

# It's Time for the US to Become Non-Nuclear

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The common perception is that if the United States did not have nuclear weapons, it would become more susceptible to attack. However, the historical record shows that any country attacking the U.S. would be counter-attacked and defeated. In any case, it is unlikely the U.S. would actually use nuclear weapons to retaliate when conventional options are available to produce the same effects. The current threats to the U.S. are terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda. When attacked by al-Qaeda multiple times in America (e.g., World Trade Center, 1993), the U.S. did not respond by using nuclear weapons. In any case, terrorists are not deterred by nuclear weapons.

The Cold War essentially ended when General Secretary of the Soviet Politburo Mikhail Gorbachev declared the dissolution of the Soviet Union on December 25, 1991.<sup>1</sup> This proclamation had numerous significant effects, including a reduction by about 50 percent of its operationally-deployed strategic nuclear weapons. The recent Moscow Treaty calls for the U.S. to further reduce warheads; a total inventory reduction of about 90 percent since 1991.

Despite this significant drawdown, according to the Arms Control Association nuclear weapons fact sheet, the United States still maintains more than 1,700 nuclear weapons on alert.<sup>2</sup> For what enemy? In what scenario would the president of the United States realistically authorize the use of nuclear weapons when he could achieve similar if not more effective results by using the high-tech and powerful conventional weapons available?

The United States continues to maintain nuclear forces for two fundamental reasons. First, the international security environment remains unpredictable, and has grown more complicated since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Political intentions can change overnight, and technical surprises can occur at any time. Second, nuclear weapons continue to play unique roles in supporting U.S. national security, though not suited for every 21st century challenge. According to Secretary of Defense Gates and Secretary of Energy Bodman in their *National Security and Nuclear Weapons in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2008), U.S. nuclear forces serve to deter acts of aggression involving nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction and major conventional attacks.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Arms Control Association, *Nuclear Weapons Budget Fact Sheet* (Washington DC, March 18, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Bodman, Samuel, and Robert M Gates, *National Security and Nuclear Weapons in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, September 2008.

Neither of these reasons really applies to the U.S. today. Realistically, no nation in the world has the capability and the will to engage the U.S. in any war for the purpose of defeating the U.S. While North Korea or Iran may eventually have the capability to strike the U.S. with a nuclear weapon, this seems highly unlikely given the military response that would result.

## **U.S. Nuclear Weapons Infrastructure**

U.S. nuclear weapons were designed for a short service life of approximately 10-15 years. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, a series of events combined to change fundamentally how the United States manages its nuclear force. These events included the dismantling of the nation's nuclear weapon fabrication plant at Rocky Flats, Colorado in 1989; two Presidential Nuclear Initiatives issued by President George H. W. Bush in 1991 and 1992 (which halted all nuclear weapon development and production underway); and, President Clinton's announcement in 1993 of an indefinite moratorium on nuclear weapons testing.<sup>4</sup>

The United States has not designed a new nuclear warhead since the 1980s, and has not built a new warhead since the early 1990s. As a result, the nuclear weapons infrastructure has atrophied, and existing U.S. nuclear weapons – most of which were designed 20 to 30 years ago – are being maintained well beyond the service life for which they were designed. Critical personnel, with experience in the design and testing of nuclear weapons, are also retiring. In the absence of a viable nuclear infrastructure, their expertise is not likely to be replaced. Moreover, as new design efforts are further delayed, the ability and availability of experienced designers and engineers to mentor the next generation will decrease over time.<sup>5</sup>

Currently, the U.S. nuclear weapons program costs taxpayers about \$31 billion annually.<sup>6</sup> However, while that yearly investment deterred the Soviet Union during the Cold War, it did not deter al-Qaeda from attacking the U.S. on 9/11. According to Steve Schwartz in *The Cost of Nuclear Weapons*, the U.S. has spent over a trillion dollars on its nuclear weapons forces since World War II.<sup>7</sup>

Why would the U.S. ever employ a nuclear weapon? The U.S. has more than enough high-tech weapons to eliminate any target anywhere with conventional weapons, including the Guided Bomb Unit -24 Advanced Unitary Penetrator and the BLU 118/B Thermobaric

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<sup>4</sup> Bodman, Samuel, and Robert M Gates, *National Security and Nuclear Weapons in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, September 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Schwartz, *The Costs of US Nuclear Weapons*, Monterey Institute of International Studies, October 1, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Bomb (both weapons used to destroy hardened underground bunkers). One problem with this approach, as noted by David Sanger and Tom Shanker in the *New York Times* article “US Faces Choice on New Weapons for Fast Strikes,” is that it would take several hours to put any conventional weapons on a target today.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, that is not quick enough to deter terrorists or others planning on attacking America.

