



## *U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy at the End of the Century: Lost Opportunities and New Dangers*

By Daryl G. Kimball, Coalition to Reduce Nuclear Dangers

The decade following the dissolution of the Soviet Union provided a historic chance to step back from the precipice of nuclear war by reducing the massive Russian and U.S. arsenals and moving toward global nuclear weapons elimination. Sadly, though the overall number of nuclear weapons is down (from approximately 60,000 in 1990 to 35,000 today) and the antagonism of the cold war has faded, the risk of nuclear war is still real, and the threat of nuclear proliferation is greater than ever. Much of the progress achieved in the last decade in the nuclear arena is tenuous at best and could easily be reversed.

During the tumultuous and uncertain period following the breakup of the Soviet Union, U.S. and Russian nuclear policymakers did recognize the need to take some new and important measures. In 1991, Presidents Bush and Gorbachev agreed to withdraw tens of thousands of forward-deployed tactical nuclear weapons and

remove thousands more from high alert. In the same year, the U.S. Congress initiated a modest program to assist Russia with the task of addressing the nuclear security threats emerging from the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In 1992, Russia extended a unilateral nuclear test moratorium begun under Soviet President Gorbachev the year before, and France also declared a test moratorium. By the end of 1992, after more than one thousand U.S. nuclear blasts, the U.S. Congress responded by mandating a nine-month test moratorium and the pursuit of a global Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). And in January 1993, Presidents Bush

Soviet states—Belarus, Kazakstan, and Ukraine—to return the nuclear arsenals left behind when the Soviet Union collapsed and to renounce nuclear weapons by signing the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). At the urging of nuclear test ban activists and congressional leaders, President Clinton took the important step of extending the U.S. nuclear testing moratorium in 1993 and helped to initiate international CTBT negotiations in 1994. The U.S. also took the lead in securing international support for the indefinite extension of the NPT in April 1995. In order to win the support of non-nuclear states, the U.S. and other nuclear powers agreed to a set of “principles and objectives,” including renewed commitments both to implement Article VI of the NPT—“to pursue in good faith negotiations on effective measures relating to nuclear disarmament”—and to conclude the CTBT.

However, the second Clinton administration and the Republican-led Congress have failed to solidify the gains made in the early 1990s, to meet America’s NPT obligations, and to seize the opportunity to delegitimize nuclear weapons as a tool of foreign and military policy. START II still has not been implemented, and START III negotiations have been stalled for years. The U.S. is pursuing a national ballistic missile defense (NMD) system with an aggressive, multibillion-dollar research, development, and testing program. (See FPIF vol. 4, no. 24, *Star Wars Revisited: Still Dangerous, Costly, and Unworkable*.) The CTBT, opened for signature in 1996, has been signed by the U.S. and over 150 other nations, but it has not yet been ratified by the U.S. and other key states, blocking its implementation. In addition, the U.S. and the other four major nuclear powers continue to reject multilateral disarmament talks despite increasing pressure by the international community, many U.S. allies, and the New Agenda Coalition, a group of nations advocating an aggressive but practical program of action on nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation.

The failure of the U.S. and other nuclear weapons states to make better progress toward disarmament and to end nuclear testing gave Indian leaders a convenient (though self-serving) rationale to conduct nuclear tests in 1998 and to flirt with deployment of its nuclear weapons. With Pakistan responding in kind, the fighting between India and Pakistan in the disputed territory of Kashmir poses the risk of the use of nuclear weapons in a region that is home to one-sixth of the world’s inhabitants.

### Key Points

- U.S. and Russian nuclear forces remain at cold war numerical levels and hair-trigger alert postures, prolonging the possibility of accidental nuclear war.
- Nuclear arms reduction pacts are being blocked in the legislatures of key nations, allowing the possibility of a new arms race between India and Pakistan and the renewal of “superpower” nuclear arms competition.
- The U.S. and Russia continue to incorporate nuclear weapons into their military plans as a deterrent to nuclear, chemical, biological, or even conventional military threats.

and Yeltsin concluded a second Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START II), which would cut U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear weapons to no more than 3,000-3,500 each.

