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# NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION UPDATE

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## President Obama's Nuclear Weapons Strategy: Reviewing the New START Treaty and Nuclear Posture Review

Speaking in Prague on April 5, 2009, President Barack Obama announced, "I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons. . . . This goal will not be reached quickly—perhaps not in my lifetime." One year later, the president put his mark on U.S. nuclear policy. On April 6, 2010, the Department of Defense released the long-awaited Nuclear Posture Review (NPR). Less than two days later, he signed, with Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). Both documents signal the president's intentions regarding nuclear weapons going forward.

The New START agreement now heads to the Senate for ratification, where it will face a tough fight from Republicans. President Obama no doubt recognizes the political challenges facing ratification of the treaty. Some observers believe the NPR was intended to placate concerns about force structure and to ease ratification of New START. Regardless, it kicks many difficult decisions down the road. The end result is a modest reduction in the size of the nuclear arsenal, but not a major alteration in the role that nuclear weapons play in overall U.S. strategy.

Many liberals and other arms control advocates were hoping the NPR would include a declarative "no first-use policy" and a statement that the "sole purpose" of the U.S. nuclear arsenal is deterrence. The NPR stopped short of a declarative "no first-use policy," but it does replace "calculated ambiguity" with a clarification of when the United States would use nuclear weapons by updating the "negative security assurance." The United States now declares that it will not use nuclear weapons on any non-nuclear nation that is in compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Additionally, the United States will not use nuclear weapons to deter a chemical or biological attack on any nation that meets these requirements. However, the NPR asserts that the

United States "reserves the right to make any adjustment in the assurance that may be warranted by the evolution and proliferation of the biological weapons threat and U.S. capacities to counter that threat."

These changes are meant to encourage countries to remain in compliance with the NPT and provide an incentive for non-signatories to join. By implicitly isolating North Korea and Iran, the administration hopes to put pressure on them and make clear that all options are on the table. Even these modest changes do not sit well with conservatives in Congress who argue that the President is weakening the U.S. arsenal, and undermining the credibility that is needed for deterrence.

While the NPR shifts U.S. declaratory policy, the New START treaty aims to reduce our nuclear arsenal to a level that makes sense in a post-Cold War world. It is not clear, however, that the mild reductions envisioned will lead to a fundamental shift in the role the nuclear arsenal plays in U.S. national security policy. That said, New START is a significant improvement over the 2002 Moscow Treaty that it replaces in two respects: it institutes tangible reductions in strategic nuclear delivery, and it puts in place a verification regime to increase transparency and ensure compliance. New START builds on the original START verification process, inspired by President Reagan's often stated dictum "trust but verify." The Moscow Treaty did not include this verification element.

The weapons totals stipulated in New START are as follows: a limit of 1,550 deployed strategic warheads; a limit of 700 deployed and 100 non-deployed strategic delivery vehicles—Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs), and heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments. On-site inspectors will now verify the number of warheads on each missile directly, replacing the counting rules and assumptions of the past. However, deployed heavy bombers that are equipped to carry nuclear weapons will only count as one warhead toward the limit.

## **NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION UPDATE**

*is dedicated to promoting peaceful resolutions to the nuclear crises in North Korea and Iran. It aims to provide policy makers with analysis on the latest developments in both nations and options for formulating coherent U.S. responses. In highlighting the importance of achieving diplomatic solutions, the goal is to avoid armed conflict and its attendant consequences.*

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**“Both Russia  
and United States  
recognize that you  
don’t need nearly  
as many nuclear  
weapons as we’ve  
had over the years  
to maintain a  
credible deterrent”**

**—CHRISTOPHER PREBLE,**  
*appearing on MSNBC,  
April 6, 2010*

Critics allege this arbitrary bomber counting rule will result in very minimal reductions in the actual number of warheads deployed. They note that a B-52 can carry as many as 20 nuclear warheads, and yet, under the New START rules, it only counts as one. Hans Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists estimates that, based on these new counting rules, the United States deploys approximately 1,650 strategic warheads, just 150 over New START’s limit. Other analysts argue that the counting rules have a historic precedent and contend that the more important goal should be to limit strategic delivery vehicles. Additionally, reports have indicated the Obama administration wanted to count actual warhead numbers for bombers, but the Russians refused to consent to onsite inspections at their bomber bases.

The limit on delivery vehicles is more substantial than the limit on warheads, but the NPR did not specifically outline how the administration plans to reach the treaty’s limits. However, on May 13, 2010, the White House released a declassified fact sheet, part of the mandatory “1251 Report” report submitted to Congress. The fact sheet outlined the new force structure under New START: up to 420 deployed ICBMs; up to 60 nuclear-capable bombers; retention of all 14 SSBNs; and reduction of SLBM launchers from 24 to 20 per SSBN, with no more than 240 SLBMs deployed at any time. Surprisingly, the total delivery vehicles appear to add up to 720 and not 700. It is possible this discrepancy is due to new counting rules for deployed versus non-deployed ICBMs. Another possibility is that the wording used in the report and noted above, “up to,” allows the administration to decide at a later date which leg of the triad will face further reduction.

The NPR and the associated fact sheet make clear that the nuclear triad will remain. Based on New START’s limits and the bomber counting rule, the Obama administration does not plan on eliminating the bomber leg of the triad. According to the NPR, offi-

cially discussed this option, but concluded that it was appropriate to retain all three legs. This “will best maintain strategic stability at reasonable cost, while hedging against potential technical problems or vulnerabilities.” In actuality, if future reductions in the number of strategic delivery vehicles are a goal, then it only becomes harder to justify a triad.

Another issue left for a later time is the status of non-strategic (tactical) nuclear weapons. The United States has reduced its tactical stockpile dramatically over the years, whereas Russia maintains a much larger force. The NPR insists that the next arms reduction treaty should include these weapons. However, the United States faces a difficult task bringing Russia on board, a task complicated by the approximately 200 tactical nuclear weapons deployed in NATO countries. Such weapons constitute the forward projection of the U.S. nuclear deterrent, and therefore provide security assurances for allies in the region. NATO members are scheduled to review the presence of these weapons in the near future.

Supporters of the decision to exclude tactical weapons from the New START negotiations claim these weapons must remain deployed to uphold security commitments to our allies, while critics maintain that tactical nuclear weapons are irrelevant today, and that the majority of Europeans in these countries support their removal. In the end, it is unlikely these deployments will change until Russia is willing to negotiate limits on its tactical stockpile.

The NPR and New START form a foundation for future negotiations on arms reduction. While the two documents may not be as bold as President Obama promised, they make incremental steps that are necessary to keep the process moving. Harder decisions must be made, and tougher concessions brokered, if the United States and President Obama are in fact serious about reducing the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy. ■

*—Prepared by Harrison Moar.*