions we must take today to ensure its effectiveness in 20 years, in an uncertain and dangerous world.

After years of denying funding for nuclear initiatives, Congress last year created a 12-person Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, chaired by Bill Perry, former secretary of defense, and co-chaired by Jim Schlesinger, former secretary

*The New Deterrent Working Group—an informal coalition of experts in national security and nuclear weapons, sponsored by the Center for Security Policy—seeks to inform lawmakers and the public about the need for the United States to maintain a credible and an effective nuclear deterrent.

of defense, secretary of energy, and director of central intelligence. The commission started work in summer 2008, delivered an interim report in December 2008, and will submit a final report in spring 2009.

Quite separately, in early 2008 the New Deterrent Working Group, an informal coalition of experts in national security and nuclear weapons, sponsored by the Center for Security Policy, became concerned that the commission would have only two “nuclear programs” to consider: one the unannounced “nuclear freeze” the United States has followed during the 18 years since the Cold War ended, and the other the “world without nuclear weapons” initiative recommended by Perry, George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn for the past two years. Both programs would lead to unilateral nuclear disarmament by the United States—the first unintentionally, the second intentionally. To outline a third program, that of a strong nuclear deterrent, the working group prepared the following remarks and provided them to the commission in the summer of 2008.

America’s Failing Nuclear Deterrent

The United States is at a critical moment in its history. To an extent largely unknown to the American people and even to many US policy makers, the nuclear deterrent that has served as the backbone of our defense posture for 50 years is becoming obsolete, unreliable, and potentially ineffective. This is the direct and predictable result of the practice of essentially “freezing” our nuclear-weapons strategy and stockpile over the past 18 years since the end of the Cold War.

Unfortunately, we may freeze weapons policies and modernization programs, but our doing so does not preclude changes to the arsenal itself. To the contrary, such a nuclear freeze serves to ensure that the combined effects of aging and changing strategic circumstances go *unaddressed*, resulting in an inexorable reduction in capability and relevance to the nation’s deterrent requirements. We have even refrained from making much-needed

improvements to the stockpile’s safety, security, and control rather than undertaking new designs that we could validate only by underground testing.

The problem is not confined to the weapons themselves. At the nuclear labs and plants operated by the National Nuclear Security Administration, the human and physical infrastructure essential to our deterrent is in real jeopardy. There is virtually no one left in that once-great industrial enterprise who has ever designed, tested, or produced a nuclear weapon. Meanwhile, the Defense Department has downgraded the importance and value of nuclear weapons across the board. The investigation that followed a recent, unauthorized B-52 flight with six full-up nuclear weapons revealed a widespread lack of focused military attention to nuclear procedures and policy.² In short, America is years late in transforming its nuclear strategy and stockpile from a Cold War orientation to one focused on today’s adversaries—as well as tomorrow’s—and to the different and far more distributed threats they represent.

The Nuclear Threats We Face

While America has largely neglected its nuclear arsenal and associated weapons complex for nearly two decades, others have taken a very different approach. Notably, Russia and China are making significant investments in the modernization of their nuclear forces. We have reason to believe that some of these will involve highly advanced, specialized-effects nuclear weapons (known as “fourth generation” weapons).

In addition, nuclear-weapons technology has proliferated of late to a number of rogue states. There is reason to fear that one or more of these nations may be willing to help terrorist organizations acquire nuclear weapons—and perhaps use them.

In short, more states today have active (if, in some cases, still-covert) nuclear-weapons programs than ever before. Apart from the United States, virtually all of these countries—compris-

ing roughly half the world's population—are working to enhance their nuclear capabilities.

Like it or not, tens of thousands of nuclear arms exist around the world, and neither they nor the know-how and capability to make them are going to disappear. Knowledge, once gained, cannot be washed away by treaties—let alone by unilateral US nuclear disarmament. For generations to come, our lives and civilization will depend on effectively countering these threats.

The Failure of Nonproliferation

The accelerating proliferation of nuclear-weapons technology in places like Pakistan, North Korea, Iran, and Syria represents an indictment of the effort to prevent such a danger via arms control. The global nonproliferation regime has been steadily declining for many years, and it has now reached the point of impotence. The last Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference, five years in preparation, achieved nothing. Non-nuclear-weapon states that have signed the treaty increasingly flout their international obligations by pursuing clandestine weapons programs under the guise of civilian power activities.

The success of such rogue states threatens to trigger regional proliferation cascades, which could soon become global. Some of our allies and friends who formerly relied on the US “nuclear umbrella” for protection could feel constrained to join these proliferators, in part as a result of their loss of confidence in our outdated arsenal and our ability and will to use it. This cascade might well lead to a world characterized by frequent use of nuclear weapons, from which there is no return.

