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The Current Nuclear Dialogue

by Leon Sloss

Conclusions

- There is no consensus among U.S. experts about the future role of nuclear weapons. As a result, clear policy to guide the future direction of nuclear programs is lacking.
- One view emphasizes the dangers of nuclear weapons to the United States and seeks further reductions and other measures to make nuclear weapons less legitimate. However, only the most extreme wing of this view believes that abolition is practical in the foreseeable future.
- Another view emphasizes the continuing salience of nuclear weapons in deterrence and emphasizes the importance of maintaining an infrastructure and competent personnel that would permit reconstitution of nuclear forces in the future if necessary.
- Future U.S. nuclear policy and posture are likely to be shaped more by budget constraints than arms control as in the past. Barring any major change in the international scene, a gradual erosion of the U.S. nuclear posture seems likely. This will be welcomed by some, decried by others, and ignored by most.

Official U.S. Policy and Programs

At the end of the Cold War the Soviet military threat to Western Europe disappeared, and with it the principal rationale for U.S. nuclear policy. Since then the United States has been searching for a coherent policy as a basis for planning future nuclear forces. This search involving a small circle of experts received little public attention until the recent nuclear tests by India and Pakistan dramatized the emergence of a new nuclear order with implications far beyond South Asia. However, the U.S. policy community remains deeply divided over the future role of nuclear weapons.

U.S. nuclear weapons policy has tried to recognize new realities while preserving many Cold War era principles. The nuclear posture retains thousands of nuclear weapons, many on a high state of alert. A multibillion dollar research program continues to develop a ballistic missile defense system for U.S. territory, but technical uncertainties about the feasibility and cost persist.

The new realities are reflected in a series of concrete actions: sharply lower budgets for nuclear missions;

substantial reductions in deployed nuclear forces; reductions in the alert status of strategic bombers and theater nuclear weapons; and reorganization and reorientation (and renaming) of several Cold War agencies such as the former Strategic Air Command. The United States has also ceased nuclear testing and the manufacture of nuclear weapons. The nuclear relationship with Russia has undergone a metamorphosis from confrontation to cooperation, although elements of distrust and suspicion remain. Under the so-called Nunn-Lugar legislation, a series of measures have been taken to reduce the possibility that Russia will export nuclear weapons and knowledge, while improving the safety of those weapons that still remain in its stockpile

The legacy of the Cold War is a stockpile of more than 5,000 strategic weapons, deployed on missiles and bombers. Such high levels remain because the Russian Duma (parliament) has failed to ratify the START II Treaty, which would reduce strategic forces further, and the United States has been unwilling to make reductions without reciprocity from the Russians. Future acquisition planning is directed at extending the life of current weapons systems as far as possible into the future. Declaratory policy also retains a Cold War flavor. Official descriptions of the roles and missions of nuclear weapons have changed little. In public statements nuclear weapons remain an important element in deterrence, not just against old threats from Russia and China but new threats from potential proliferators. While current policy focuses on deterring nuclear attacks and threats, a window has been left open to deter chemical and biological threats. The administration has resisted pressures from many non-nuclear states and the arms control community to declare an unambiguous policy of "no first use," and it has been cool to ideas for further de-alerting of nuclear forces.

View Alpha: Nuclear Weapons are a Threat

As for unofficial views, there is one perspective (View Alpha) which sees the continued existence of large inventories of nuclear weapons primarily as a threat to U.S. security. In this view there are few strategic benefits to the United States in retaining nuclear weapons and many risks in a world in which nuclear weapons are proliferating to states that have little experience in the management of such a dangerous military tool.

Alphas are also gravely concerned about the possibility of an accident or unauthorized launch of a nuclear weapon as the management and control of Russian nuclear forces erode. They believe that U.S. interests are best served if we can lead the world as rapidly as possible toward lower and less ready-to-use nuclear postures. Abolitionism, the extreme expression of this view, is considered impractical, even embarrassing, by those who hold more moderate views. Moderate Alphas acknowledge that nuclear weapons still have a role to play in deterrence of other nuclear weapons, and expect the process of dismantling nuclear forces to take many years. Alphas seek to exert steady pressure along this path, primarily through arms control. Adherents of this view include the traditional arms control community, some moderate politicians (e.g., Sam Nunn) and many military officers who subscribe to parts of this agenda. There is a widespread military view that maintaining nuclear weapons is an operational headache and a fiscal albatross. As the Defense Department faces the growing costs of maintaining START I forces, as mandated by Congress, the pressure to move promptly toward START II levels grows.

