

The Prospects for Deep Reductions in Strategic Nuclear Weapons

As several previous speakers have noted, the Bush administration is generally hostile to arms control. Even so, deep reductions in strategic weapons was a key element of Bush's national security platform when he was a candidate, and soon after the election Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld began a nuclear posture review that is expected to recommend such reductions.

Statements by Bush and other senior officials revealed the philosophy that would guide the review. There was a strong inclination to reduce U.S. forces unilaterally, to whatever level the U.S. believes is necessary for deterrence. START II would not enter into force, and the START III negotiations would not resume. Instead of spending years in Geneva negotiating detailed verification procedures, we would implement reductions rapidly, perhaps on the basis of an informal understanding or loose "framework" agreement with Russia.

The Bush administration doesn't believe that formal negotiated reductions are necessary, because it doesn't believe that Russia can compete with the United States--Russian forces will go to much lower levels due to attrition, regardless of what happens to U.S. forces.

Nor does the Bush administration believe that formal agreements are desirable, because they reduce U.S. flexibility regarding the future size and structure of its nuclear forces. The administration wants to break the linkage between the size of the U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals. The Bush administration doesn't appear to be interested in reducing the size of its "hedge" stockpile by dismantling the warheads that would be removed from its missiles. It sees more value in being able to rapidly reconstitute its own strategic arsenal than in preventing Russia from doing the same.

The administration linked reductions in strategic forces with the deployment of national missile defenses. Like the Clinton administration, the Bush administration hopes that moving to lower levels of strategic weapons will mute criticism of NMD and will increase the likelihood that Russia will acquiesce to its missile defense plans. At the same time, by portraying these reductions as unilateral steps that are not linked to the size of the Russian arsenal, it is attempting to immunize itself against Russian threats to withdraw from the START treaties if the U.S. withdraws from the ABM Treaty. By retaining a large hedge stockpile, it can satisfy the right wing that it could rebuild its nuclear forces if Russia somehow manages to maintain a large force.

All of this was apparent before Bush took office. Although many features of the policy are unpalatable, there seemed to be a genuine desire to reduce to as few as 1500 deployed strategic warheads, based mostly on submarines. It appears, however, that the Joint Chiefs of Staff and STRATCOM are balking at reductions much below the 2500 level they agreed to for START III, toward the end of the Clinton administration. This is because the structure of U.S. war plans, which emphasize counterforce attacks, remains unchanged. Unless the U.S. changes the way it thinks about targeting and deterrence, I doubt that we will be willing to go down to 1500 warheads.

This was my evaluation of the situation before September 11. On balance, I believe these events probably have improved the prospects for deep cuts.

I am unaware of anyone in a position of authority who believes that strategic nuclear weapons are relevant to the war on terrorism. These weapons don't deter terrorists or their state sponsors, and it is almost impossible to imagine any military use for strategic nuclear weapons. (Bob Sherman will address the question of nonstrategic nuclear weapons, but I believe that the same holds true for these, as well.)

The main effect of September 11 on the prospects for deep cuts is the need to build and maintain a coalition that includes Russia and China. As many of you have pointed out, the cooperation of Russia and China is absolutely essential to solving the Afghanistan problem, and this is by far the highest problem on the U.S. security agenda. I find it hard to believe that the U.S. would withdraw from the ABM treaty in the near future, if Russia and China continue to object strongly. Russia clearly prefers a formal agreement on strategic forces, and such an agreement would help bind Russia to the coalition, but this is possible only if there if the two countries reach an understanding on missile defenses. The Bush administration should realize that it has much more to gain by accommodating Russia than by going its own way on NMD.

Even before September 11, it was reported that the NPR identified the need for transparency regarding nuclear weapons stockpiles. This should now be seen as even more important, and I think it will increase the attractiveness of formal arms control agreements, or less formal agreements that incorporate on a voluntary basis many of the procedures in START.

I think this is an excellent time to promote the idea of a comprehensive declaration of nuclear warhead stockpiles, or a nuclear weapon registry. It is now more important than ever that our welfare depends on all nuclear weapon states maintaining the highest standards of accountancy, safety, and security. All countries have a stake in this, and it is not unreasonable for them to ask for reassurance that all weapons are accounted for.

The hijackings changed perceptions of the security threats to the United States in ways that make U.S. nuclear policy seem less relevant, more anachronistic, and harder to defend publicly. U.S. targeting policy, which is the main barrier to truly deep reductions, is probably more vulnerable to change than at any time in the last 50 years. Deep reductions--including the mutual dismantling of retired warheads and the disposal of the nuclear materials--has intuitive appeal. The problem is focusing enough public and congressional attention on the issue, to wrestle it away from the nuclear priesthood.