



Barack Obama's nuclear reset:

Mutual destruction is still assured but it's a START

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The long negotiated follow-on agreement to the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) has been completed and is being signed in Prague today. In addition, the US announced a significant shift in strategic thinking with the publication of its [Nuclear Posture Review](#) (NPR) earlier in the week. And next week the President will host a 47-nation nuclear proliferation summit in Washington. These are heady days for arms control policy wonks.

Under the 'New START' the US and Russia would cap their strategic nuclear arsenals to 1,550 deployed warheads (those mounted on intercontinental missiles or bombers), according to a White House [fact sheet](#). That represents a nearly 30 percent reduction from a 2,200-weapon limit the states were to meet by the end of 2012 under the 2002 Moscow Treaty. The two nations also agreed to limit their total fielded and reserve strategic delivery vehicles to 800, a reduction from an earlier discussed ceiling of 1,100 bombers, missiles and submarines. Each nation can keep on deployment no more than 700 of the systems.

However, that still leaves more than enough firepower to destroy both nations many times over. And the treaty's focus on deployed warheads means that there are no limits on warheads, missiles and bombers that either side may keep in storage. There are also [question marks](#) over the accounting system in the treaty, which leaves wiggle room for fewer reductions. Nor does the treaty address the thousands of shorter-range tactical nuclear weapons in Europe: about 2,000 on the Russian side and a tenth of that number on the US side, the latter as part of a 'NATO nuclear sharing' arrangement. As Eben Harrell [concludes](#) in *Time* magazine, if the US and Russia "were to fire even a portion of their remaining arsenals at each other, over a matter of minutes you, your family and every person on this

planet would face death by atomic fireball, radiation poisoning or eventual starvation from the ensuing nuclear winter".

But even this modest New START faces a tortured process of achieving [senate ratification](#) and probably reflects the best that President Obama can achieve at present given the posse of hard-line critics on Capitol Hill. Verification will be a key aspect of getting the treaty through the Senate, and the 18 annual on-site inspections and other measures restore the strict verification mechanisms that had lapsed with the expiration of the old START treaty.



Secretary of State Hillary Clinton; Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates; Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff conduct a press conference on the new Nuclear Posture Review at the Pentagon on 6 April 2010 – photo credit: [Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff/flickr](#)

This pursuit of incremental improvements on unsatisfactory circumstances also best describes the first fully unclassified US nuclear weapons strategy document. The NPR is important because it sets the framework for decisions on US nuclear policy for the next five to 10 years, including the size of the stockpile and investments in submarines, missiles and nuclear laboratories. This latest version was delivered four months late after becoming mired in interagency arguments. It certainly does not embody an ideal future— notions of deterrence remain central and the shift towards conventional strategic weapons and missile defences are likely to prove problematic further down the nuclear zero path — but among the limited options available to President Obama today, it represents another step in the right direction.

The NPR places preventing nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism at the core of the US nuclear agenda and significantly narrows the role of nuclear weapons in US national security doctrine: "The United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations". Despite the latter important caveat, which effectively leaves out North Korea and Iran, the review contrasts starkly with the Bush administration's declaration that nuclear weapons would be used to deter a wide range of threats, including weapons of mass destruction and large-scale conventional military forces. The review also reaffirms that the US will not conduct nuclear explosive tests, rejects the development of new nuclear weapons and alludes to the possibility of further discussions with Moscow on even deeper bilateral reductions beyond those called for in the New START agreement, including tactical nuclear weapons.



Titan Missile Museum, Green Valley, Arizona. All 54 Titan II missile sites were eliminated from the US arsenal during the Reagan administration – photo credit: [Kingdafy/flickr](#)

On the negative side of the ledger, however, the report stops short of arguing that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons should be to deter nuclear attack on the US and its allies, nor does it call for the US to adopt a 'no first use' policy or abandon its current launch on warning posture. And as regards NATO nuclear sharing the NPR adopts a familiar conservative line:

Although the risk of nuclear attack against NATO members is at an historic low, the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons – combined with NATO's unique nuclear sharing arrangements under which non-nuclear members participate in nuclear planning and possess specially configured aircraft capable of delivering nuclear weapons – contribute to Alliance cohesion and provide reassurance to

allies and partners who feel exposed to regional threats.

