

A Review of the 2002 US Nuclear Posture Review

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Introduction

The Bush administration's Nuclear Posture Review (NPR)¹ begins with a fallacy. It states that it "puts the Cold War practices related to planning for strategic forces behind us." Yet the NPR calls for retaining some 2,000 deployed strategic nuclear warheads as well as thousands of additional warheads in storage for rapid redeployment. The only conceivable justification for such an arsenal is to maintain the capability to target Russian nuclear forces. That is the primary role assigned to nuclear weapons during the Cold War, and it remains the primary role in the Bush administration's NPR.

In addition to continuing to embrace the central tenet of Cold War nuclear planning, the Bush administration's NPR emphasizes several other negative policies. Rather than reducing the role of nuclear weapons in US military policy, the NPR creates new roles for nuclear weapons and calls for new kinds of weapons and increasing the capability to produce new weapons. In sum, it is a recipe for maintaining a large nuclear arsenal, a robust nuclear infrastructure, and a developed nuclear weapons research capability for the foreseeable future.

What is publicly known about the NPR is based on a leak of significant sections—but not all—of the review. It was provided to a few media outlets, and a large number of extracts appeared on the web.² However, the entire document has not been made public, and it is possible that the NPR includes other policies that are not publicly known.

Analysis of the 2002 NPR

This paper examines the Nuclear Posture Review by comparison to *Toward True Security: A US Nuclear Posture for the Next Decade*, an independent nuclear posture review carried out by the Union of Concerned Scientists, the Federation of American Scientists, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and several nuclear policy experts.³ Below we discuss the major points of disagreement between these two documents.

¹ The Nuclear Posture Review is just that – a review. It does not in and of itself set nuclear policy. It can provide guidelines and give a sense of priorities, but to make actual changes in US nuclear policy requires implementing action. In particular, a Presidential Decision Directive, or PDD, would be required to change US targeting priorities. Such a PDD could lead to changes in the SIOP, the Strategic Integrated Operational Plan, which actually details individual targets.

² See, for example, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/npr.htm>

³ The full report is available at: <http://www.ucsusa.org/security/npr.html>

The Role of US Nuclear Weapons

- *Toward True Security* proposes that the United States declare that the sole purpose of US nuclear weapons is to deter and, if necessary, respond to the use of nuclear weapons by another country.
- In contrast, the Bush NPR explicitly calls for US nuclear weapons to deter and respond to a “wide range of threats,” including attacks by conventional, chemical, or biological weapons as well as “surprising military developments.”

In keeping with its stated interest in increasing the roles for US nuclear weapons, the NPR also states that the review lead the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) to undertake several initiatives to explore new kinds of nuclear weapons. These include: “possible modifications to existing weapons to provide additional yield flexibility in the stockpile; improved earth penetrating weapons (EPWs) to counter the increased use by potential adversaries of hardened and deeply buried facilities; and warheads that reduce collateral damage.”

The NPR policy is counter to US and international security interests. Maintaining and strengthening the firebreak against the use of nuclear weapons by all countries should be a paramount concern for US national security. The additional roles for nuclear weapons called for by the Bush NPR would undermine the overriding goal of preventing the proliferation and use of nuclear weapons. If the United States, with unquestioned conventional superiority, chooses to rely on nuclear weapons, then weaker states—particularly those not covered by US security guarantees—would apparently have a far greater need for nuclear weapons.

Addressing the Risk of Mistaken, Unauthorized or Accidental Launch of Nuclear Weapons

- To reduce Russia’s incentive to maintain its launch-on-warning capability and thus to minimize the risks of a mistaken, unauthorized, or accidental launch of Russian nuclear weapons, *Toward True Security* proposes that the United States reject rapid-launch options (launch-on-warning and launch-under-attack), and change its deployment practices to provide for the launch of US nuclear forces in hours or days rather than minutes.
- In contrast, the Bush NPR does not discuss ways to prevent such attacks from occurring, but discusses only ways to respond to them once they occur. The NPR claims to address “concerns about the accidental or unauthorized launch of certain foreign forces” by providing (1) “missile defenses to protect the United States, its allies, and friends,” and (2) “a spectrum of ... response options” that would allow the United States to “tailor an appropriate response to the specific event and to limit the danger of escalation.”

By considering how to respond to—rather than how to reduce the risk of—a mistaken, unauthorized, or accidental launch of Russian nuclear weapons, the Bush administration’s NPR takes a highly irresponsible and cavalier attitude towards this danger. According to the NPR, even US warheads to be withdrawn from deployed status will not have their alert status reduced: “Peacekeeper deactivation will occur over a 36-month period [beginning in FY03] with missiles remaining fully on alert and fully mission capable throughout the deactivation period.”

