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“An Alternative Nuclear Posture”

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A portion of President Bush's 2002 nuclear posture was released or leaked recently. The posture is largely silent on international cooperation and largely negative on arms control. The main relatively new trend in the posture is that the US will be prepared to use nuclear weapons in a much wider range of circumstances than before, with a particular emphasis on tactical uses. Such an emphasis in a declaratory policy has not been seen since the days of "flexible response" forty or so years ago, when tactical nuclear weapons were deployed in Europe and elsewhere. Supporting that trend, the posture states that the infrastructure for those expanded missions will be built up, including the design and production of new nuclear weapons; and that arms control measures, such as SALT II and the CTBT, will not stand in the way.

The main point of this essay is that what is emphasized in what has been released of the posture is needlessly imprudent, while what is absent or de-emphasized is essential to meet coming threats and take advantage of coming opportunities. I start with what is emphasized.

The posture explicitly increases the nuclear threat, particularly the tactical nuclear threat, to possible US adversaries, some of which are named. The fear of nuclear attack has been a strong motivator for building and protecting a nuclear force. It was a prime motivator for the United States, the Soviet Union, China, Pakistan, and arguably India. Thus the posture's emphasis on building up and widening the nuclear threat increases the motivation of states, which could find themselves on the US target list, to improve and extend their own nuclear force, or to get one if they don't have it.

The benefits to US security in return for this increased motivation of proliferation are marginal. The posture could be thought of as a warning against nuclear proliferation. If so, it is not an effective warning. The US has demonstrated means of discouraging nuclear proliferation that are more usable and less risky than the threat of tactical nuclear weapons. While those means have not always been effective, adding to the US nuclear threat does little to make them more effective. It is unlikely that the US would attack any country, aside perhaps from Iraq, just for acquiring nuclear weapons, even assuming it had clear evidence, which could be hard to come by. It is even less likely that the US would use nuclear weapons in such an attack. Thus, the warning, if warning it is, only adds marginally and at great potential political cost to the deterrent and dissuasion means that the US has already.

The posture states that there will be new nuclear weapons for various missions. But again the help is marginal and comes at high cost. Nuclear weapons don't help much with the kinds of missions the US prepares for and carries out, including the ones noted in the posture, such as digging out very deep underground facilities and developing small nuclear weapons for discriminate use. Both offer operational as well as political difficulties for marginal increased utility. Deep underground facilities are very difficult to destroy without large nuclear explosions, and are usually more vulnerable through their outlets for communication and action. Small nuclear weapons have only marginally more effectiveness than US conventional weapons against most targets of force projection, are more difficult to use, and carry all the risks of first use if used against a non-nuclear opponent. In the area of biological weapons, it is unlikely that nuclear weapons would provide the US a better counter against the most effective delivery methods than do current and planned non-nuclear alternatives.

On balance, from what has been released, the posture would increase the main threats to the US today (nuclear proliferation, nuclear force buildups, and nuclear use by states other than the US) for marginal or unusable US advantages. That is the opposite of what a nuclear posture should do. Given the overwhelming US conventional advantage and the relative invulnerability of the US to all but nuclear weapons, the US nuclear posture should aim at minimizing the chances of the worst outcomes rather than seek marginal gains. The present posture only makes sense if the US is confident it will be the last or only power to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons. But there is no ground for such confidence.

At the same time, it is true that a new nuclear posture is needed, one that takes into account relevant new developments. Below I attempt to sketch out what such a posture could look like. First, however, some of the relevant new developments are noted briefly.

1. The Cold War order is gone. That's good in most ways, but there is a drawback. Security prospects and alignments for many states are now less clear than they were. The Cold War lines separating nuclear rivals were unmistakable: they had been drawn in blood and through serious crises. It's good they are gone, but it's not good that the lines are now fuzzy. Rivalries remain among the US, Russia, and China, and between other nuclear or nuclear-capable countries. Several of them concern zero-sum issues such as military dominance over territory. In this climate of uncertainty, rivals are maneuvering for advantage. Uncertainty about what are central interests makes for instability in crises.

