

DefenseNews

Going Nuclear

The Struggle To Complete Latest U.S. NPR

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The White House and the Pentagon are reportedly struggling to reconcile competing views over a critical national security issue that may be about to go nuclear. Literally. It involves the future course and direction of U.S. nuclear strategy.

The Pentagon is putting the finishing touches on its Nuclear Posture Review (NPR). This congressionally mandated review of nuclear policy will provide the rationale for decisions affecting the size and composition of the American nuclear arsenal over the next decade. But unlike the last NPR in 2001, this year's review is hamstrung by the need to square a circle: articulating the continuing value of nuclear weapons while explaining why we should get rid of them.

The end result may be a highly nuanced report that partisans on both sides see as "less filling" rather than "tastes great."

President Obama is determined to chart a course that leads toward the abolition of nuclear weapons. In his April Prague speech, he declared that as long as nuclear weapons exist, the United States will maintain their safety, security and effectiveness to deter any adversary and to offer protection to allies. But he was equally clear that the United States - as the only nation to have used nuclear weapons in anger - has a "moral responsibility" to seek their elimination.

In the president's view, the United States must "lead by example" by significantly reducing its own nuclear stockpile. He has already agreed with Russia to go below the historically low levels set by the 2002 Moscow Treaty, and his negotiators are working feverishly to conclude a binding treaty slashing nuclear arsenals even further.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates has called nuclear weapons "a vital deterrent." He has criticized the decline in attention to nuclear matters and has taken actions to strengthen the Pentagon's nuclear stewardship. Gates understands that American nuclear weapons have

not only prevented a third world war for more than six decades, but also provide the umbrella under which allies and friends can feel secure without acquiring nukes of their own.

The continued credibility of this extended deterrent depends on the reliability and effectiveness of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, and Gates has worried aloud that our lack of nuclear testing, along with congressional prohibitions on modernizing our weaponry, will erode its efficacy. As he told an audience at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in 2008, "To be blunt, there is absolutely no way we can maintain a credible deterrent and reduce the number of weapons in our stockpile without either resorting to testing our stockpile or pursuing a modernization program."

A similar concern was echoed in a recent letter to the president by 41 senators who stated, "We don't believe further reductions can be in the national security interest of the U.S. in the absence of a significant program to modernize our nuclear deterrent."

The president opposes creating any new nuclear weapons despite the age of our legacy stockpile and its questionable relevance to contemporary threats. It remains to be seen whether he will support a robust nuclear weapon modernization program, but such support may be difficult to square with his stated vision of nuclear elimination.

Some suggest the NPR may argue that other measures, both military and nonmilitary - such as fostering stronger political partnerships, increasing the American military footprint overseas, deploying advanced conventional weapons and fielding missile defenses - will be able to provide a credible extended deterrent to allies and strengthen the link between their security and ours.

But while all of these measures have merit, eliminating nuclear weapons from the deterrence equation carries risks that may not be fully offset by relying solely on non-nuclear substitutes. Indeed, a policy that espouses the virtue of an ever-shrinking U.S. nuclear arsenal may actually encourage adversaries to seek precisely those nuclear capabilities that we seek to abolish. Most importantly, the credibility of our extended deterrent depends on what our allies think, and at least some of them may see the path to nuclear elimination as a retreat from America's commitment to their security.

Because of the difficulty of forging an administration consensus, release of the NPR has been delayed twice. It is now expected to be submitted to Congress by March 1. At that time, we will learn how good the administration is at squaring circles. ■

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