

Return of the Nuclear Debate

In time, President George W. Bush's administration may release much more detail concerning its intentions for nuclear modernization, arms control, ballistic missile defense, space dominance, and the "transformation" of conventional forces.

These initiatives, though presented separately, actually relate to each other and can be best understood with reference to an organized concept of the United States' security needs moving forward into the twenty-first century. But the administration itself has announced no such overall concept. And yet, even if the administration really sees no connections between its choices about nuclear weapons and arms control, defenses and offense, and nuclear and conventional forces—even if the administration actually insists there are no connections—they do interact. It is a good thing for people to be conscious of how these interactions might work out.

The Administration's Case

The following, then, is an interpretation of what the administration appears to have in mind.

- Arms control was at best a highly imperfect effort to regulate the military rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. In many ways, such agreements were little more than contracts allowing both sides to pursue next steps in the arms race that each had elected as desirable, arms control or not. At worst, arms control agreements may actually have

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The Washington Quarterly • 24:4 pp. 97–108.

channeled competition into even more dangerous technologies. Moreover, the price for these agreements was high in terms of unending squabbles about fine points, compliance, and verification—along with dismantling and inspection procedures that literally cost billions of dollars to operate.

- But by far the highest cost of arms control was that it locked the United States into the doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD). The objective of limiting offensive nuclear weapons was to find a way to make each side feel certain that, under even the most difficult conditions, it would always be able to destroy an aggressor. The purpose of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty was to reinforce this “security” by making it impossible for either side to develop a defense of its national territory. However, the ABM Treaty also perpetuated MAD, which was fine so long as MAD was the best arrangement both sides could envision to deter the other.
- Things are now radically different. The Cold War is over; Russia is too weak to be a threat; and, besides, relations with it are basically good. Therefore, the levels and kinds of nuclear weapons available to the United States and to Russia are no longer reasons for mutual fear. In view of this, the United States and Russia should stop trying to regulate their strategic nuclear weapons by way of explicit, formal agreements and instead rely on “understandings” informally worked out and not legally binding. Both sides would be free to shape their nuclear forces as they please; political and economic realism will assure that this translates into spontaneous deep reductions all around.
- On the other hand, the United States faces an emerging new threat from weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the hands of countries such as North Korea or Iran. To deal with this threat, the United States needs to develop and deploy ABM weapons. The Clinton administration was working on a limited defense—the so-called national missile defense (NMD)—but its heart was never really in the program, and the design was anemic. The United States should shorten the timetable to initial deployment and aim to make the system much more powerful from the outset. The ABM Treaty prevents the United States from doing this and is therefore an obstacle to self-defense. The treaty should be abandoned if Russia will not agree to liberally rewriting it.
- Russia was ready to fight against even the last administration’s very limited NMD on the grounds that it constituted a first step toward a system ultimately big enough to threaten the credibility of their nuclear deter-

rent. In ratifying the second Strategic Arms Reductions Talks (START II) agreement, the Russian Duma attached a condition according to which the provisions of the treaty would not be executed if the United States did not commit itself to the continuance of the ABM Treaty. The United States should not be deterred by Russian opposition. Perhaps, in time, the U.S. government can persuade Russia to accept its word that U.S. defenses are not intended to be a threat. But if not, the United States should be prepared to pull out of the ABM Treaty. Doing so will produce no untoward consequences for the security of the United States. Russia cannot afford very impressive countermeasures. Russia has threatened that, if the United States pulls out of the ABM Treaty, Russia will pull out of all existing arms control agreements, but the United States can discount that as bluster. But if this warning turns out to be real, the United States is better off without such agreements in any event and, therefore, can dispense with them.

Highly questionable assumptions hold the administration's chain of reasoning together.

- The United States' allies are extremely nervous about all this and are very reluctant to give the United States their cooperation. But the United States can eventually persuade them to give up their reservations and to come along with it. Washington will have to promise them protection from ballistic missiles under a U.S. or a joint defensive shield. Honoring that commitment will require that the United States explore technologies and systems that cannot in any way be reconciled with the basic logic of the ABM Treaty, but the allies will value that promise more than they value the existing system of arms control. Besides, in the last analysis, what choice do they have?
- The United States does not much care what China thinks about this or what the Chinese government's responses might be. China has a relatively small number of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and the United States expects them to modernize that force with or without a U.S. decision to build missile defenses. Building defenses is unlikely, therefore, to result in any increase of the Chinese nuclear threat in excess of that which we already anticipate.
- On the other hand, building ballistic missile defenses would better prepare the United States for a confrontation with China over Taiwan. The

United States should not only accept that a confrontation with China is in the cards, but should act on that assumption by profoundly reshaping—“transforming”—U.S. conventional military forces.