2. The US has gone from a military posture of defense and deterrence to one of military expansion. NATO expansion, military agreements with former Soviet republics, a much increased presence and unilateral action (with the UK) in the Middle East, unilateral or NATO action in the Balkans, and attempts to increase the role and range of Japanese forces (the most modern in the world after those of the US), these moves, rightly or wrongly, have brought US forces much closer to Russian, Chinese, and other countries' areas of vital interest than before. The Pentagon has given top priority to offensive projection forces. President Bush's statement that his highest priority is the military reinforces the emphasis on the offense. Militarily, the US is not a status-quo power, the US is on the move.

3. There are now several demonstrations of the relative ease with which nuclear weapons can be acquired. North Korea, a poor nation of 17 million people, made and separated plutonium, perhaps enough for one or more weapons, with very little help. South Africa made at least six weapons with essentially no help. Iraq and Pakistan, both in hostile surroundings and neither with a good technical and economic infrastructure, went all or most of the way. Pakistan got help from China and Iraq from the world's markets. So could other countries. There are probably fifty countries that could obtain nuclear weapons if they so wished, and many of them could get at least a marginal capability surreptitiously.

4. US vital security interests and those of its key allies (aside from Israel) are essentially unthreatened except for the possibility of nuclear proliferation or instability. Except for that possibility, Western and Central Europe are safe, so is Japan. South Korea faces a dangerous possible adversary, but that adversary is vastly outgunned, isolated, and trying, albeit clumsily and overaggressively, to find some road to international acceptance. Who dominates Taiwan is vital to China, not to the US. Who dominates former Soviet republics is vital to Russia, not to the US. Persian Gulf oil is needed by the US economy over the short run, but it is vital to the sellers.

5. US conventional force superiority (which is anything but conventional), manifested by high-precision, well-informed, relatively invulnerable weapon delivery systems, is not likely to be challenged for some time. It is other countries, not the US, that may need to have recourse to nuclear weapons to offset conventional superiority.

In addition to these changed aspects of the landscape, three aspects that have not changed are relevant and often overlooked.

1. The US has, and has had for decades, an enormous comparative advantage over its potential adversaries with the tools of diplomacy, international organizations, and economics. No one, not Russia or China or Islamic extremists can use these tools more effectively than the US. On the US road to superpowerdom, these tools have been more useful than the military (though the military was necessary). The US won a Cold Peace, not a Cold War. The outcomes of the

various wars (in Korea, in Vietnam, in the Middle East) were ambiguous or worse, but the outcome of the peaceful competition was not.

2. Nuclear weapons are equalizers. They make winning a war far more costly, and, in the case of states with significant protected nuclear weapon systems, they make winning impossible. In most cases, tactical nuclear weapons, if introduced into a theater, would disadvantage the US more than its foes. Nuclear weapons are effective against expensive concentrated means of force projection, such as port facilities, air bases, and fleet units including carriers. They are comparatively ineffective against dispersed and less expensive targets such as mobile or hidden missile launchers. Escalation to threats of destruction of cities, setting aside its criminal aspect, could lead to disaster. Indeed, getting useful results without taking risks of escalation is what much of nuclear policy must be about. As noted, the US has plenty of capability to pursue its interests without nuclear confrontation.

3. Non-proliferation requires willing adherents and the only lasting ground for such adherence is security. This truth points to the other major defect of the nuclear posture, its almost total lack of attention to the international dimension of nuclear weapons control. Most states under the Cold War regime came to feel secure in giving up the nuclear weapons option. That regime is gone. In the troubled regions of the world, securing adherence to nuclear non-proliferation on the basis of each state's national security must be done over again. The nuclear posture betrays a negative view of non-proliferation agreements and arms control in general that is not supported by history. Lasting settlements on the basis of security have minimized proliferation.

What kind of nuclear posture follows from these remarks? I cannot pretend to answer the question fully, but here is a brief list of suggestions.

1. An updated strategy for minimizing the demand for nuclear proliferation, both vertical and horizontal. Such a strategy would take into account the changed situation in the parts of the globe where nuclear proliferation is most likely, East, South, and Western Asia. These parts of the world contain most of the world's population and will in a few decades have most of its wealth. Several states there have nuclear weapons, a number more could readily have them. The prime purpose of a US nuclear posture should be to deal constructively with this prospect. That can only be done by minimizing the demand or perceived need for nuclear weapons. To that end, a stable security order is needed, in which the various states, whether the US likes their internal governance or not, have a reasonably assured chance of peaceful survival if they themselves are peaceful. Continued US military expansion and unilateral disregard of sovereignty do not serve that purpose. They are more likely to motivate nuclear proliferation than nuclear limitations.

