

The U.S. Strategic Posture Review: Issues for the New Administration

by M. Elaine Bunn and Richard D. Sokolsky

Key Points

In the past, U.S. decisionmakers have addressed strategic nuclear force and national missile defense issues in an incremental and uncoordinated manner. Too often, force structure decisions have been driven by near-term programmatic, budgetary, arms control, and political pressures rather than by long-term strategy and objectives. The forthcoming Strategic Posture Review (SPR) needs to fundamentally reassess the purposes of nuclear weapons, missile defenses, and the requirements of deterrence and stability in the new security environment.

The Bush administration should develop a comprehensive conceptual framework to decide on the size, composition, and posture of strategic offensive and defensive forces. Such a framework should integrate new assessments of deterrence and stability over the next 10–20 years, in light of the much more diverse threats facing the United States.

It will not be easy to come up with solutions that balance competing and often contradictory objectives. Improving U.S. capabilities to deal with one set of strategic concerns may complicate efforts to address others. SPR should include a reassessment of U.S. strategic force levels and targeting requirements; consideration of different hedges and reconstitution options against greater-than-expected threats, such as maintaining production capabilities or making unilateral strategic force reductions outside a formal treaty framework; and development of a broad calculus to assess the impact of national missile defense and other strategic developments on deterrence and stability.

Before the next administration decides on a strategic force posture, national missile defense (NMD) architecture, and arms control objectives for both offensive and defensive forces, it needs to grapple with questions of strategy and doctrine. Any consideration of alternative defense strategies and their implications for nuclear forces and missile defenses should start with a basic set of questions: For what purposes will we need nuclear weapons and missile defenses in the future and under what conditions would these missions be carried out? What countries will pose strategic threats to vital U.S. national interests over the next 10–20 years? What hostile actions are we trying to deter, and what are the proper character, size, and mix of nuclear weapons and defenses in deterring these threats?

The United States could face three types of strategic threats in the security environment of the next 20 years: the reemergence of a potential challenge from Russia, challenges from a hostile China, and aggression by states of concern (e.g., North Korea, Iraq, and Iran.). Any of these countries may use or threaten to use force against the United States, its forces, or its allies and friends. Such aggression would be particularly troublesome if it involved use of weapons of mass destruction and long-range ballistic missiles to deter U.S. and Western military intervention in regional crises. A related question is how the United States should deter these threats. The fundamental goal of deterrence is to prevent aggression by ensuring that, in the mind of a potential aggressor, the risks of aggression far outweigh the gains. Offensive deterrence and defensive deterrence affect different sides of this deterrence equation: offensive forces increase risks

to aggressors by threatening unacceptable costs; defensive forces decrease potential gains by denying an aggressor's ability to achieve its objectives.

These two variables—the threats we seek to deter and the most effective means of achieving this goal—have significant implications for the role of nuclear forces and missile defenses in overall U.S. defense strategy and for the appropriate mix of these forces for meeting U.S. deterrence requirements. Broadly speaking:

A strategy that puts higher priority on meeting future challenges from an adversarial Russia or a hostile China, and that maintains faith in traditional deterrence, is likely to continue relying most heavily on the threat of nuclear retaliation. Force mixes for this world are likely to emphasize robust offensive capabilities and no or minimal NMD (although some have suggested that the United States should not rule out the possibility of defending against China in the future).

A strategy that is much more concerned with rogue states than large nuclear-armed powers, and is pessimistic about the efficacy of offensive deterrence, is far more likely to feature a force mix that is heavy on missile defenses and overwhelming conventional power, and lighter on strategic offensive forces.

A strategy that is more concerned with building partnerships with Russia and China and relying on preventive defense, traditional deterrence, and conventional capabilities to defend U.S. interests against rogue state actions would be characterized by lower levels of offense and no or low defenses.

A strategy that is concerned with the emergence of both a nuclear competitor and

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rogue states might have a mix heavy in both offensive and defensive forces.

Force Mixes and Offense-Defense

Before developing alternative force mixes, one must address the relationship between strategic nuclear forces and national missile defenses as they relate to assumptions about who and what the United States is trying to deter. There are essentially four different ways of thinking about the offense-defense relationship:

The first possibility is a direct relationship—that is, the more NMD one has, the more nuclear weapons the other side will have; conversely, the lower the level of NMD, the lower the level of strategic offensive forces. Such a relationship is the basis for the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) and Strategic Arms Limitation (SALT) I Treaties, as well as the current Russian proposal for a reduction in strategic nuclear forces to 1,500 and a ban on NMD deployment beyond what is allowed in the ABM Treaty.