- By its nature, the military systems needed for a full-scale transformation of U.S. conventional forces will intensify U.S. dependence on space-based intelligence and battle management systems. Space must therefore be viewed as a zone of military operations where the United States must attain dominance. The United States may even need to develop space-based offensive weapons for use against ground targets.
- In particular, the United States should attempt to develop technologies for space-based defense against ballistic missiles and, if successful, should deploy them. The fact that space-based defenses really could threaten Russia’s nuclear retaliatory forces ought not to prevent U.S. action. Russia will trust the United States. Besides, given the tremendous problems besetting the Russian government, what is its recourse? Once the Russian government acquiesces to earlier phases of development and deployment of U.S. defenses, the precedents will be set anyway.

Critique: The Yardstick of Strategic Stability

It is fairly easy to pick out some of the highly questionable assumptions that hold this chain of reasoning together. First, there is a readiness to gamble hugely on unproven technologies and even on technologies not yet invented. Second, there is eagerness, even zeal, to be rid of the ABM Treaty long before the workability of an elaborate defense system can be estimated, much less demonstrated. Third, there is a complacent view of U.S. trustworthiness, to the point where one assumes that all the rest of the world, friends and enemies alike, have merely to hear what U.S. intentions are, and they will be reconciled. Fourth, there is a facile dismissal of the ability of other countries to take actions against the United States that this country would find truly damaging. Fifth, there is a naïve model of history that sees the United States and Russia as having attained durable friendship, and a very dangerous corollary that fatalistically accepts China as the next great threat. Sixth, there is radical impatience with the difficulties of negotiating agreements. And seventh, there is an unproven and utterly reckless belief that the United States does not need to regard nuclear weapons, ballistic missile defenses, and space warfare as mutually interactive. The administration may believe that a framework encompassing strategic and defensive weapons must be accepted to mollify Russia,

but it is very likely to view that framework as a means to relax rather than to clarify linkages between offense and defense.

It is this last point that may be the most serious deficiency of all because it denies the relevance of any effort to gauge the net impact of a complex set of proposed changes against some standard value of what is good for the United States. There is such a standard. It is called strategic stability. One ought not to pretend that strategic stability is a scientific unit of measure. It does involve modeling and calculations at some level, but then moves on to a heavy mixture of history, political science, and even intuition. Despite these imprecisions, however, strategic stability offers a clear statement of what the goals of the United States should be: that its nuclear weapons and its doctrines about how and when to use them should decrease, rather than increase, the likelihood of being forced into an otherwise undesired conflict. A fundamental corollary to this definition of strategic stability is that it does not exist for any one party unless it exists for all. Hence, it cannot be imposed; it must be set in place by mutual consent.

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The concept of strategic stability evolved over a lengthy period of time. Until the advent of modern arms control in the late 1960s, there was no means in place to constrain rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union over nuclear weapons and delivery systems. Each side imputed the worst intentions to the other and reacted to every new weapons development—rumored or real—as a further proof of hostility. Consequently, each side sought to offset any perceived advantage accruing to the other. It was soon clear that, because neither side could ever allow the other to enjoy what it would regard as marked overall supremacy, the arms race might continue indefinitely in a kind of rolling stalemate.

The first Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I) treaty, signed in 1972, attempted to end this cycle, but mainly rechanneled it. Limits on the number of launchers for ICBMs perversely encouraged both sides to speed the deployment of multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs) on those launchers remaining. Each side watched the other deploying more and more warheads on fewer missiles. The net result was to increase a sense of vulnerability on each side. As the number of MIRVs deployed per launcher increased, and as improvements in accuracy were made, each side feared the other was acquiring the means to carry out a first strike against the other's ICBMs.