2. A strategy for nuclear arms reductions that could include eventually limitations on the Chinese and other arsenals. Executive agreements between the US and Russia, such as the administration favors, cannot fulfill that strategy for long. For one thing, the US and Russia are not the only actors. That they have most of the weapons does not mean that they pose most of the threat. After the first hundred or so survivable weapons, it matters less and less how many a state has. For another thing, while executive agreements may fill short-term political needs, they do not carry the backing of international law and recognition. Such international recognition provides the only lasting basis for extending arms limits to most states. Finally, not only is the approach shortsighted, but the reductions advertised are illusory. Redefinition of numbers of weapons to be limited and delays in implementation amount to a step backward in the US position on reductions.

3. A policy basis for addressing the problem of nuclear terrorism. President Bush and other administration spokespeople have repeatedly addressed the risk of nuclear terrorism. The US nuclear posture should correspondingly propose and lay the groundwork for both unilateral and multilateral actions to minimize that problem. Any solution to the problem of keeping nuclear weapons and materials out of the billions of shipments that crisscross the world will require international cooperation on standards, procedures, and the like. Money and agreements are needed toward these goals. A modern nuclear posture should establish the policy basis for securing those resources and agreements. The problem of inadequate safeguarding of nuclear materials and weapons in locations abroad has been addressed through added appropriations recently but the nuclear posture does not lay the policy basis for continued action or for the needed international cooperation in this regard, nor does it address the problem of safeguarding and, as needed, disposing of the hundreds of tons of excess nuclear weapon material.

4. A reconsideration of the problem of minimizing the risks of accidental nuclear launch while at the same time maintaining invulnerability of the reduced deployments. The nuclear posture briefly mentions the "rigorous safeguards" on US weapons systems and proposes to deal with the problem of accidental or unauthorized launch of "certain foreign forces" via nuclear missile defense. That is at best a partial and certainly a distant remedy. At present, a number of nuclear weapons systems are on alert under conditions where maintaining the human infrastructure for such a system will become more difficult in the US as well as elsewhere. Bilateral and multilateral measures could alleviate this problem. While details may be classified, the policy basis for such measures should appear in a nuclear posture.

5. A policy basis for updating and broadening the C3I systems infrastructure. Some of this is in the present nuclear posture statement. Missing is an international aspect to warning and control, something that would begin to reassure states that are subject to nuclear threat or potential nuclear threat. This would be a long-term program that would use US technical leadership cooperatively to reassure all states involved. That is needed now in South Asia. Later, it could help limit crises with Russia and China, and help prevent proliferation in the Middle East. President Reagan, with a portion of Star Wars, and, before him, President Eisenhower, with Open Skies, had something of the kind in mind. It is time to begin thinking about how this would look in modern form.

In summary, a new nuclear posture is needed, but it should not bring nuclear weapons back into the forefront of regional deterrence. That is likely to set into motion a process of growing insecurity under conditions where time and the spread of technology are not working for the US, and the assumption that the US will be the only state to effectively threaten or use nuclear weapons is not likely to be valid very long. Nuclear deterrence continues to be needed, but, where it can be effective, it exists in abundance already. Emphasizing the occasions for wider nuclear use, stating that the infrastructure to permit such use will be built up and that arms control agreements will not stand in the way of carrying out new nuclear missions, all this adds little to deterrence and is not need for conventional war-fighting. It adds an unknown amount to incentives for nuclear proliferation.

Despite its claims of going beyond Cold War concerns, the present posture in fact goes back to early Cold War arguments and neglects current realities. Easier nuclear proliferation and possible nuclear terror are dangers of our globalized world. These dangers can only be dealt with through cooperation among the nations; unilateral US policing won't work. Any forward-looking nuclear posture must provide for such cooperation. Cooperation won't work unless the United States plays its role. It may not work anyway. If it does not, our children and grandchildren can look forward to slaughter that will make World War II and other twentieth-century disasters look like child's play.