The second possibility is an inverse relationship—that is, a tradeoff between strategic nuclear forces and NMD. For example, some have suggested a future agreement between the United States and Russia on both offensive and defensive forces that would set an aggregate ceiling for strategic ballistic missiles and allow freedom to mix between offensive and defensive interceptors. This trade-off relationship is also often implicit in budget discussions.

The third possibility is that there are no inherent or direct relationships between offense and defense levels, because they are driven by different factors: NMD is sized by threats from states of concern, while strategic nuclear forces are sized to deal with a potentially hostile Russia (or perhaps a China that might be viewed as a strategic threat in the future). Because there are different drivers, both nuclear forces and missile defenses should be sized independently of each other, and therefore many combinations are possible.

A fourth possibility is that there is a relationship, but it is nonlinear and unpredictable because of the complex interaction of U.S. decisions on offenses and defenses and their impact on the security calculations of different sets of countries: states of concern, Russia, China, or allies. This relationship is analogous to interconnected gears, but with an unknown differential. It is clear there are connections,

but it is not clear in which direction and how far the gears will turn, or what the consequences would be.

Thus, with a number of ways to view the relationship between nuclear and missile defense forces, no single logic defines the appropriate mix of U.S. offenses and defenses. The matrix on the next page presents illustrative mixes for the 2020 timeframe. While levels of offensive and defensive forces in these mixes are not the only ones possible, they cover a

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range of possibilities that have been put forward by government officials and academic specialists both here and abroad. These force mixes should be seen primarily as a device to identify and frame key issues that should be addressed in the SPR; each will need to be evaluated in terms of its implications for deterrence, stability, the behavior of states of concern, relations with Russia, China, and allies, and U.S. arms control and nonproliferation objectives.

The relative emphasis on either strategic nuclear forces (SNF) or NMD in future strategies is driven by assumptions related to the major threats confronting the United States and the relative level of confidence in offense-versus defense-dominant deterrence. For example, the no NMD/ minimal deterrent SNF posture of 300–500 warheads reflects a view that Russia and China are unlikely to emerge as hostile nuclear competitors, that very low numbers of nuclear weapons are the best guarantee of security, and that rogue state threats can be handled with offensive retaliatory capabilities (nuclear or conventional) or preemption. On the other hand, a medium NMD/very light SNF posture of 600–800 interceptors and 1,000 warheads, respectively, would establish NMD levels comparable to those

envisioned under U.S. proposals from the early 1990s for protection against accidental/unauthorized launches and states of concern (global protection against limited strikes, or GPALS), and nuclear forces at the levels to which some predict Russia will fall.

Future Force Posture

In considering future mixes of strategic nuclear forces and national missile defenses and the future of the U.S. strategic force posture, the SPR will need to address several inter-related issues.

Force Levels and Targeting Policy. The possibility of a future hostile, aggressive Russia with substantial nuclear forces continues to place the most stressful demands on the prospective U.S. strategic nuclear posture. Current U.S. policy on deterring this kind of Russia (a strong Russia gone bad) means being able to hold at risk those targets that the United States believes a potentially hostile Russian leadership would value. Historically, implementing the hold-at-risk doctrine has meant meeting a high standard of target destruction in four categories: (1) nuclear forces, (2) other military forces, (3) economic and industrial targets, and (4) leadership and command, control, communications, and intelligence (C³I) assets. Because being able to hold at risk Russia's strategic forces is only one part of the strategy, further reductions in Russian nuclear forces would probably not yield further significant reductions in U.S. nuclear requirements regarding Russia. Reductions in U.S. strategic nuclear forces below the levels agreed to in principle in 1997 (2,000–2,500 accountable warheads) would require a fundamental change in the targeting policy that underlies the strategy for nuclear deterrence of Russia. Such a change in guidance by the civilian leadership might mean dropping one or more categories of targets, relaxing the exacting damage criteria that affect strategic force levels (for example, by reducing the number of targets within each category that must be held at risk with strategic warheads), or adopting a strategy that targets populations (a difficult choice, given American values).