To avoid such a frightening prospect, the United States must both eliminate questions about the credibility of its deterrent and adopt a more effective approach to nonproliferation. If we are to have any chance of fulfilling these two roles and averting an unimaginably dangerous world, we must change our policies and programs significantly.

A Program for Recovery

America must reestablish the posture of nuclear strength that saved the West—and the world—during the half-century-long Cold War. During those decades, our nuclear posture was also the key factor in preventing renewed outbreaks of global conventional wars and the terrible costs they entail. To provide a similar insurance policy for the future, we must undertake *at a minimum* the following eight critical steps:

Immediate Actions

As a matter of great urgency, two initiatives are in order: First, the president must issue a clear, firm statement to the effect that a credible, safe, secure, and reliable nuclear deterrent is essential to America's security and that we will maintain it with highest priority.

Second, we must reestablish the Reliable Replacement Warhead as a vital program in order to prevent the loss of core nuclear-weapon capabilities in the National Nuclear Security Administration's labs and plants, and to provide the optimum replacement approach for those overage weapons in our stockpile that we will need for decades to come. This warhead provides our only current opportunity to recapture the experienced, integrated management expertise necessary to guide new nuclear weapons from concept definition to service introduction. Without it, this invaluable capability, for all intents and purposes, will be lost.

National Debate

The issue of deterring nuclear attack, despite its potentially existential importance to millions of Americans, has scarcely—if ever—been rigorously discussed in a highly visible way since the Cold War ended. If the United States wishes to maintain an effective nuclear deterrent, it will need a strong consensus, reflected in solid bipartisan majorities, sustainable over the decades required to implement that program. We can assure such majorities only by informing the American people and enlisting their support.

Toward that end, we must initiate a thoughtful national debate on (1) the nature of deterrence in this new age, (2) its role in US foreign policy and national security strategy, (3) the role of nuclear weapons in this strategy, and (4) the characteristics and approximate numbers of nuclear weapons needed to provide effective deterrence today and in the future.

Advanced Technology

We must reestablish a continuing, robust research, development, test, and evaluation program. Currently, we should focus on cutting-edge technology in research, exploratory development, and accelerated development across dozens of fields relevant to advanced designs for nuclear weapons.

This scientific approach is absolutely essential if the United States desires to understand the possibilities—for us and for potential adversaries—in physics, weapons effects, materials, explosives, diagnostics, and so forth. Verifiable evidence indicates that our peer adversaries are working very hard to develop new and more usable systems in order to exert leverage over the United States and further their strategic interests. If we allow them to continue unchallenged, we may lose our world leadership position. At the very least, without a corresponding US research and development effort, America's deterrent cannot possibly remain commensurate with the emerging nuclear threat.

Military Preparedness

The Defense Department must recommit to the need to maintain, *for the foreseeable future*, both an appropriate nuclear arsenal and the competencies necessary to field and exercise it. Doing so will entail preserving America's existing nuclear-weapons platforms and capabilities as well as planning, budgeting, and performing the long-range actions needed to contend with an uncertain nuclear future.

Specifically, the armed services must take the following steps:

1. Establish military requirements for new nuclear weapons that will credibly

deter current and future adversaries and threats. These counterproliferation weapons should have low yield, great accuracy, and intrinsic security features to prevent unauthorized use. They must also produce reduced collateral damage and minimal residual radiation yet destroy deep underground bunkers as well as neutralize biological and chemical agents.

2. Plan, program, and budget for follow-on strategic submarines, sea- and land-based intercontinental-range ballistic missiles, bombers, cruise missiles, and so forth.
3. Increase emphasis on nuclear-specialist personnel, nuclear strategy and tactics, and nuclear exercises.
4. Work as a closely integrated team with the Department of Energy and the National Nuclear Security Administration to revitalize and transform our nuclear-weapons infrastructure. In addition, the military's insights and expertise will prove vital to informing the aforementioned national debate.

New Nuclear Weapons

We must adopt anew a national commitment to design, test, and produce, on a continuing basis, new nuclear weapons. We can maintain expertise in these "performance arts" only by engaging in them. Simply put, the extreme complexity and hazards of the work are such that there is no substitute for competent, integrated management, which, in turn, requires continuing, hands-on experience. Although the throughput in terms of numbers of weapons may amount to tens per year (rather than the hundreds routinely in the pipeline at the height of the Cold War years), we can realize no credible deterrent over time without an active pipeline that includes a "hot" production line.

Nuclear Infrastructure

The United States must immediately commence the comprehensive modernization of

its nuclear-weapons infrastructure. We have debated the measures necessary to do so for years and have proposed plan after plan. We have *done* little, however. Meanwhile, our facilities become ever-more antiquated, dilapidated, and unsafe. We most urgently need a modern fabrication facility for the “pits,” the heart of a warhead, with adequate flexibility to produce several designs simultaneously and a throughput capacity sufficient to permit replacement of the stockpile’s obsolescent weapons at an acceptable rate.

