

The US nuclear debate: Issues of concern

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As new President George W Bush enters the White House, one of the first issues he will face is the congressionally mandated requirement to do a sweeping review of US nuclear posture. There are both inherent opportunities and dangers in this exercise, which is due to be completed by the end of 2001.

There are numerous reasons to be optimistic about the Bush administration's attitude toward nuclear weapons. Secretary of State Colin Powell, while chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, undertook a major effort to reduce the US arsenal. Bush himself already has signaled a willingness to consider deep cuts in the number of strategic nuclear weapons, and to look at the potential for lowering the arsenal's alert status. Both moves, even if unilateral, would be giant steps in moving the United States away from reliance on nuclear weapons.

In addition, Republican presidents traditionally are more successful at arms control, as they can invoke party loyalty to bring along Republican nay-sayers while winning the many Democrats who generally support arms control and nonproliferation efforts.

However, many dangers loom. These stem from the turmoil in the domestic debate about the future of nuclear weapons. The end of the Cold War and the shift in the balance of power relationship with Russia, concerns about how China evolves as a global and regional power, the dissolution of many regions into fractious ethnic and religious conflict, and fears about the ability of anti-US actors to obtain new technology are all factors contributing to a re-thinking of how the United States should wield its nuclear power.

Issues of concern

One emerging worry is the growing chorus within some US nuclear policy circles advocating the development of new, low-yield nuclear weapons. The primary, but not only, rationale given for such weapons is that they are needed to counter the spread of biological and chemical weapons capability. Such a small (less than 5 kiloton) weapon would be able to destroy a deeply buried, hardened underground facility containing such agent with less danger of 'collateral damage' than an attack by a conventional weapon.

The US Congress, at the urging of some in the nuclear labs and their champions, this year cracked open the door for potential future research and development of a low-yield weapon for use against hardened and buried targets. However, it remains to be seen what sort of real support there would be for actual development and deployment of new nuclear weapons, either among lawmakers or within the new Bush team.

The debate about new, more usable weapons nonetheless is linked to a number of disturbing trends in how US policy-makers think about nuclear weapons.

Of particular concern is the fact that Bush personally has renounced the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). The Bush team's argument is that traditional arms control through treaties no longer works in today's multi-polar world, although they also have raised specific questions about the viability of the CTBT (such as verification).

While Bush has pledged to uphold the US testing moratorium for the foreseeable future, the fact is that failing to sign the treaty leaves open the options for future testing and modernization efforts. Some warhead modernization already has been ongoing under the Energy Department's computer-based Stockpile Stewardship program. However, a move toward full-scale development of a very low-yield weapon likely would lead to a renewed call for testing prohibited by the CTBT – as the design would differ enough from today's weapons for the military to feel 'real' testing, and not simply computer modeling, is required.

Meanwhile, there remains a significant core of support across Washington's political spectrum for pursuit of National Missile Defense (NMD), although there is considerable domestic debate about technology, costs and architecture of a future system.

Bush made a campaign promise to pursue NMD deployment as rapidly as possible,

and to explore a much more robust system than the land-based option under study by the Clinton administration. It is likely that these two promises are contradictory: as the technology required to deploy a more robust system – whether sea-, space- or land-based – is farther away. How a Bush team will handle this problem remains to be seen; in particular, there may be some internal wrangling over the vast increase in funding necessary for a more robust system to be researched.

It is clear, however, that the Bush team is wedded to NMD, along with theater missile defenses. Key Bush administration officials (including new Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld) repeatedly have stated that they are convinced that missile defenses are necessary to protect America's ability to project conventional power abroad, by limiting the vulnerability of US troops or the American homeland to 'blackmail' or attack by either state or non-state actors. At the strategic level, the Bush team also rejects the concept of mutually assured destruction – arguing that 'deliberate vulnerability' should not be an option.

While Bush intends to champion NMD and abandon the CTBT, his team is convinced that the United States can – and should – cut its nuclear arsenal. This, Bushites argue, can be done through mutual unilateral initiatives modeled on the pact between former President George Bush and his Soviet counterpart, Mikhail Gorbachev.