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Illustrative U.S. Force Mixes for 2020

Strategic Nuclear Forces	Heavy 3,000–3,500+					
	Medium 2,000–2,500					
	Light 1,500					
	Very Light 1,000					
	Minimal 300–500					
		0 None	100 Very Light	250 Light	600–800 Medium	1,000+ Heavy
		National Missile Defense				

There is, in fact, nothing sacrosanct about current targeting requirements. The Cold War calculus of setting a requirement to hold at risk a certain set of targets comes down to a judgment call about what level of damage would deter a Soviet/Russian leader from launching nuclear weapons against the United States. Over the years, this political judgment has varied. Moreover, the process of translating general policy guidance into the selection of specific targets often involves subjective judgments. The real issue is what kind of strategic deterrent we realistically need to maintain to deter a potentially hostile Russia in the future. In thinking through this issue, four key questions should be taken into account. First, how would a hostile Russia, assuming that it could mount a strategic resurgence, choose to challenge the United States, and what role would strategic nuclear weapons play in this strategy? Second, how much strategic warning time would the United States have of the revival of a hostile Russia, and would these signs of hostile intent allow for timely and effective measures in response? Third, what kind of target list would a resurgent Russia present, and what would its implications be for U.S. strategic force levels and targeting policy? Finally, if Russia were destined to become an anti-status quo peer competitor, would U.S. interests best be served by having Russia launch its bid for hegemony from a higher or lower nuclear

baseline? In other words, how should the balance be struck between maintaining near-term strategic force readiness and the capabilities for managing an uncertain long-term nuclear risk?

The “Lead-and-Hedge” Policy. The 1994 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) called on the United States to reduce the role of nuclear weapons while preserving the option for reconstituting a much larger nuclear force above the warhead ceilings in arms control agreements in the face of an uncertain future for Russia. Such a force would consist of nondeployed warheads and strategic delivery vehicles with sufficient space to upload these warheads if circumstances warranted. The NPR hedge was conservative, based in part on the assumption that Russia might emerge as a major power within a relatively short period, and in part on the assumption that whatever level to which the United States reduced would become a de facto ceiling. These assumptions may have been valid then, but are not necessarily true today. In the NPR, the hedge was the difference between a START II force of 3,000–3,500 warheads and a START I force of close to 6,000. In the future, if a political decision were made to retain a hedge, it might mean the difference between future levels of strategic forces

(whether treaty-mandated or not) and START II levels. Alternatively, a future hedge might mean putting less emphasis on maintaining a large number of warheads on the shelf that are rapidly available in favor of maintaining stored components and/or the industrial and nuclear weapons infrastructure to increase nuclear capabilities within the timelines that a threat might arise. Making further reductions in the number of *deployed* strategic weapons outside a formal treaty framework (i.e., unilaterally, with deployed defined as immediately available for use), which would give the United States even greater flexibility both to reconstitute strategic forces and to agree to substantially lower strategic force levels, might also be part of a redefined lead-and-hedge policy. In sum, the way the hedge was first conceived may have served our interests over the past decade, but may need to be conceptualized differently if it is to serve our interests in the future. In other words, can the United States safely afford to do more leading and less—or a different kind—of hedging?

Nondeployed and Tactical Nuclear Weapons. In looking at substantially lower numbers of strategic weapons, the issue of nondeployed (or stockpiled) and tactical nuclear weapons (TNW), which are unconstrained by arms control treaties, assumes more importance. To compensate for declining conventional capabilities, Russian military doctrine has increased reliance on tactical nuclear weapons. Moreover, the characteristics of TNW, especially their small size and mobility, are a proliferation worry. At the same time, trying to negotiate legally binding limits on nondeployed and TNW warheads, especially if it required verified warhead dismantlement, would be contentious and time-consuming and could cause serious military and political problems. Intrusive verification procedures pose potential problems for protecting sensitive military and operational information—an especially important concern, as some experts have noted, because of the ascendancy of the Russian security services in Russian national security policymaking. In addition, stockpiled weapons for both sides, but especially for the United States, are important to maintaining effective stockpile stewardship programs under nuclear testing moratoria. Moreover, the military significance of stockpiled Russian tactical nuclear warheads is probably marginal, since many of these weapons and their associated launchers are obsolescing rapidly. Because of

the age of many TNW systems, as well as resource constraints, Russian TNW capabilities are expected to drop significantly in the coming years (see *Proliferation: Threat and Response*, Office of the Secretary of Defense, January 2001, p. 54; available at <http://www.defenselink.mil>). Finally, negotiating limits on tactical nuclear weapons is perhaps even more problematic. Reaching an agreed definition on these systems would present thorny issues, and verifying limits on them, many of which are dual-use, with any degree of confidence presents a daunting technical challenge. Verification would also require a level of intrusiveness that is probably unacceptable to both countries. Because of its huge numerical advantage, Russia would probably have little incentive to negotiate lower limits; the United States, moreover, would have little bargaining leverage unless U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe were put on the bargaining table—a decision that would cause serious problems with NATO allies.