Shortly after taking office, President Clinton took advantage of some key opportunities to build upon this momentum. In 1993, the U.S. convinced three former

Rather than fading away, cold war-era nuclear dangers persist, and new ones have emerged. The U.S. still deploys approximately 7,200 strategic nuclear weapons, and Russia still deploys 5,900, with both countries retaining thousands of warheads in "strategic reserve." Even though a deliberate nuclear attack seems implausible, the nuclear weapons postures of the U.S. and Russia still reflect an outdated, nuclear war fighting mind-set. Nuclear forces remain on hair-trigger alert. This means that over 4,000 nuclear weapons could be launched within minutes. Russia's economic collapse and its decreasing ability to maintain either nuclear command and control systems or early warning mechanisms increase the possibility of "accidental" or unintended nuclear war. To assuage public fears about accidental attacks, Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin agreed to detarget their countries' nuclear weapons. But this arrangement has no practical effect, since U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons can be retargeted at previous targets (military sites and cities) within a few minutes.

These ongoing nuclear threats make it all the more important to immediately remove U.S. and Russian nuclear forces from attack-on-warning status and to eliminate both long-range and shorter-range tactical nuclear bombs. However, each side has failed to exert the leadership needed to achieve these goals, and both the Clinton administration and Congress have pursued policies that have made the task even more challenging. President Clinton has stated that START III negotiations will not begin until the Russian legislature, the Duma, ratifies START II. Congress has also enacted legislation that bars the U.S. from reducing its nuclear forces below START I levels (6,000 strategic nuclear weapons) or lowering the alert status of U.S. weapons until the Duma ratifies START II. In Moscow, hardliners in parliament have blocked ratification of START II in order to extract concessions on various other matters from President Yeltsin. The U.S. bombing of Iraq (December 1998) and Serbia (March 1999) on the eve of Duma consideration of START II angered Russia and further postponed possible Duma passage of the treaty.

Without implementation of the START agreements, there is a very real possibility of a re-emergent nuclear arms race between the U.S., Russia, and China in the coming years. Russia's shrinking conventional military forces combined with NATO expansion and the revival of U.S. missile defense plans have unfortunately left Russian military leaders more reliant on nuclear weapons. Washington now wants to negotiate changes in the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty to allow a limited national missile system to defend the U.S. from "rogue" states such as North Korea. But Grigory Berdennikov, of the Russian Foreign Ministry's disarmament department, has said any modifications to the ABM treaty would undermine the START treaties and force Russia "to raise the effectiveness of its strategic nuclear armed forces." Similarly, China may respond by

increasing its strategic nuclear force to overcome U.S. missile defenses. China currently deploys fewer than two dozen long-range nuclear-armed missiles.

Instead of adopting policies that downplay the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. military strategy, the Clinton administration has taken steps designed to make nuclear weapons more usable, particularly against non-nuclear states. In 1996, the administration approved development of a modified nuclear gravity bomb, the B-61 Mod 11, which has earth penetrating capabilities designed to make it more usable against underground bunkers. In 1997, President Clinton approved a new nuclear doctrine that reportedly widens options for using nuclear weapons against rogue states in order to deter the acquisition or use of weapons of mass destruction. In 1998 and 1999, the U.S. tried to persuade NATO to endorse the possible use of nuclear weapons against chemical and biological weapons proliferators. These actions undermine the U.S. treaty commitments against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states.

Furthermore, President Clinton has failed to exert the political leadership needed to finish the job on his most significant disarmament and nonproliferation achievement to date: the CTBT. This treaty would make it much harder for countries with advanced nuclear weapons—including the U.S., Russia, and China—to produce new and more threatening types of nuclear warheads. It would also help prevent nations seeking nuclear arms—like Iran and Iraq—from making advanced nuclear warheads, which are more easily deliverable by ballistic missiles. The CTBT would establish a far-reaching global monitoring network and the option of on-site inspections. This monitoring system is not only crucial in making global test ban verification possible, it is also vital to the development of the tools needed for verification of more ambitious nuclear weapons elimination initiatives.

U.S. ratification is vital to persuading other key states, including Russia, China, India, and Pakistan, to ratify the CTBT and to secure its global implementation. Although the Clinton administration was instrumental in negotiating the treaty, it has been unable to move the CTBT to a vote in the Senate. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jesse Helms (R-NC) has blocked a vote, ensuring that the CTBT remains stuck in a treaties traffic jam.