Prospective defenses against ballistic missiles added to this growing sense of insecurity, because if either side were able to effectively protect its national territory, it might be even more tempted to think of launching a first strike. To be more concrete, the idea was that one side might think that it would be able to destroy a substantial portion of the other's retaliatory force in a first strike, and then use its ABM shield to deal with the response. The ABM Treaty was negotiated to settle this fear, by denying each party the means to build the necessary shield, but it also locked both sides into a condition of permanent mutual vulnerability.

Strategic arithmetic is the same as always; and so is human nature.

The START II agreement, signed in 1993, was a deliberate effort to break this cycle by shaping the offensive forces of both sides in such a way as to negate even the hypothetical advantages of a first strike. Both sides agreed to begin de-MIRVing their ballistic missiles, while reducing them in number. The result would be a smaller overall force but, perhaps even more importantly, a force that both sides believed would be intrinsically more stable. That is to say, there would be a balance between the nuclear forces of both sides such that neither would have reason

to believe that the other could objectively benefit from launching a first strike. Defenses were to remain bounded by the ABM Treaty, which now acquired a new value: as a means to facilitate deeper reductions by reducing the fear that radically improved and expanded defenses might create a first-strike capability at a much lower overall offensive weapons level.

START II responded to three fundamental axioms about strategic stability: first, that reductions alone may not necessarily produce a better, more crisis-resistant situation; second, that the relationship between offensive forces needs to be consciously designed to produce this effect; and third, that reductions may continue to progressively lower levels, providing that (1) the resultant balance is always arranged with a view toward stability and that (2) defenses are not allowed to become a wild card.

If all this sounds arcane, it was. The possibility that either Washington or Moscow would actually think it wise to launch a first strike may have been very small. But the fear that each side felt about this was real because it was based on the actual capabilities of weapons and on a reading of human psychology. START II recognized that this fear had to be addressed through a mutually acceptable, ergo negotiated, arrangement.

Obviously, the world has changed tremendously since the days when START II was negotiated, but strategic arithmetic is the same as always. And so is human nature. Strategic arithmetic tells us that deep reductions

can lead to results that damage strategic stability, if they are not worked out on a mutual basis. Unilateral reductions are a role of the dice, by comparison. Chances that things will work out for the worse are at least 50/50. And if they do work out for the worse, basic human instincts will take over: the fear of the other's intentions, based on the fear of the other's capabilities, will again acquire the power to drive events. If, at the same time, the ABM Treaty falls away so that the defensive side of the stability equation becomes completely unpredictable, paranoia about first strikes will be reestablished.

The administration argues that, because the Cold War is over, the need for arms control has disappeared. In doing so, the administration uses profound changes in the real world to rationalize old policies dressed up as new. The administration asserts complete freedom of action for the United States, including the right to dispense with the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), the ABM Treaty, and any other arms control agreements that might perish along with them.

In the real world, however, attention must be paid to the interests and considerations of others if the United States is not to end up isolated and unable to marshal support for issues that matter greatly to U.S. principles and even U.S. security. Arms control remains necessary precisely in order to build durable structures for order and stability in the twenty-first century. The United States needs it to regulate and balance out strategic nuclear forces; it needs it to open a path toward progressively deeper reductions in those forces; it needs it to have the transparency and legal structure needed to dispel uncertainty and stop paranoia from putting down new roots. "Good fences make good neighbors" remains a simple truth.

Consequences: A Renewed Arms Race

Following Bush's meeting with Russian president Vladimir Putin at the G-8 meeting in Genoa, the administration is now able to test its theories with Russia. The stakes are extremely high. In the worst case, the administration's course of action can literally reignite the arms race. One should think carefully about what that would mean.

Even though the Russian government is strapped for cash, the fact is that ballistic missiles and nuclear warheads are relatively cheap (land-based systems, that is). Russia has throw-weight to spare on their existing ICBM force and could load up to maximum, something that it did not do even in the Cold War. The Russian nuclear weapons establishment still has the capacity to manufacture at arms-race levels. The U.S. weapons establishment, by the way, is drastically smaller than in the past and is in no position to compete, nor would it be for at least a decade.

So Russia could rapidly build up its inventory of online strategic warheads without fielding new missiles. That would be the obvious, brute-force response to a U.S. move that potentially threatened the credibility of Russia's nuclear deterrent in its eyes. Credibility is at least as much a matter of subjective impression as it is of force-planners' calculations. It does not matter what the United States thinks of Russia's deterrent, or vice versa; it only matters what each country thinks of itself—and in existential calculations

of this sort, too much is never enough. The prompt Russian reaction could thus easily be to build up their forces.

