

Strategic Insight

A Quiet Revolution: The New Nuclear Triad

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In January 2002, the Bush administration announced the completion of a congressionally mandated review of U.S. nuclear capabilities. Called the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), the study unveiled a new strategic triad, consisting of nuclear and precision non-nuclear strike forces; passive and active defenses; and a revitalized defense infrastructure. The report's authors consider nuclear weapons to be only one element of an array of capabilities designed to address threats posed by the proliferation of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles.

The purpose of the Bush administration's new strategic triad is to integrate defenses (i.e., missile defense), nuclear weapons and "non-nuclear strike forces" [\[1\]](#) into a seamless web of capabilities to dissuade and deter adversaries and to fight and win wars if deterrence fails. The NPR notes that the strike elements "...can provide greater flexibility in the design and conduct of military campaigns to defeat opponents decisively. Non-nuclear strike capabilities may be particularly useful to limit collateral damage and conflict escalation. Nuclear weapons could be employed against targets able to withstand non-nuclear attack (for example, deep underground bunkers or bio-weapons facilities)." [\[2\]](#)

The Bush administration has noted that the new triad will rely on "adaptive planning" so that it can meet quickly emerging threats and contingencies. Advanced command, control and intelligence capabilities will integrate the legs of the triad, facilitating flexible operations. This emphasis on adaptive planning differs from the traditional approach taken to the development of the U.S. nuclear war plan, the Single-Integrated Operations Plan or SIOP. The SIOP reflected a deliberate planning process that often took months or even years to complete and which generated a finite number of nuclear employment options for consideration by the President in his capacity as Commander in Chief.

By using the term "triad" to describe this new array of strategic capabilities, the Bush administration also is redefining a central concept borrowed from Cold-War nuclear deterrence. Prior to the Bush administration, the term triad was used to refer to the three legs of the U.S. strategic nuclear force: submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), land based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and long-range bombers. The purpose of maintaining the triad was to complicate Soviet efforts to launch a disarming nuclear attack against the United States: an attack that maximized destruction of land based ICBMs, for example, would not harm SLBMs deployed safely at sea. The triad also protected the United States from an unexpected technological development or a catastrophic failure in a specific weapon system. For instance, if bombers became vulnerable to a new type of air defense or if they were grounded because of some structural problem, the other two legs of the triad would still be able to deter the Soviet Union. In theory, each leg of the triad was supposed to be able to launch a second-strike attack capable of inflicting an amount of damage unacceptable to the Soviet leaders, thereby deterring nuclear attack and generating crisis stability. Each leg of the triad was supposed to be able to absorb a Soviet nuclear strike and still "assure destruction" of the Soviet Union.

STRATCOM TRIAD PATCH

The patch of U.S. Strategic Command, the military organization responsible for U.S. nuclear forces, depicts the old strategic triad of bombers, ICBMs and submarines. Superimposed on the old triad are a mailed fist, olive branch and lightning bolts of the Strategic Air Command, the military organization that was charged with maintaining strategic nuclear deterrence during the Cold War.



The Bush administration's new triad concept thus constitutes an important facet of the quiet revolution taking place in U.S. strategic nuclear doctrine. First, it suggests that deterring an all-out nuclear war between Russia and the United States is no longer the central feature of U.S. war plans. U.S. policymakers no longer believe that a nuclear war between Russia and the United States is likely and U.S. nuclear doctrine now reflects this changing threat perception. Second, like the old triad concept, the new triad embodies an effort to increase the credibility of U.S. strategic deterrent threats by increasing the range of options available to U.S. officials. The old triad concept was intended to guarantee the availability of a massive response to nuclear attack, while the newly reconfigured triad is intended to guarantee that U.S. policymakers will have an appropriate way to respond to aggression, thereby bolstering deterrence. Third, the new triad concept provides a way to sidestep bureaucratic resistance to changing what constitutes one of the most respected elements of the nuclear creed that shaped U.S. nuclear doctrine, the sanctity of the old triad of forces and the focus on guaranteeing a massive nuclear response under any circumstances. The new strategic triad thus paves the way for further reductions in U.S. strategic nuclear forces because it clears a path for the possible elimination of one of the legs of the old nuclear triad.

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References

1. United States Department of Defense [Special Briefing on the Nuclear Posture Review](#), J.D. Crouch, Assistant Secretary of Defense, International Security Policy, January 9, 2002.
2. [Excerpts from the Nuclear Posture Review](#) are posted on the globalsecurity.org website.