

The Importance of Transforming U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy

February 1, 2010

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington DC 205100

Dear Mr. President,

In your historic address last April in Prague you pledged “to put an end to Cold War thinking” and said “we will reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy and urge others to do the same.”

The steps you outlined are vital to maintain U.S. security. Our current nuclear forces, policies and posture are a legacy of the Cold War effort to deter the Soviet Union—a country that, as you noted, no longer exists.

The challenge has evolved from deterring the Soviet Union to working with Russia and other countries to stop the further spread of nuclear weapons and know-how that could end up in the hands of terrorists.

We write to you out of concern that your soon-to-be-completed Nuclear Posture Review will preserve rather than put an end to Cold War thinking, and undermine the important agenda you set forth in Prague.

We respectfully urge you to ensure the review advances today’s highest security priorities: preventing terrorists or additional states from obtaining or using nuclear weapons, reducing global stockpiles, and moving toward a world without nuclear weapons. To do so, the NPR must effect transformational rather than incremental changes in the following key areas:

1. Declaratory Policy: It is inconceivable today that you or any other president would conclude the first use of nuclear weapons is in our national interest, especially in light of our conventional military power. Indeed, the logical corollary to your call to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons is that all non-nuclear threats can be met with a conventional response. The new NPR should clearly narrow the purpose of nuclear weapons to deterring nuclear attacks on the United States and our allies, and it should assure states without nuclear weapons that are parties in good standing to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) that they will not face nuclear threats from the United States.

Ambiguity about the purpose of U.S. nuclear forces provides little deterrent value at a high cost; it undermines the credibility of our conventional deterrent, complicates our nonproliferation diplomacy, and can be used by other countries to justify their pursuit or improvement of nuclear weapons.

2. Deeper Reductions in Nuclear Stockpiles: If the United States adopted a core nuclear deterrence posture, it would facilitate a shift to a stockpile of hundreds rather than thousands of nuclear weapons. In this context, we applaud your efforts to reach a START Follow-on Treaty with the Russians in order to reestablish bilateral cooperation on nuclear armaments. The Nuclear Posture Review should make clear, however, that the United States is able and willing to undertake further significant reductions in its deployed nuclear warheads provided that Russia is a willing partner. We urge you to insure that new guidance reflects this determination.

As a step toward future reductions, the NPR should signal that forward-deployed U.S. nuclear weapons are no longer essential to preserving the security of the NATO alliance. The actual removal of such weapons should await formal consultations within NATO and may, in part, depend on arms control negotiations with Russia. But a useful first step would be the immediate consolidation of remaining forward-deployed nuclear weapons to one or two U.S. airbases in Europe.

3. Reducing the Risks of a Rapid Launch Posture: During the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union kept thousands of nuclear weapons ready to be launched within minutes of a decision to do so. Today, both the United States and Russia each still maintain about one thousand weapons on day-to-day alert and—as you have undoubtedly noticed—the nuclear “football” shadows you just as it shadowed your predecessors during the Cold War. The guidance signed by your predecessors continues to establish a requirement for a massive prompt use of U.S. nuclear weapons within the flight time of a Russian ballistic missile in the mistaken belief that such an option creates uncertainty that helps deter a deliberate Russian attack.

We conclude, rather, that the existence of large, alert U.S. forces trained and ready to launch on a few minutes notice does not serve the purpose of making war less likely. Restructuring our forces to provide high confidence that our weapons and command and control would survive an attack would remove the requirement for a prompt response and put you in a better position to manage a crisis.

4. No New Nuclear Warheads: The NPR should clarify your January 2009 pledge “not to authorize new nuclear weapons” by establishing that it is U.S. policy not to develop or produce newly designed warheads, or to modify existing warheads for the purpose of creating new military capabilities.

Advances in the stockpile stewardship program over the past decade demonstrate that the United States can maintain a safe, secure, and reliable nuclear stockpile through a properly funded program of non-nuclear tests and evaluations and, as necessary, the remanufacture of key components to previous design specifications. As the fully informed JASON independent technical review panel concluded in September 2009, the

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“lifetimes of today’s nuclear warheads could be extended for decades, with no anticipated loss in confidence.” Efforts to pursue newly designed warheads are technically unnecessary and would undercut our efforts to convince other nations to forgo nuclear weapons or to refrain from developing new and more advanced types of nuclear warheads.

We applaud your work thus far to advance efforts to reduce the nuclear weapons threat and urge you to seize the opportunity to transform outdated U.S. nuclear weapons policy to meet the nuclear security challenges of the 21st century. Doing so will not only increase the security of the United States, but firmly establish your legacy as the president who turned the tide against the nuclear threat.

Sincerely,

David Culp, Legislative Representative
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Charles D. Ferguson, President
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Lt. Gen. Robert G. Gard, Jr. (USA, ret.) former President
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cc: Vice President Joe Biden
The Honorable Antony Blinken, National Security Adviser to the Vice President
The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State
The Honorable Susan Rice, Permanent Representative of the United States to the United Nations
The Honorable James B. Steinberg, Deputy Secretary of State
The Honorable Ellen Tauscher, Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security
The Honorable Rose Gottemoeller, Assistant Secretary of State for Verification, Compliance, and Implementation
The Honorable Robert J. Einhorn, Special Advisor for Nonproliferation and Arms Control
The Honorable Robert M. Gates, Secretary of Defense
The Honorable William J. Lynn III, Deputy Secretary of Defense
The Honorable Michèle Flournoy, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy
The Honorable James Miller, Principle Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy
The Honorable Michael Nacht, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Global Strategic Affairs
Mr. Bradley H. Roberts, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear and Ballistic Missile Defense Policy
Rear Adm. Philip Davidson, Deputy Director for Strategy and Policy, Joint Staff J-5 Directorate
The Honorable Steven Chu, Secretary of Energy
The Honorable Daniel Poneman, Deputy Secretary of Energy
The Honorable Thomas D'Agostino, Under Secretary of Energy for Nuclear Security and Administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration
General James L. Jones, USMC (ret.), Assistant to the President for National Security
The Honorable John Holdren, Assistant to the President for Science and Technology
The Honorable Thomas E. Donilon, Deputy National Security Advisor
Mr. Barry Pavel, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Defense Policy and Strategy
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