And the review concludes that the US will: "*retain the capability to forward-deploy U.S. nuclear weapons on tactical fighter-bombers and heavy bombers, and proceed with full scope life extension for the B-61 bomb*" and "*continue and, where appropriate, expand consultations with allies and partners to address how to ensure the credibility and effectiveness of the U.S. extended deterrent*". Finally, the NPR emphasises that "*any changes in NATO's nuclear posture should only be taken after a thorough review within – and decision by – the Alliance*".

While the NPR therefore defers any changes to NATO nuclear sharing until after the Strategic Concept review, the indications are that (unless NATO allies reach a prior consensus on a change in the nuclear status quo) the withdrawal of the final US nuclear bombs from Europe will either be part of future US-Russian bilateral negotiations or may coincide with the deployment of the first phase of 'adaptive missile defences' in 2012. In other words, just as non-nuclear elements are expected to take a greater share of the US deterrence burden (and thereby allow progressively greater cuts in US strategic nuclear weapons), the creation of an enhanced regional conventional deterrence architecture in Europe is going to be price for US withdrawal of its remaining tactical nuclear weapons. To this end, the NPR states:

Contributions by non-nuclear systems to U.S. regional deterrence and reassurance goals will be preserved by avoiding limitations on missile defenses in New START and ensuring that New START will not preclude options for using heavy bombers or long-range missile systems in conventional roles.

And:

By maintaining a credible nuclear deterrent and reinforcing regional security architectures with missile defenses and other conventional military capabilities, we can reassure our non-nuclear allies and partners worldwide of our security commitments to them and confirm that they do not need nuclear weapons capabilities of their own

However, the US Air Force removed half of its tactical nuclear weapons stationed in Europe between 2000 and 2009 without any reciprocal action required of Russia or reassurance to NATO allies. And this proposed increased reliance on non-nuclear deterrence capabilities (such as missile defences

and conventional long-range 'prompt global strike' missiles) is itself destabilising and may undermine attempts at reaching agreement with Russia (and later China) on deeper nuclear cuts. Indeed, the NPR recognises that *"maintaining strategic stability with the two countries will be an important challenge in the years ahead"*, but expects that the pursuit of high-level, bilateral dialogues on strategic stability will be sufficient to foster *"more stable, resilient, and transparent strategic relationships"*.

This seems naïve given Russian and Chinese fears that US conventional superiority allied with missile defences may render portions of their deterrent obsolete and tips the nuclear balance of terror in favour of the US. As George Perkovich at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace [concludes](#):

While the new START treaty represents real progress, Russian leaders will not embrace deep reductions of all nuclear weapons—including so-called "tactical" systems—as long as Russia's overall military capability is seen to be dramatically weaker than that of the United States if nuclear weapons are taken out of the equation. Russia will remain deeply concerned about conventional military imbalances between it and NATO, as well as U.S. ballistic missile defense technologies and space-supported conventional strike capabilities.



Barack Obama, Prague, October 2009 – photo credit: [zionsiva/flickr](#)

And while Obama and the NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen both emphasise engagement with Russia on the development of missile defences and tend to focus on the systems' defensive qualities (e.g. ["One security roof" from Vancouver to Vladivostok](#)"), a very different narrative is often articulated by US officials. According to Frank Rose, US Bureau of Verification, Compliance, and Implementation, for example, [missile defences](#) *"also provide U.S. and allied forces with freedom of maneuver by helping to negate the ability of regional actors to inhibit or disrupt U.S. military access and operations in the region"*. It is this assumption that the US military has a 'right of access' to intervene anywhere in the world that is likely to continue to fuel nuclear proliferation in fragile states and deter existing nuclear weapon states from paying more than lip-service to the 'global zero' agenda.

In his April 2009 speech in Prague, President Obama highlighted 21st century nuclear dangers, declaring that to overcome these grave and growing threats, the United States will *"seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons"*. The new START agreement and US NPR are two steps in that process and do make the world a little safer— but many other and more critical steps are needed. The Obama administration will need to move forward assertively on agreements to secure nuclear materials from terrorists, to discourage new nations from getting these weapons, and to set in motion further negotiations to go from thousands of nuclear warheads to hundreds. NATO allies will also need to play their part. In particular, the Alliance needs to rethink the relationship between offensive and defensive weapons and look for ways of moving beyond strategic deterrence doctrine, irrespective of whether it is based on nuclear weapons, conventional weapons or, as is becoming increasingly apparent, a combination of both.