Reassessing U.S. nuclear weapons policy

Harold Brown[1] and John Deutch[2]

The end of the Cold War changed "the balance of nuclear terror" and with it the centrality of nuclear forces in U.S. security strategy. New security threats that have emerged since the end of the Cold War, notably the rise of terrorism and the risks of nuclear proliferation, call for a reassessment of the role of nuclear weapons. Several former senior U.S. foreign policy officials advocate a significant shift in U.S. policy to elevate the goal of the complete elimination of nuclear weapons as a practical means of mobilizing more resolute international action to combat the proliferation on nuclear weapons and discouraging their possession and use.

We share the view that the dangers make combating nuclear proliferation a higher priority for the United States than ever before. The strongest possible measures to inhibit the acquisition and roll back the possession of nuclear weapons are surely justified.

However, we believe adopting an aspirational goal of eliminating nuclear weapons is both counter-productive to making substantive progress on nonproliferation policy objectives and risks compromising the value that nuclear weapons continue to make through deterrence to U.S. security and international stability.

The overwhelming motive of a problematic state is the belief that the possession of nuclear weapons will improve its security. Nothing that the United States does with its nuclear posture will directly influence such a nation to abandon its weapons program. Whatever their other merits, and those are significant, it is difficult to argue that a comprehensive test ban treaty, a "no first use" declaration by the United States, reducing by three-quarters the number of deployed or total weapons in the U.S. stockpile, or cutting off fissionable material production, will convince North Korea, Iran, India, Pakistan or Israel to give up their nuclear weapons programs. A declaratory U.S. policy of moving to eliminate nuclear weapons in a distant future will have no direct effect on reducing the forces that prompt nations or terrorist groups to have nuclear ambitions or to abandon their nuclear weapons aspirations.

In fact, the aspirational goal of a world free of nuclear weapons has long been an aspect of United States policy. The United States has ratified the 1968 Nonproliferation Treaty whose Article Six states:

> "Each of the parties to the treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control."

No one suggests abandoning the hope, embodied in such a well-intentioned statement. However, hope is not a policy, and, at present, there is no realistic path to a world free of nuclear weapons.

One cannot make the knowledge that make nuclear weapons possible disappear. So even if one assumes that the United States and the other nuclear weapons states could agree to destruction of their nuclear stockpiles, it does not mean that other nations, for example, Israel, Iran, and North Korea, would abandon their nuclear capability.

Even with the additional, still more heroic assumption, that the abandonment of nuclear weapons by the nuclear weapons states was accompanied by a resolute and harmonious international condominium of states committed to take stringent action against any nation or entity that pursued nuclear capability, proliferating states would have other options. One option would be clandestine retention of a few existing weapons. Another would be to maintain a standby, break-out, capability to acquire a few weapons quickly, if needed. In any case, even in the absence of overwhelming superiority in nuclear weapons, the great predominance of the United States in conventional forces would continue to be a strong motive for aspiring states to seek nuclear weapons.

So long as serious political differences exist between nations and peoples, and given that the possibility of nuclear weapons exists, the United States should have nuclear weapons to deter potential opponents and avoid intimidation by other states that seek to acquire a capability of weapons of mass destruction.

A U.S. pledge to adopt a world free of nuclear weapons as a practical goal can serve initially to attract international cooperation for some counter proliferation measures. But in the long run this promise is likely to lose good will and cooperation in non-proliferation efforts, when it becomes clear that there is no concrete prospect for doing so.

The practical way forward

So what is to be done? The answer is not to throw a "hail Mary" pass to reach the goal of a nuclear free world, but to rely on "blocking and tackling" in managing counter proliferation efforts.

The lack of a pathway to a nuclear weapons free world does not world does make nuclear proliferation inevitable. It is possible to slow the spread of nuclear weapons and in some cases, even to reverse a country's drive to the bomb. In the 1970s, several countries: South Korea, Taiwan, Brazil, and Argentina, were convinced to abandon their potentially regionally destabilizing weapons programs. In the 1990s South Africa voluntarily dismantled its nuclear weapons as the end of apartheid ended international isolation. During the first Clinton administration, the United States successfully persuaded governments of the former Soviet Union to transfer their nuclear weapons to the new Russian state. During the George W. Bush administration, Libya renounced its nuclear program. In each case, these successes came about through combined application of the carrots and sticks of proliferation policy as well as a change in the way a proliferating state perceived its security circumstances.