View Beta: Nuclear Weapons Have Continuing Utility

The second perspective (View Beta) sees continuing utility for nuclear weapons and a broader deterrent role. Betas are concerned about what they perceive as the long-term erosion of U.S. nuclear capabilities. This view has been articulated in some detail in a recent study jointly sponsored by the National Defense University and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (*U.S. Nuclear Policy in the 21st Century: A Fresh Look at National Strategy and Requirements*, Center for Counterproliferation Research, Washington, DC, 1998). The study contains several new perspectives on the future role of and requirements for nuclear weapons. In contrast to the Alpha view, the authors of this study believe that nuclear weapons will retain utility, principally as a deterrent to weapons of mass destruction (not just nuclear weapons) for the indefinite future. The study emphasizes the need for a robust nuclear infrastructure in the long term. Infrastructure includes production facilities, a research and development establishment, and a cadre of skilled personnel, both military and civilian. It also proposes to focus arms control efforts on dialogues between the nuclear states designed to increase transparency and develop specific stabilizing measures, rather than on broad international treaties and massive reductions. This perspective includes some who voice extreme views against the CTB and the ABM Treaty.

Specific Issues

These two broad perspectives divide on several issues that constitute the heart of the current nuclear dialogue:

1. The size of the future stockpile

- While there are several variants, generally the Alphas advocate reductions in the total nuclear stockpile to a few hundred weapons over 10-15 years
- The Betas would retain deployed strategic weapons at START III levels (i.e., 2,000-2,500 deployed weapons) for at least some time.

There is a significant difference between the two views on what to limit. The Alphas would attempt to reduce and limit total weapons, while acknowledging that verification and control would be extremely difficult. The Betas believe that, for the foreseeable future, limits on total inventories, while desirable, are probably not practical due to verification difficulties. Furthermore, the Betas are more concerned about the dangers of de-militarizing large stocks of fissile material in Russia with limited accountability.

2. The importance of nuclear infrastructure

- Alphas believe that infrastructure should be reduced as the stockpile is reduced so as to leave no temptation or capability for rearmament. They see no requirement for production facilities or design capabilities for weapons the nation should not design or build.

- Betas place high priority on a robust infrastructure. The NDU/LLNL study talks about a total force posture that includes infrastructures. In this view the total posture becomes more important as forces are reduced. Infrastructure is seen as both an element of deterrence and as a necessary hedge for a very uncertain future. The view recognizes that maintaining hedges can lead to unwanted competition. It advocates discussions among nuclear states to develop mutual understandings as to what might be an appropriate hedge posture.

3. How best to promote strategic stability

- The Alpha View is driven by the conviction that the United States and Russia must set an example by reducing their nuclear arms and de-legitimizing nuclear weapons to the extent possible. Alphas place emphasis on traditional arms control. In addition, they are strong supporters of less traditional measures, such as cooperative threat reduction and de-alerting of strategic forces.
- The Beta View is skeptical of traditional arms control as a means for enhancing strategic stability. It emphasizes the development of a strengthened strategic dialogue among nuclear states and the sharing of warning data with Russia. The Betas strongly oppose de-alerting, doubting that it solves any strategic problem and fearing reductions in the readiness of U.S. nuclear forces.

4. The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty

- The Alphas view the CTBT as an essential element in curbing proliferation and urge early U.S. ratification of the Treaty and strong support for the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).
- The Beta View sees the CTBT as a potential threat to a viable long-term nuclear posture as current weapons age. However, all but the most extreme fringes of the Beta View accept the CTBT as a "done deal."

5. Maintaining nuclear competence

- The Alphas do not see the maintenance of nuclear competence as a major problem if most nuclear forces are going to be phased out over 15-20 years.
- For Betas, maintaining nuclear competence in the military services, the laboratories, and industry is a serious concern for the long term, particularly given the importance they place on nuclear infrastructure.

6. Deterring chemical and biological weapons (CBW)

- The Alphas strongly oppose a role for nuclear forces in deterring use of CBW. Restricting the role of U.S. nuclear weapons is central to their approach. Furthermore, they believe that current U.S. superiority in conventional forces is an adequate deterrent to CBW.

- The Betas believe that deterring the use of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, particularly by so-called "rogue states," is an important continuing role for nuclear forces, although most who hold this view see nuclear weapons as an adjunct to other capabilities.

7. Stockpile stewardship

- Alphas view the Stockpile Stewardship Program as an important assurance that the United States can maintain a reliable stockpile under a CTBT. However, Alphas believe the United States should be able to reduce its effort as the nuclear posture declines.
- Betas support stockpile stewardship, but are concerned that the program has not yet proven that it can continue to provide high confidence in stockpile reliability and safety over the long term without testing.