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## Key Problems

- Deployment of national ballistic defenses could undermine the prospects for U.S.-Russian nuclear force reductions and would likely prompt China to accelerate its planned nuclear force modernization.
  - Both Congress and President Clinton have embraced a short-sighted policy requiring Russia to ratify the START II agreement before the United States will reduce its nuclear force levels or engage in START III negotiations.
  - The nuclear weapon states have failed to fulfill the obligations toward nuclear disarmament agreed to at the 1995 conference, which extended the NPT indefinitely.
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The U.S. public strongly endorses nuclear disarmament: an August 1999 poll found that more than two-thirds (70%) of registered voters believe a goal of U.S. policy should be to either eliminate (44%) or reduce (26%) nuclear weapons. U.S. policymakers have both the opportunity and the obligation to future generations to set a new course toward complete nuclear disarmament.

## Key Recommendations

- Washington should agree to reduce U.S. and Russian arsenals to 1,000 weapons or less within the next decade and should immediately shift the majority of nuclear forces off hair-trigger alert.
- The Senate should immediately ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, block further development and deployment of new nuclear weapons, and close existing nuclear test sites.
- The president should invite the other four major nuclear powers to begin nuclear disarmament talks and should support progress on a multistep nuclear weapons elimination process.

President Clinton and his successor must work with Congress to break the current disarmament deadlock and move toward the next phase of nuclear weapons elimination: multilateral talks on verifiable nuclear disarmament involving all of the nuclear weapons states. The Clinton administration must act quickly with Russia to finalize a START III agreement that would reduce each nation's strategic arsenals to 1,000 weapons or fewer. (Russia has indicated it would support a ceiling of 1,500 weapons or fewer.) If an agreement is not reached before mid-2000, or if ratification of the agreement hits new snags in the Duma or the Senate, the

leaders of both nations must be prepared to jump-start the arms control treaty process. The presidents can accomplish this by taking unilateral, verifiable, and reciprocal steps to withdraw and eliminate their respective nuclear arsenals to 1,000 or less within the decade. In addition, both presidents should immediately dealert all nuclear forces scheduled for elimination and abandon the present launch-on-warning and mass attack nuclear war fighting plans.

In its present negotiations with Russia regarding START III and possible modifications to the ABM treaty, the Clinton administration must avoid scuttling the chances for deep cuts in U.S.-Russian arsenals. Such cuts could be jeopardized if Washington insists that Russia accept modifications of the ABM treaty that would allow the U.S. to deploy a limited missile defense system. Furthermore, the Clinton administration should terminate development and deployment of the NMD system. Not only is such a system unwise because

it is technologically infeasible and costly, it risks the opportunity to eliminate thousands of existing Russian nuclear weapons for the sake of trying to address the very remote chance of a North Korean missile attack.

The Senate must also consider and approve the CTBT immediately. The longer the Senate waits to ratify the treaty, the greater the chance that some nation may challenge the de facto global norm against nuclear testing. Senate Democrats have indicated that they are prepared to bring the Senate to a standstill if the Republican leadership continues to refuse to allow a vote. President Clinton and his Cabinet must immediately launch their long-delayed, high-profile campaign for the CTBT. The president must capitalize upon military leaders' endorsements of the test ban, harness the widespread public approval for the treaty (82%, according to a June 1999 poll), win the active support of sympathetic Republicans, and force the Senate leadership to allow a vote, which would produce the two-thirds majority needed for ratification.

Now is not the time to passively allow hidebound policies to perpetuate old threats or foster the emergence of new nuclear dangers. The U.S. must take bold steps to decrease the political value of nuclear weapons by pledging not to be the first to use them in the new millenium. Washington should reinforce the CTBT by barring the development of new nuclear weapons and warhead modifications under its \$4.5 billion nuclear weapons stockpile stewardship program.

The end of the cold war has created the unprecedented opportunity—indeed the moral imperative—to pursue the elimination of nuclear weapons. The next president must be prepared to follow up an agreement with Russia on deep, irreversible nuclear reductions with an initiative to begin talks on multilateral nuclear disarmament. U.S. and Russian nuclear force levels at around 1,000 weapons each will open the way for talks—involving China, Britain, and France and, later, India, Pakistan, Israel, and other major non-nuclear states—that address the framework, political conditions, and verification mechanisms needed for the final elimination of nuclear weapons.

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## Websites

**Acronym Institute**  
<http://www.acronym.org.uk>

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