Reasons for doing so include:

- 1 The US military hates spending money on nuclear weapons, widely considered by military leaders to be "wasting assets" at a time when they need funding for more high technology-based conventional weaponry and improvements to soldiers lives.
- 2 The Russians are going to cut anyway, simply because they cannot afford to keep up the current arsenal. Therefore, supporters argue, the United States can leverage a promise to do the same to get even more concessions from Moscow – such as an okay for US deployment of a NMD system.

The Bush team is discussing cuts in the number of warheads in the US nuclear arsenal to as low as 1,000 – a move that would have to be welcomed by the disarmament community under any circumstances.

However, the price for such cuts could be high. There is some reason to worry about the emergence of a Bush nuclear policy coupling deep, unilateral cuts with modernizing today's arsenal; building new, usable weapons; and deploying a far-reaching NMD system. Such a combination – being touted by the right-wing Heritage Foundation among others – might raise the risk that the fabric of the global arms control, nonproliferation and disarmament web could become unraveled.

The potential line of argument for such a combined US policy is that the United States should build down its arsenal of massively destructive nuclear weapons for both cost and risk reasons, but at the same time must continue to protect its ultimate military edge. This could be done in part by the creation of smaller, 'less-deadly,' and thus more 'usable' weapons. A mixed arsenal, based on a small number of current weapons (including SLBMs) and these new weapons, would be an adequate deterrent against not only today's nuclear powers, but also against emerging nuclear, biological and chemical powers.

In other words, one could argue that an arsenal based largely on lower-yield weapons is both more humane and strategically prudent – especially when coupled with new missile defenses. The defensive factor could help counterweight the smaller size of the arsenal, under this logic.

There are a number of flaws in such 'new thinking' on nuclear policy, however.

NMD

First, the development of a US NMD system, even with the grudging acceptance of Moscow, raises serious questions about the wisdom of the nuclear powers in relying on

traditional nuclear deterrence. In particular, countries such as China, India, and Pakistan will question the viability of their small nuclear arsenals. Not only may they be spurred to increase the size of their arsenals, but also to explore development of countermeasures to missile defenses (technology they may be forced, for cost reasons, to sell on the international market to the very rogue elements NMD is designed to protect the United States against).

Relations with US allies also are likely to be rocked by rapid US pursuit of NMD. The issue already has exploded on the political stage in the United Kingdom, where Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour Party government is deeply divided over the issue. Most European governments – the majority of which currently are in the hands of Socialist governments or center-left coalitions – are profoundly ambivalent about, if not solidly opposed to, the concept. Almost unanimously, European governments are worried about the impact of NMD on relations with Russia, and on global nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament efforts.

The political problems remain even if the Bush administration decides to explore sea-based concepts that – unlike President Bill Clinton's land-based plan – provide options for better protection of allied territory and potential for industrial participation. Still, sea-based options are likely to require enormous economic investment, and a degree of dependence on US technology that today's more Euro-centric allies may be loathe to accept. In addition, there remain serious questions about the technical viability of either sea-based or boost-phase anti-missile technologies.

Extending NMD to its logical extreme, one further can envisage a race to develop not only new nuclear weapons and countermeasures against missile defenses, but also a highly destabilizing sprint by the nuclear powers toward space-based weaponry, both offensive and defensive. There are numerous proposals for space-based systems floating among the hard-core of missile defense supporters. In addition, The US Air Force's Vision 2020 document stresses the need necessity of dominating space in future warfare. The underlying parallels are unmistakable.

Rumsfeld already has said he intends to make defense of US assets in space a top priority – although neither he, nor the congressionally mandated commission on threats to US space assets that he chaired, has directly called for space-based weaponry to do so. Still, the potential for future expansion of a US NMD network into space haunts both China and Russia.

Usable nukes/modernization

Perhaps even more problematic than US pursuit of NMD, however, is the possibility that those re-thinking the composition of the current arsenal may prevail. US moves to seriously modernize today's weapon stockpile as well as develop new types of weapons, such as low- or micro-yield warheads with an explicit battlefield role, could sound a death knell for the international arms control and disarmament scheme that for the past 50 years has ensured against nuclear war.

Such a move by Washington would reveal that the US government has no intentions of pursuing its commitment to eventual disarmament under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). It is this treaty that has dissuaded many former nuclear weapon aspirants from pursuing programs. Specifically, development of new weapons, and a doctrine to ease their use, would be antithetical to the promises made by the United States, most recently at the May 2000 NPT Review Conference in New York, to undertake practical steps leading to nuclear disarmament.