There is no sound security reason to maintain the US ability to launch its nuclear weapons quickly. A reliable and credible US nuclear deterrent does not require that the United States be

able to retaliate within minutes, so long as no attack could totally disable the US command-and-control system and sufficient nuclear weapons are based on submarines, where they would survive any attack. At the same time, by changing its deployment practices so that large numbers of its nuclear forces could no longer be launched promptly, the United States would reduce Russia's incentive to maintain its launch-on-warning capability, thereby minimizing the risks of a mistaken, unauthorized, or accidental launch of Russian nuclear weapons.

The NPR's plan to rely on missile defenses to defend against mistaken attacks is not based on reality. No nation-wide missile defense is anywhere near deployment. Moreover, as described in *Toward True Security*, an "unauthorized" launch of Russia missiles could involve up to 500 warheads, an amount that would overwhelm any feasible US missile defense system.

Size of Nuclear Arsenals

- *Toward True Security* notes that no current or conceivable future threat requires the United States to maintain more than a few hundred survivable warheads. It calls on the United States to unilaterally reduce its nuclear arsenal to a total of 1,000 warheads, including deployed, spare, and reserve warheads and to announce its commitment to further reductions in the number of nuclear weapons on a negotiated and verified multilateral basis.
- The Bush NPR sets a goal of reducing the number of "operationally deployed" US nuclear warheads to between 1,700 and 2,200 warheads over the next decade, while retaining thousands of the warheads withdrawn from deployment as part of a "responsive force."

As stated above, maintaining 1,700-2,200 operationally deployed strategic nuclear warheads can only be justified by continuing to target Russian nuclear forces. Moreover, according to the NPR, the arsenal will include a "responsive force" that can be redeployed "in weeks, months, or . . . years." According to press reports, the responsive force will include 2,400 strategic warheads in operational condition. An unknown number—probably a couple hundred or so—of "logistical spares" will also be maintained.

The arsenal will also include in "inactive stockpile" of warheads. Such warheads do not have limited-life components—such as tritium gas—installed and may not have the latest warhead modifications. According to the Natural Resources Defense Council, there are currently roughly 4,900 intact warheads in the inactive reserve. The United States also maintains, again according to NRDC, some 5,000 stored plutonium "primary" and highly-enriched uranium (HEU) "secondary" components that could be reassembled into weapons.

Thus, in total, the Bush administration plans to maintain the ability to deploy some 15,000 nuclear weapons, though it would take some years to increase to this level.

The NPR also details how the United States will be able to maintain existing and produce new nuclear weapons in the future. It states, "today the complex can process—either refurbish or dismantle—roughly 350 weapons per year. If the NNSA's proposed plan is funded, that number should increase to roughly 600 per year." For new weapons, the NPR describes how Los Alamos National Laboratory will be given an interim capability to produce new "pits," or weapons primaries. However, the NPR adds, for the "long term a new modern production facility will be needed to deal with the large-scale replacement of components and new production."

There are two basic problems with the plan the NPR lays out. First, by keeping its warheads in storage and maintaining the ability to rapidly redeploy them instead of dismantling its warheads, the United States will provide Russia with no incentive to dismantle its warheads. Nuclear warheads kept in storage constitute a serious proliferation risk, especially under current conditions in Russia. Instead, as a first step the United States and Russia should place their non-deployed warheads and fissile material stocks under secure, bilateral storage. Moreover, to give Russia an incentive to reciprocate and to lay the groundwork for future reductions, *Toward True Security* argues that the United States should begin dismantling its excess nuclear warheads in a manner transparent to Russia and the rest of the world. The United States should commit to storing and disposing of the resulting fissile material under international safeguards to preclude its reuse in nuclear weapons and to make clear that those reductions are irreversible.

Second, the NPR ensures that the United States and Russia will continue to maintain enough nuclear weapons to destroy each other many times over, as they did throughout the Cold War.

Further Reductions

- *Toward True Security* recommends that the United States announce its commitment to reduce its total arsenal to below 1,000 nuclear weapons on a negotiated and verified multilateral basis. Negotiated agreements would make reductions more difficult to reverse and thus provide all nuclear weapon states with the predictability needed to move toward smaller nuclear forces and safer nuclear postures.
- In contrast, the Nuclear Posture Review makes very clear that the United States has no plans to go below the 1,700-2,200 level of deployed warheads, a point it will take ten years to reach. Moreover, the NPR is committed to maintaining the maximum flexibility for the future US nuclear arsenal.

While it may seem desirable to maintain maximum flexibility for US nuclear forces into the future, doing so will preclude achieving effective constraints on the nuclear capabilities of other states and will leave the United States and the world less rather than more secure.

Tactical Nuclear Weapons

- *Toward True Security* recommends that the United States promptly and unilaterally retire all US tactical nuclear weapons, dismantling them in a transparent manner, and take steps to induce Russia to do the same.
- The NPR makes no mention of what will be done with US tactical nuclear weapons, but only notes that such “nonstrategic” forces are included in the active US nuclear arsenal.

