

Forging a Consensus on a Sustainable U.S. Nuclear Posture

Clark A. Murdock and John K. Warden

Despite significant efforts by the current administration, a consensus on the future U.S. nuclear posture remains elusive. This leaves the next administration—whether a second Obama term or the first of a Republican president—with difficult decisions about new nuclear delivery systems, infrastructure investments, and most important, what strategy to pursue.

The Obama administration released a forward-looking Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), signed a new bilateral arms control treaty with Russia, hosted the first Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, helped achieve a final document at the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, and just last month, attended the second Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul. Domestically, the administration hoped to unite Democrats and Republicans behind both a new arms control treaty and the investments needed to modernize the U.S. nuclear weapons complex and nuclear force. Internationally, it wanted to restore U.S. credibility on nonproliferation issues, while continuing to protect the United States and its allies from nuclear threats.

By the end of 2010, the administration's strategy was bearing fruit. Washington reached an inside-the-Beltway consensus on a smaller

U.S. nuclear force that still maintained the Cold War triad—silo-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and nuclear-capable bombers. The U.S. Senate gave advice and consent to New START, which capped U.S. and Russian nuclear deployments at 1,550 accountable warheads, and as part of the deal to secure ratification, the administration promised to request \$85 billion over 10 years to modernize the U.S. nuclear weapons complex, which includes a number of aging production and maintenance facilities, and over \$100 billion to replace nuclear delivery systems.

But what was always a fragile consensus began to unravel. Pressure on federal budgets, particularly those for defense, has made it increasingly difficult for the administration to maintain a coalition in support of a modernized nuclear triad. Those advocating for new conventional military capabilities resist spending on nuclear platforms, which are viewed as far less usable, while those committed to nuclear abolition argue that nuclear modernization sends the wrong signal internationally and is a waste of money. Unfortunately, worsening prospects for consistent modernization funding may make lawmakers more hesitant to support reductions and arms control in the future.



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The inside-the-Beltway agreement addressed arms control priorities and covered the programmatic details of recapitalizing the U.S. nuclear force and infrastructure. Left unresolved were important strategic questions regarding the fundamental role of nuclear weapons in U.S. strategy in the twenty-first

century and what nuclear capabilities are needed to fulfill that role. By arguing that the United States should reduce the role of nuclear weapons and work toward a world without them, the administration made a tough argument even more difficult: that nuclear complex modernization is more important than other congressional priorities.

During the Cold War, the existential threat posed by a nuclear-armed Soviet Union, as well as the inherent risk of escalation from any conflict between the superpowers, created a strong consensus, both in Washington and across America, that a robust nuclear arsenal was critical to deter a great power war. The United States now faces a changed geostrategic landscape in which nuclear weapons seem less salient. Russia, China, and others retain the capability to inflict tremendous damage to the United States with nuclear weapons, but the risk that they would actually do so seems minimal. Instead of deterring adversaries, U.S. nuclear policy now prioritizes the prevention of nuclear terrorism and proliferation—goals the Obama administration has argued are more likely to be achieved by upholding the NPT regime and pursuing a world without nuclear weapons.

2013 is the right time for the United States to forge a new consensus on the enduring role of nuclear weapons. While the value of nuclear deterrence has clearly changed since the Cold War era, the demands of a rapidly changing security environment, which includes a number

of states that are either pursuing or expanding nuclear weapons programs, will alter, and perhaps increase, our reliance on nuclear deterrence. Analysts and policymakers alike need to ask tough questions and return to first principles. How will the security environment change over the next few decades? How will that alter the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. strategy? Who is the United States trying to deter from taking what actions? To whom is deterrence being extended, and what constitutes credible assurance? These are hardly original questions, but the context in which they are being presented is quite new.

As the next administration works to answer these questions, there are a number of important considerations to keep in mind.

First, strategy should drive numbers, not the other way around. Just as it was a mistake in the Cold War to deploy thousands of nuclear weapons and find the required number of targets, it would be a mistake now to begin a review of deterrence requirements with an a priori decision that the number of weapons must be smaller. Instead, the next administration should reevaluate what potential adversaries value and what capabilities are necessary to inflict sufficient damage, without predetermining the outcome. This premise cuts both ways, however. Defenders of nuclear deterrence are right to criticize reductions for reductions' sake, but wrong to oppose a deterrence review that *might* result in further reductions. Concluding that no reductions are possible before a review is even conducted falls victim to the same problem.

Second, nuclear modernization decisions made in 2013 will last for decades. Replacements for land-based Minuteman missiles and Ohio-class ballistic missile submarines are scheduled to come online around 2030 and last through the middle of the century. As a result, the United States must invest in a flexible force posture and responsive

infrastructure that can adapt to the range of potential futures. By 2050, the United States could face a highly proliferated world, significant progress toward disarmament, or something more similar to the status quo. In dealing with such long time horizons, it is extremely important to make the best possible predictions about the security environment and plan accordingly. There is little reason to think that the world's nuclear powers will give up their weapons within the service life of follow-on delivery systems under consideration. If anything, there may be reason to think that the United States will encounter even more potential adversaries with nuclear weapons.

Third, finding the balance between maintaining a safe, secure, and effective nuclear force and pursuing a world without nuclear weapons will be difficult, but necessary. Politically, future arms control and reductions will only be possible if a robust nuclear infrastructure is in place. Similarly, sustained funding for the infrastructure is unlikely without the support of arms control advocates. While creating the conditions for a world that is safer without nuclear weapons is a laudable long-term goal, it must be realistically tempered by a sober analysis of the security environment.

Fourth, reaching a truly bipartisan consensus is critical. Partisan fights will make it extremely difficult to sustain budgets for missiles, ships, and facilities that take decades to design and construct. Inconsistent budgetary support will slow progress and, in turn, raise the final costs. A lack of bipartisan commitment to the U.S. nuclear enterprise will also send mixed signals internationally, which might cause adversaries to question U.S. resolve or allies to doubt U.S. commitment to their defense.

The next administration should forge a consensus among the broad middle of the political spectrum on the role of nuclear weapons—a necessary step to ensure a sustainable U.S. nuclear posture in the twenty-first century. ■