Such a buildup would also obliterate what progress the two countries have made toward strategic stability because increasing the numbers of warheads loaded on ICBMs would progressively add to the value of the Russian land-based launchers as targets for the United States, or so Russia would reason. Now, any American may think it would be an act of insanity for the United States to contemplate a first strike, but the whole point is that our opinion does not matter: it is the opinion of the Russian side that is dispositive.

There would also be immense opportunity costs. In the atmosphere of a renewed arms race, it is unlikely that the United States would be able to make progress toward what should be its follow-on goals at this moment: START III, with lower final levels than those agreed at Helsinki; reduction of the Russian nuclear arms complex to post-Cold War size; transparency arrangements for nuclear weapons in storage; accountability for inventories of bomb-grade fissionable materials; continuity of the joint program for U.S. purchases of Russian bomb-grade uranium blended down into fuel-grade for U.S. power reactors; execution of agreements just completed for the safe disposition of plutonium; and negotiation of a treaty for the cessation of further production of bomb-grade fissionable material. In theory, one supposes, programs premised on remarkably intimate cooperation might continue even in the midst of a new arms race, but that flies in the face of any sensible reading of political and psychological reality.

To this list of costs, one should also add the possibility that Russia will act on its threat to abrogate all other arms control agreements, including perhaps the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force (INF) Treaty, which eliminated SS-20s, ground-launched cruise missiles, and Pershing IIs aimed at the heart of Europe. Never mind, of course, that the United States will promise to protect Europe under a U.S. ballistic missile shield. Who will pay for that additional safety? The North Atlantic Treaty Organization

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(NATO) allies have already reduced military spending so much that they are running hollowed-out armed forces. If the NATO allies were prepared to spend billions more on defense, one would hope that the money would go first to remedy their tremendous weaknesses in conventional forces. Or is the United States supposed to foot the bill? And if so, then at what cost to the U.S. military posture?

Of course, it might be that Russia is simply too short of money to take any of these steps, but that does not mean reconciliation with U.S. behavior. On the contrary, it would inspire a slow-burning desire to even the score. At some point, sooner or later, Russia would have its chance. It is folly to imagine that the history of Russia as a great power has been written and sealed.

As for China, its resources may limit it only to modernization in forms it was already pursuing. In that case, China may deploy road-mobile ICBMs that are harder to target, and push forward until it has the technology to MIRV these, to maximize the chance of overwhelming a U.S. defensive shield. China is, however, a country whose gross domestic product (GDP) grows at about 8 percent a year and will not lack for means for much longer. Thus, one should not ignore the possibility of a major expansion of Chinese ballistic missile forces. Meanwhile, the United States will have built into the Chinese political system a deepening conviction that the United States is an implacable enemy. The United States will therefore be building momentum toward confrontation that could unleash the nuclear war it was fortunate enough to avoid with the Soviet Union.

A final word about our allies. In the end, faced with an atmosphere of inevitability, and the choice of resisting the United States to the point of severely damaging alliances, U.S. friends may swallow their objections and acquiesce. If this happens, however, it will be yet another galling example for the allies of their dependence on the United States and of a style of U.S. leadership they consider both arrogant and reckless. If a new arms race does materialize, the consequences for relations between the United States and its allies will be disastrous.

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A Constructive Alternative

All this having been said, there are some valid elements in the administration's position. It is possible to stipulate that (1) the proliferation

of weapons of mass destruction and the means to deliver them to the United States represents a potential, important oncoming threat; (2) if these threats continue to develop, it would be appropriate for the United States to have developed and, as necessary, deployed a proportionate, limited defense; and (3) deeper reductions of nuclear weapons than those provided for in the START II agreement are acceptable and desirable.