Effects of Nuclear Weapons

We must revitalize the Pentagon’s national research and development program for examining the effects of nuclear weapons. The survivability of American weapons systems (conventional and nuclear); our command, control, communications, and computer systems; and our intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems against a wide range of nuclear-weapons effects depends on our successfully hardening and testing these systems. Good design and simulator testing can help, but actual underground nuclear testing is essential in order to assure survivability. Such test and evaluation is also indispensable for assessing and correcting the vulnerabilities of critical parts of the country’s *civil* infrastructure against such threats as electromagnetic pulse.

Prevention of Proliferation

Finally, America must undertake a sweeping course correction with respect to countering nuclear proliferation. Full effectiveness, of course, demands changes in the world’s approach to nonproliferation—not just this country’s. Still, any improvement in the utility of global efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear-weapons technology and capabilities remains unlikely unless and until the United States adopts a more practical strategy for contending with this threat.

Over the last several decades, the Nonproliferation Treaty has been distorted by the preoccupation of its stewards with promoting nuclear *disarmament* rather than with preventing proliferation. Apart from the steady ero-

sion of the US arsenal, this fixation has neither resulted in the appreciable diminution of existing inventories of nuclear weapons around the world nor prevented a mushrooming of proliferation to other states.

With some 188 signatories (out of about 193 nations in the world), the 40-year-old Nonproliferation Treaty, the accepted cornerstone of the global nonproliferation regime, provides the basis for our efforts. If we wish the treaty actually to prove helpful, however, we must refocus attention and effort on its *actual language and intent*.

The Nonproliferation Treaty’s purpose is to prevent proliferation, codifying the right of five nations—the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—to be nuclear-weapons states and requiring all other signatories to remain non-nuclear-weapons states. Each of the 188 signatory states has voluntarily accepted this inequality and endorsed a treaty that places no restrictions whatsoever on the five nuclear-weapons states as regards designing, testing, producing, and deploying nuclear weapons.

Given the aforementioned hard strategic realities, the United States should redirect its nonproliferation policy along the following lines: (1) emphasize that nonproliferation requires enforcement; (2) urge that the five nuclear-weapons states accept this implicit responsibility; (3) until all five agree, be willing to act unilaterally, or in coalition, as a default action to prevent proliferation; and (4) regularly modernize our stockpile to keep it effective, safe, secure, reliable, and able to enforce nonproliferation. Without these actions, the remnants of global nonproliferation will inevitably become ever-more irrelevant and ineffectual.

America’s Choice: Weakness or Strength?

In conclusion, the nation must decide between weakness and strength *now*. Adopting the former by continuing the 18-year-long post-Cold War status quo can only lead to dangerous, unilateral US nuclear disarmament. We would be ill advised to adopt the

agenda for accelerated dismantling of our nuclear arsenal now promoted as a way to “reinvigorate” the moribund nonproliferation regime. Champions of the latter idea propose, among other things, that we (1) cut our nuclear stockpile below its already vastly reduced level, (2) commit irrevocably (by treaty) to forgo necessary testing, and (3) refrain from all essential nuclear modernization or replacement activities. They believe that doing so will cause our adversaries to reduce their arsenals and motivate the entire world eventually to abandon nuclear weapons.³

Regrettably, there is no basis in past experience or in logic for these lofty hopes. To the contrary, history has clearly shown that unilateral US reductions, far from causing a similar response, actually stimulate nuclear buildups by adversaries. Second, as a practical matter, it would be impossible to verify the elimination of all nuclear weapons. Third, reduced numbers encourage first strikes designed to disarm. Fourth, and most importantly, the ultimate goal of a world without nuclear arms is not only unachievable but also a utopian delusion. Nuclear weapons cannot be “uninvented.” Pursuit of such a goal by the United States

would constitute a formula for the further evisceration of America’s deterrent and for a world in which only the most dangerous states and perhaps nonstate actors have these weapons—a world of unimaginable horror and chaos.

For these reasons, the United States has no real choice other than adopt a policy of peace through abiding nuclear strength. The foregoing eight measures will assure that such strength continues far into the future and, with it, will enhance the prospects for a world free of either nuclear war or global conventional conflagrations. □

Notes

1. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates (speech to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, 28 October 2008), <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1305>.

2. See Defense Science Board Permanent Task Force on Nuclear Weapons Surety, *Report on the Unauthorized Movement of Nuclear Weapons* (Washington, DC: Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, February 2008).

3. George P. Schultz et al., “Toward a Nuclear-Free World,” *Wall Street Journal Online*, 15 January 2008, http://online.wsj.com/public/article_print/SB120036422673589947.html.

Air Force communications, ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance], and geo-positioning satellites are the bedrock of the Joint Team’s ability to find, fix, target, assess, communicate, and navigate.

—Air Force Posture Statement 2008