Nonetheless, Russia's nondeployed and tactical nuclear weapons pose a potential proliferation problem and international pressure will continue to grow for both countries to reduce and dismantle their large number of stockpiled weapons as a test of their commitment to genuine nuclear disarmament. To deflect this pressure, and in view of the formidable problems inherent in controlling these weapons, the United States should continue to push for transparency and confidence-building measures that could reduce uncertainties about the size of weapons stockpiles and provide reassurance about U.S. and Russian intentions.

The Stability Calculus. Finally, the Strategic Posture Review will need to come to terms with the concept of stability. Stability is a factor that is often thrown around in discussions of the strategic balance and missile defenses but has different meanings—arms race stability, crisis stability (a subset of which is first strike stability), and regional/political stability—whose relevance in the new security environment should be reexamined. The SPR will need to carefully consider the implications of alternative offense-defense force mixes for all three types of stability. To cite but one example, much of the discussion to date about NMD and strategic offensive forces has revolved around arms race stability—that is, whether nations feel pressure to increase the size or capabilities of their forces in response to possible U.S. ballistic missile defenses. However, numbers should not be the only or even primary consideration. More

important is the posture of forces—in particular, how they are deployed and whether they are survivable in all types of situations, from normal peacetime (day-to-day) to periods of heightened tension when a nation may put more of its forces on alert (generated). Such factors, along with early warning and command and control capabilities, have a far greater impact than force levels on crisis or first strike stability, particularly whether they encourage escalation in a crisis situation.

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In short, lower numbers are not intrinsically better and should not be the measure of merit in evaluating alternative offense-defense mixes or options for lower strategic force levels. Proposals for reducing the alert status of U.S. and Russian strategic forces, while potentially lowering the risks of accidental or unauthorized launch or providing a symbol of U.S. leadership and the end of U.S.-Russian enmity, should also be judged in terms of their impact on crisis stability. It is by no means clear, for example, that a unilateral U.S. decision to reduce the alert levels of its strategic forces would enhance stability, especially in a crisis, when re-alerting of forces could prove to be highly destabilizing, increasing rather than dampening incentives for escalation. It is equally problematic that Russia would be receptive to U.S. proposals for full reciprocity in de-alerting, given its greater reliance on nuclear

forces for deterrence, or that the U.S. and Russian approaches to reducing alert levels would be compatible. Finally, to the degree that the threat of an accidental or unauthorized launch of nuclear weapons is based on faulty information, the problem lies with Russia's deteriorating early warning and command and control capabilities. Unilateral changes in the U.S. strategic force posture would not address this problem; on the other hand, continuing and expanding efforts on shared early warning—such as the recently agreed Joint Data Exchange and pre-launch notification system—would be an effective response to this problem.

The Bush administration will need to make decisions on NMD and the U.S. strategic force posture in light of its overall global strategy, the range of scenarios for which we can envision a mission for both strategic offensive and defensive forces, and judgments about the efficacy of offensive and defensive deterrence. Moreover, in considering alternative deterrence futures and preferred outcomes, the Strategic Posture Review will need to integrate a much broader range of factors into its analysis—not just strategic nuclear weapons, but also theater and national missile defenses, tactical and nondeployed nuclear weapons, alert levels, conventional strategic and information operations capabilities—and develop a strategic calculus that is relevant to the security environment.

This is an inherently messy process and confronts U.S. planners and decisionmakers with a serious intellectual challenge that will require a coherent long-term vision, innovative thinking, and a willingness to challenge Cold War logic and orthodoxy. The discussion here only scratches the surface. But it will have served its purpose if it illuminates some key choices and tradeoffs the United States faces and stimulates more informed debate and understanding about how all the pieces of this complex puzzle fit together.

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