President George W. Bush’s administration began working on a weapon system that could put a conventional weapon on any target anywhere on Earth within an hour and that would generate the destructive power of a nuclear warhead. The program is called “Prompt Global Strike.” Beginning in 2008, the U.S. Air Force and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) received funding from Congress to begin working on this program. These two organizations have been exploring the development of a hypersonic glide delivery vehicle that would deploy on a modified Peacekeeper Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM). It is called the “Conventional Strike Missile” (CSM). This program continues under President Obama.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, the Air Force and Navy are both planning to spend hundreds of billions of dollars to upgrade their respective nuclear weapons forces, to include 12 new ballistic missile submarines (lifetime cost of \$350 billion), 100 new strategic bombers (at least \$68 billion), and at least 400 new ICBMs (cost unknown).<sup>10</sup> All of this effort and expense is going into weapons that are simply not needed. The historic record shows that nuclear weapons have only been used for deterrence, and that effectively became obsolete after the Cold War ended in the early 1990s. The U.S. high-tech conventional forces stand as enough deterrence against any country or rogue element.

### **Non-Nuclear Weapon Strategic Posture**

President Obama declared that he is interested in eliminating all nuclear weapons. In a major address in Prague on April 5, 2009, newly-elected President Obama proclaimed, “So, today I state clearly and with conviction America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world *without nuclear weapons*.” In September 2009, he became the first American president in history to chair a United Nations Security Council meeting dealing with nuclear disarmament. The result of this meeting was unanimous Security Council

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<sup>8</sup> David Sanger and Thom Shanker, “US Faces Choice on New Weapons for Fast Strikes,” *New York Times*, April 22, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Amy Woolf, “Conventional Prompt Global Strike and Long-Range Ballistic Missiles,” *Congressional Research Service*, January 10, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Arms Control Association, *Nuclear Weapons Budget Fact Sheet*. Washington DC, March 18, 2013.

support for UN Resolution 1887, which supported the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons worldwide.<sup>11</sup>

Many countries interested in acquiring nuclear weapons point to the fact that the U.S. has them. The U.S. appears hypocritical demanding that countries such as Iran and North Korea give up their nuclear weapons programs when it is investing in its own nuclear weapons programs.

### **A Proposal for a Non-Nuclear U.S.**

I support a proposal to accommodate both President Obama's desire for no nuclear weapons and his desire for more options to strike any target anywhere in less than one hour. We should eliminate all of our nuclear weapons and allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), to include Russian inspectors, to inspect and monitor U.S. nuclear weapons facilities to confirm this new non-nuclear status.

Once the IAEA, China, and Russia were satisfied that the U.S. no longer has nuclear weapons, all of America's intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) would serve as delivery platforms for conventional - not nuclear - weapons. The flight time of a typical ICBM is less than 30 minutes. The flight time for an SLBM is less than that depending on where the nuclear submarine is located at the time. Where once these formidable delivery systems were unlikely to ever be used, now the possibility is reversed!

As such, all of the investment in these ballistic missile systems could actually become practical. The deterrence effect of DoD's military force could increase exponentially. At the same time, DoD saves close to a trillion dollars by not having to maintain and recapitalize its nuclear forces, and canceling the Prompt Global Strike's CSM program. All of this can be accomplished unilaterally without negotiations with Russia.

This initiative would also make DoD a more effective deterrent against asymmetric threats, such as terrorists, given the new capability to launch a ballistic missile with a conventional warhead and strike a target anywhere within 30 minutes. It would give the President and the National Security Council options currently not available. Finally, it would save DoD and the American taxpayer hundreds of billions of dollars in a time of fiscal constraint.

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<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Wittner, "Has Obama Abandoned His Commitment to a Nuclear Free World?" *CounterPunch*, February 4, 2013.

**Endnotes:**

1 Arms Control Association, *Nuclear Weapons Budget Fact Sheet* (Washington DC, March 18, 2013).

2 Ibid.

3 *National Security and Nuclear Weapons in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 2008.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Stephen Schwartz, *The Costs of US Nuclear Weapons* (Monterey Institute of International Studies, October 1, 2008).

7 Ibid.

8 David Sanger and Thom Shanker, "US Faces Choice on New Weapons for Fast Strikes," (*New York Times*, April 22, 2010).

9 Amy Woolf, "Conventional Prompt Global Strike and Long-Range Ballistic Missiles," (*Congressional Research Service*, January 10, 2013).

10 Arms Control Association, *Nuclear Weapons Budget Fact Sheet* (Washington DC, March 18, 2013).

11 Lawrence Wittner, "Has Obama Abandoned His Commitment to a Nuclear Free World?" (*CounterPunch*, February 4, 2013).

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**Biography:**

Dr Steve Schwalbe served for 30 years in the Air Force Intelligence and retired as a colonel in 2007. He was the Defense Intelligence Agency's top military analyst, focusing on the Soviet General Staff. He also conducted Intermediate Nuclear Force Treaty inspections in the Soviet Union with the On-Site Inspection Agency.