8. Modernization of the stockpile

- For Alphas, modernization of the stockpile is inconsistent with reducing reliance on nuclear weapons.
- Betas contend that modernization is inevitable if the role of nuclear weapons has an indefinite future.

9. Ballistic missile defense (The ABM Treaty)

- The Alphas believe that stability requires maintenance of the ABM Treaty for the indefinite future. They tend to see the Treaty as more important than improving missile defenses.
- The Betas are convinced that the growth of new threats requires expansion and modernization of missile defenses. The extreme Beta View favors ending U.S. adherence to the ABM Treaty. The more moderate view supports an attempt to negotiate changes to accommodate new missile defense programs.

Some Hidden Issues

1. Non-strategic nuclear forces (NSNF)—The Russians retain thousands of non-strategic nuclear weapons which are a source of concern to both Alphas and Betas. These concerns center on the adequacy of Russian controls over their non-strategic stockpile, the resultant risk of accidents, and the leakage of nuclear capabilities to third parties. They are not covered by any existing arms control agreement, although in 1991 Gorbachev undertook to reduce Russian theater nuclear weapons and withdrew all those in Eastern Europe as Soviet troops withdrew. At the Helsinki Summit in 1994, Presidents Clinton

and Yeltsin agreed that NSNF should be considered in START III. However, how tactical nuclear weapons should be dealt with remains a major issue. One view, often supported by Betas, is that NSNF should be addressed in numerical terms. But, the United States has little to offer to induce the Russians to reduce their significant stockpile, and in recent years a number of Russian leaders have announced that the Russians were placing more importance on NSNF in their strategy. Another position, which tends to be favored by Alphas, would emphasize transparency—trying to generate more information on the size and location of the Russian stockpile. But the Russians seem likely to resist transparency and want to link limits on U.S. sea-based cruise missiles and advanced conventional munitions to any agreement on NSNF.

2. Non-nuclear strategic forces—Some experts, particularly Betas, believe that there will be a continuing role for long-range bombers and missiles in non-nuclear missions. For example, technology will permit stand-off delivery of bombs and missiles with considerable precision, and the desire to avoid risk to friendly forces makes such tactics attractive. Advocates for preserving a role for long-range non-nuclear systems are concerned about the impact of strategic arms control agreements on that role. For example, numerical limits on bombers and cruise missiles, proposed in order to limit nuclear forces, also could limit non-nuclear systems unless those limits are carefully drawn. However, arms control provisions that provide a "loophole" for U.S. non-nuclear systems also provide similar opportunities for others. There are difficult tradeoffs.

Future Prospects

The prospects, at least for the next several years, are for a U.S. nuclear posture and policy that lie somewhere between the Alpha and the Beta views. However, we expect budget considerations to replace arms control as the major driver of the nuclear posture. With strong pressures to increase the U.S. defense budget, it seems unlikely that DOD officials or Congress will continue to spend funds to support strategic forces that seem likely to exceed Russian forces that are rapidly deteriorating.

Nevertheless, the U.S. administration shows no inclination to adopt radical reductions or de-alerting of nuclear forces or changes in nuclear doctrine as advocated in the Alpha View. It seems to have adopted the view of the Betas that nuclear weapons will be around indefinitely. However, it is unlikely to take aggressive steps to shore up nuclear infrastructure and protect a reconstitution capability, as Betas advocate. The future of the stockpile stewardship program remains uncertain. There is no longer a strong nuclear program constituency in the Defense Department, and in Congress only a handful of members show an active interest. In the absence of a major new threat from abroad, future administrations will likely pursue the current path of maintaining a nuclear deterrent while minimizing the cost. This path seems destined to lead to a gradual erosion of nuclear competence, which could make it more costly and more time-consuming to reconstitute nuclear forces should that need arise in the future.

Some events could alter this prognosis. Neither Russia nor China seems capable of becoming a "peer competitor" in the traditional sense for several decades. That is, they are unlikely to have the military technology and global reach that characterizes U.S. forces today. However, either Russia or China or

several rogue states could adopt asymmetric strategies to deter or discourage U.S. involvement in their neighborhood. Such strategies could involve the use or threatened use of weapons of mass destruction. Military operations against the United States, utilizing nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons, cannot be ruled out in the future, and any such use could change the strategic landscape radically. A major new external challenge could dramatize the need for a modernized nuclear deterrent.

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