But there are critical qualifications. Those qualifications should be the organizing issues of the national debate the United States needs the Congress to undertake. This debate would be most meaningful in Congress. From the congressional perspective, possible elements of a constructive alternative are:

- Given a choice between defensive technologies that require a reasonable modification of the ABM Treaty and more aggressive technologies that require the treaty's abrogation, the United States should prefer the former. Such a choice exists. It is the NMD system, whose development commenced under the last administration.
- The United States should explicitly avoid developing technologies that can be scaled up to threaten to neutralize the entire Russian nuclear deterrent. Space-based interception of ballistic missiles is such a technology and should not be on the U.S. agenda.
- The United States should explore technologies for attacking ballistic missiles during boost phase, using land- or sea-based interceptors. However, these technologies should be viewed as hedges in case of the appearance of second-generation ballistic missile delivery systems in the hands of rogue states (e.g., systems MIRVed or with penetration aids). Moreover, the United States should offer to develop such systems jointly with Russia.
- The United States should resist an effort to rush to deploy an improvised boost-phase defense. Haste is unnecessary and, notwithstanding what the administration is likely to say in support of such defenses, they are in fact technologically immature and present very serious issues of crisis stability.
- Vigorous work should continue on theater ballistic missile defenses, up to and including deployment. However, the U.S. Congress should refuse to fund work on theater defenses that would violate the memorandum of understanding on succession to the ABM Treaty signed with Russia in 1997, which established an upper limit for the performance of theater ballistic missile interceptors.

- Any proposal for deeper reductions of nuclear weapons than those agreed at Helsinki (2,000–2,500) must be preceded by a thorough review of the implications for U.S. security and must be accompanied by testimony from the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) as to military sufficiency under existing guidance. The deeper the proposed cut, the more imperative it is to be sure that what the military says truly reflects their private judgment, as opposed to the political line one can expect to hear from the Pentagon's civilian leadership.
- Unilateral reductions certified by the JCS as militarily sound could be considered, particularly if the case can be made that savings are important for other military applications. Such recommendations should be preceded by persuasive arguments concerning stability, including an assessment of how different end-states for the United States and Russia might influence perceptions of stability. Finally, Congress should not fund such reductions unless the administration either has worked out thorough arrangements for mutual verification with Russia, in binding form, or has presented a convincing case for why the United States should have no concern regarding the disposition of hundreds of Russian strategic nuclear warheads. There is no need to rush into unilateral reductions. Patience should rule.
- The dollar costs of a ballistic missile defense must be convincingly presented, along with the means for financing them. Trade-offs between developing defenses and paying for the "transformation" of our conventional military forces must be presented clearly and discussed. The U.S. government should not agree to a missile defense project with open-ended costs, to be paid for either at the expense of military readiness or modernization/transformation.
- We should not follow an artificially accelerated timetable, or one that deliberately moves to destroy the ABM Treaty simply to explore whether one technology or another is likely to work.
- If, after thoroughly testing technologies that are candidates for deployment, after getting the best cost estimates possible, and if the efforts of rogue states to proliferate continue, the United States should be prepared to deploy. At that juncture, if Russia—having been thoroughly consulted beforehand—still objects and has been unwilling to work out an amend-

**The United States
needs Congress
to undertake a
national debate.**

ment to the ABM Treaty, the United States would be obliged to let national interest govern its actions, notwithstanding Russian views. The U.S. government should use the intervening time to make similar efforts to talk through these issues with China. As a nonsignatory to the ABM Treaty, China has no say in its fate, but every effort should be made to enter into a serious strategic dialogue with China.

- Despite the administration's announced intention not to seek ratification of the CTBT, Congress should refuse to fund new programs for nuclear weapons development or testing. Congress should, however, be prepared to spend any reasonable amount on stockpile management in order to assure the viability of the U.S. reserve. It should also make clear that legal restraints on funding for testing will expire if another of the CTBT's original nuclear state signatories were to start testing.
- Whether or not an NMD system is deployed, Congress should both demand and support a comprehensive program to combat proliferation and to protect the U.S. homeland against the possible infiltration of weapons of mass destruction, which could turn out to be a vulnerability as great, if not greater than, exposure to any future threat of ballistic missile attack by a rogue state.
- Given the potential expense of an NMD system of even the most modest proportions, the overall impact on the availability of funds for modernizing conventional military forces needs to be assessed. The United States will continue to need conventional military forces with balanced capabilities for dealing with a wide range of contingencies.

These, then, could be the outlines of a responsible political stance in the face of steamroller tactics from the administration, and they could also, ultimately, be the basis for an emerging compromise. Those who take the lead in this debate may be characterized as lacking vision. On the contrary, they will be looking out for all of us.