Such an obvious rejection of the NPT, and US commitments to the treaty, would be damning indeed for the future of the treaty process. It also would send a signal to other countries that pursuit of nuclear weapons is not only important and necessary for self-

defense, but also highly desirable for any power wishing to challenge US dominance and/or influence on the global stage.

In addition, research and development of tiny nuclear weapons specifically aimed at chemical and biological targets would seriously call into question the promises made by the United States and other nuclear powers, in the margins of the NPT, to refrain from using nuclear weapons against those states that have foresworn them.

“The political consequences of a great democratic power like the United States employing such a weapon would be profoundly damaging, both to the decades-long effort to contain the spread of nuclear weapons and to our moral authority as the leader of this effort. [L]ower the nuclear threshold and encourage not just the proliferation of such weapons, but of other [nuclear weapons] as well,” Gen. (ret.) Lee Butler, former head of US Strategic Command, said in an August response to written questions from BASIC.

The result of launching such a US development program could be a new, and more dangerous, nuclear arms race as powers rush to obtain technology that they feel more free to consider deploying on the battlefield. While not as wildly devastating as today’s nuclear weapons, even a 5-kiloton weapon would have enormous destructive power, and it remains practically impossible to predict the effects of fallout on the surrounding environment of even a precise hit. Further, even with today’s precision-guidance capabilities, there is no 100 percent guarantee that a weapon will not go off course.

Testing

Obviously, a resumption of explosive testing by the United States would wreck the international norm that has grown up against such tests. The CTBT would no longer be viable, and a free-for-all in nuclear development could ensue.

But even short of such a radical US move, the Bush team’s negative attitude toward the treaty remains seriously problematic. For one, it raises questions in the international community about long-term US intentions. The fact that the largest and most important nuclear power refuses to uphold it damages the credibility of the CTBT.

Secondly, it highlights the fact many in US policy circles no longer see the need for the United States to ‘embroil’ itself in multilateral treaties that constrain behavior on the international stage. This alone is worrisome to both US friends and enemies, and again, undercuts the overall value of any such regimes, whether in the arena of nuclear disarmament, conventional arms control, trade or the environment. Thus, the United States would be contributing to a degradation of the fundamental precepts of international relations that may prove to have global negative consequences.

First-strike Capability?

Finally, there is a danger that a revised US nuclear stance based on a more modern, usable offensive capability coupled with robust defenses could be seen from outside Washington as an attempt by the United States to establish a relatively unconstrained first-strike nuclear capability. There already are concerns within the global community about the capabilities provided by recent upgrades of US nuclear weapons, such as the hard-targeting improvements in the W-88 warhead for D-5 missiles housed on Trident submarines.

Despite the apparent problems with the long-standing theory of mutually assured destruction, the fact that no nuclear power could be assured that a first-strike would eliminate the possibility of a devastating retaliatory attack has made full-scale nuclear war less thinkable. No rational world leader up to now could afford to blithely contemplate the massive destruction of country and population expected to result from a nuclear war. Might a new US nuclear posture provide an illusion otherwise? Wouldn’t China, Russia

and aspirant nuclear powers such as Iran fear, and seek to counter in any way imaginable – including the development of chemical and biological capabilities – a US first-strike potential? At a minimum, US policy-makers must take into account any negative perceptions that pursuit of new nuclear options might engender.

Conclusions

Under the congressionally mandated Nuclear Posture Review, the new Bush administration has an unprecedented opportunity to increase the safety of the American people by moving the US military away from its heavy reliance on a costly and risky nuclear policy. Reductions in the US arsenal, the elimination of overkill in targeting, and the lowering of hair-trigger alert status all will contribute to a more stable global nuclear environment, even if undertaken on a unilateral basis.

However, the Bush team needs to avoid the pitfalls along the path to a new, more rational US nuclear policy. A rapid, unwise pursuit of NMD technologies; moves toward modernizing the arsenal and developing new war-fighting weapons; and under-cutting the CTBT each could seriously undercut the progress made by the positive strategic changes now under consideration. Taken together, such developments raise the specter of destabilizing the fragile international consensus that nuclear war is something to be contemplated only in the darkest of national nightmares.