The arsenal numbers described above do not include US tactical nuclear weapons. The United States still deploys roughly 1,100 such weapons, consisting of gravity bombs and submarine-launched cruise missiles. The total includes approximately 150 gravity bombs that are still deployed in Europe and ready for use by the air forces of six or seven NATO countries. Russia maintains some 3,600 operational tactical nuclear weapons, but may have thousands more in storage.

Because tactical nuclear weapons are often stored and deployed under less secure control than strategic weapons, eliminating tactical nuclear weapons would reduce the dangers of unauthorized use and theft, particularly if Russia reciprocates.

Nuclear Testing

- *Toward True Security* proposes that the United States commit to not resuming nuclear testing and ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).
- The NPR does not repudiate Bush's pledge to maintain the current US testing moratorium but it states: "While the United States is making every effort to maintain the stockpile without additional nuclear testing, this may not be possible for the indefinite future." Moreover, the NPT calls for increasing "test readiness" by reducing the time needed to resume nuclear testing, and for establishing "a revitalized nuclear weapons complex that will...be able, if directed, to design, develop, manufacture, and certify new warheads in response to new national requirements; and maintain readiness to resume underground nuclear testing if required."

The United States has a large and varied suite of fully tested nuclear weapons designs that give it the capability to meet all credible future military requirements. It also has sophisticated facilities for maintaining a reliable nuclear stockpile without explosive testing. A US resumption of testing would severely compromise the nonproliferation regime, whereas US ratification of the CTBT would strengthen the regime.

The Bush administration has made very clear its opposition to the CTBT. President Bush has said that he supports the test ban moratorium, but will not seek US ratification of the treaty. However, some Bush administration officials are actively seeking to repudiate formally the US signature to the CTBT to free the United States from its international legal obligation as a treaty signatory to not take actions contrary to the treaty's basic purpose.

Commitment to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)

- *Toward True Security* proposes that, in recognition that the universal and verifiable prohibition of nuclear weapons would be in its national security interest, the United States should reaffirm its commitment to pursue nuclear disarmament under Article VI of the NPT and present a specific plan for moving toward this goal.
- The NPR, at least in the extracts that were leaked, makes no reference at all the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons or to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Every indication in the review, from the emphasis on revitalizing the nuclear infrastructure to plans for new weapons and delivery systems, indicates that the Bush administration has no intention of moving the United States and the global community toward the elimination of nuclear weapons. Moreover, the NPR explicitly calls for targeting nuclear weapons against several non-nuclear weapon state (NNWS) signatories to the NPT, which is contrary to previous US pledges to not do so. Such pledges were made by all the nuclear weapon state (NWS) signatories to the NPT as an incentive for other countries to renounce nuclear weapons.

The Bush NPR thus undermines the NPT in several ways. Moreover, over the long term, US nonproliferation goals can be accomplished only if the United States demonstrates by its own actions and policies that it has reached the firm conclusion that nuclear weapons bring with them

greater dangers than security benefits and that it intends to move expeditiously toward a nonnuclear world together with the other nuclear weapon states.

Missile Defenses

- *Toward True Security* notes that deployment of a US missile defense system that Russia or China believes could intercept a significant portion of its survivable long-range missile forces would trigger reactions by these countries that could result in a net decrease in US security. It therefore recommends that the United States should commit to not deploy any missile defense system that would decrease its security in this way.
- In contrast, the NPR considers missile defenses to be an integral part of its new triad, which will consist of: (1) offensive strike systems, (2) defenses, and (3) a revitalized defense infrastructure.

The NPR is very optimistic about the timelines for deploying missile defenses; it states the United States has a variety of options that could provide “near-term” emergency missile defense capabilities and “mid-term” operational systems by 2003-2008. At the same time, there is no discussion of the potential reactions on the part of other countries and steps that the United States might take to reduce or mitigate those reactions.

In fact, the NPR also calls on the United States to demonstrate a linkage between “long-range precision strike weapons and real-time intelligence systems” to be able to target mobile ballistic missiles. The pursuit of such a capability along with missile defenses is sure to cause China to respond negatively. China has some two dozen long-range missiles capable of reaching the United States, and because it is concerned about the survivability of these missiles, it is developing new solid-fueled mobile missiles. Now the NPR calls for eliminating the survivability of these missiles as well, thereby threatening China’s modest deterrent.

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Additional Resources:

Toward True Security: A US Nuclear Posture for the Next Decade; Federation of American Scientists, Natural Resources Defense Council, Union of Concerned Scientists, June 2001
<http://www.ucsusa.org/security/npr.html>

Excerpts of the Nuclear Posture Review, 8 January 2002
<http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/npr.htm>

Nuclear Notebook, from the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, May 2002
<http://www.thebulletin.org/issues/nukenotes/mj02nukenote.pdf>