It is also essential to harmonize nuclear weapons policy with non-proliferation efforts. In today's world, it is in the interest of the United States, given its predominant conventional weapons capability, to deemphasize the role nuclear weapons play as instruments of U.S. power and to adopt a nuclear weapons strategy and force posture that reinforces non-proliferation efforts. This means reducing the total inventory of nuclear weapons to the lowest number needed for the purpose of deterrence; this number is likely to be considerably below the present stockpile of over 8000 weapons. The nuclear weapons complex -- people, technology, and facilities – should be sized to assure the safety, reliability, and effectiveness of these weapons. The United States should not propose or fund large-scale programs or

initiatives that suggest new roles for nuclear weapons.

There are several significant proposals for changes to the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile that need to be decided during the next several years. Adopting an aspirational goal to eliminate nuclear weapons risks obscuring the reasons pro and con for deciding issues on more concrete grounds. Here are three examples: (1) A significant reduction in the size of U.S. nuclear stockpile could be justified on the ground of cost compared to the level needed for credible deterrence; the vision of zero nuclear weapons is neither necessary or politically useful for making decisions on reductions today.

(2) For decades, in the United States, there has been a debate about the desirability of a universal and permanent comprehensive nuclear test ban, (CTB). Those favoring the complete elimination of nuclear weapons are unlikely to consider a compromise measure, such as five-year renewable CTB that would likely attract not only the political support for passage in U.S. Congress, but also the support many of the 44 states, listed in Article XIV of the treaty, such as India, Israel, and Pakistan, that must become signatories before the treaty enters into force.

(3) The Bush administration has proposed significant new programs to modernize the entire U.S. nuclear weapons production and maintenance complex. The reliable replacement warhead program (RRW) proposes to replace existing nuclear warheads with a new design on the grounds that this new warhead will facilitate reductions in the stockpile; permit confidence in the reliability, security, and safety of weapons for the indefinite future; as well as maintain the design capability of the Department of Energy nuclear weapons laboratories. The RRW could lead to a design that is certified without testing, but that would be a subject of debate. The advisability of adopting costly new weapons complex programs rather than continuing the current stockpile stewardship approach based on extending the life of existing weapon types, should be decided on the basis of the infrastructure needed to support the nuclear force structure and assure its reliability, not on the basis of whether investments contribute or not to a distant and uncertain goal.

In contrast, there is general agreement on the priority measures that should guide counter proliferation efforts: These are: First, supplier states can seek to control the

transfer of fissile material and relevant technology. The inspections of the International Atomic Energy Agency will continue to play an important role in this regard. Second, building on the Nunn-Lugar-Domenici program, greater emphasis needs to be given to security of weapons and weapons usable material, not only in Russia, but also throughout the world, both in stockpiles and research facilities. Third, with the potential expansion of nuclear power around the world, it is urgent to put into place new means for controlling the aspects of the fuel cycle, enrichment and fuel reprocessing, that present the greatest proliferation risk. The fourth, and ultimately the most important and difficult task is to change the underlying security circumstances that lead nations to seek nuclear weapons. To that end, direct negotiations involving positive incentives (economic, political, and security arrangements) for states willing to abandon nuclear weapons aspirations, as well as cooperation with others to impose negative sanctions across an escalating spectrum on recalcitrant actors, are essential.

Differing past approaches chosen by the United States when there was a widely shared consensus about the need to meet a serious global security problem is instructive. In 1928, in an effort to avoid another European war, world leaders signed the Kellog-Briand pact, still in effect, declaring "in the names of their respective peoples that they condemn recourse to war for the solution of international controversies, and renounce it, as an instrument of national policy in their relations with one another..." The goal has had little effect beyond requiring nations to invoke self-defense to explain military action. By contrast, in 1947, U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall, recognizing the need to rebuild Europe after World War II, announced a comprehensive set of actions designed to achieve that purpose, without offering a grand political vision of a united Europe. In fact, the Marshall plan, by successfully accomplishing its concrete objectives, laid the basis for realizing the grander vision. The Marshall plan is a more appropriate model for U.S. nonproliferation efforts today.

Nuclear weapons remain far more than empty symbols; they play an important deterrent role. Despite well-intentioned hopes and the stated goal of the Nonproliferation Treaty, nuclear weapons cannot be eliminated. U.S. foreign policy must be based on this reality, and the United States should work with other nations on the many aspects of counter proliferation that lower the risks of the spread of

nuclear weapons capability and the possibility of nuclear weapons use.

[1] Harold Brown, Senior Counselor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies was Secretary of Defense in the Carter Administration.
[2] John Deutch, Institute Professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was Director of Central Intelligence in the first Clinton administration.