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NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN THE NEW WORLD ORDER

THE dissolution of the Soviet Union has brought to many minds the question: How fast, and by how much, can we reduce our nuclear arsenal?

This country's nuclear activities cannot abruptly cease. It will remain important, for example, to maintain the weapons complex that is responsible for the design, manufacture, and testing of nuclear armaments. We will continue to need these facilities, if for no other reason than for the technically demanding task of getting rid of unneeded weapons.

During the last few months, the United States has seemed to be lurching toward a reasonable nuclear posture. It began with President Bush's historic speech last September, in which he announced unilateral reductions for long-range nuclear systems and removed U.S. bombers and some missiles from alert status. The president withdrew destabilizing, short-range nuclear weapons systems-artillery shells and "theater" ballistic missiles-from overseas deployment. He ordered the removal of all nuclear weapons from surface ships and attack submarines.

Along with these reductions is coming a much needed reappraisal of our nuclear strategy. The newly created Strategic Command, headed by Air Force General Lee Butler, is sponsoring studies that are fundamentally reassessing the purpose of nuclear weapons, the number and types of targets that should be included in a new nuclear strike plan, and the number and types of nuclear delivery systems required to meet future security needs. Outside civilian experts participated in this reappraisal and the results are appearing in thoughtful, unclassified reports. These studies confirm that we are on a path to a nuclear stockpile of 4,000 to 6,000 weapons, down from today's stockpile of more than 20,000 weapons.

Many question why we need even this number of weapons. But there should be no doubt that this slimmer nuclear arsenal will be required for the foreseeable future. First, we should not lose sight of the problem of controlling the 20,000 weapons in the nuclear arsenal of the former Soviet Union. We hope that these weapons will remain under the control of a single authority, probably Russia. In reality, however, it is likely that several of the former Soviet republics will have strategic nuclear weapons, and tactical weapons will be even more widely distributed. It 's a turbulent period in the region, and we need nuclear weapons to guard against undesirable, but by no means improbable, political events.

Second, nuclear weapons remain an important element of political power. U.S. nuclear forces can deter aggression in unstable regions of the world. Saddam Hussein has demonstrated that aggression can involve not only conventional weapons but also nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. And the

hard-line leadership of China possesses a modest nuclear stockpile capable of striking Taiwan and other U.S. allies.

No one suggests that we should meet aggression with nuclear force. Ideally, any required military action would always be limited to conventional weapons. Nevertheless, the presence of nuclear forces places an important constraint on the political and military behavior of nations with hegemonic ambitions. This country still needs an inventory of a few thousand weapons and delivery systems to guarantee the perception throughout the world that we have the right weapons in the right place at the right time.

A credible nuclear deterrent force must be survivable and effective. For these reasons, I support the deployment of a reasonable number of D-5 submarine-based missiles, which are virtually invulnerable to attack, as well as the Midgetman, a small intercontinental ballistic missile. I also favor the B-2 bomber, which could reach its targets more surely than the current B-1.

Theater nuclear weapons have perhaps their most significant role in deterring regional conflicts and the use of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. I therefore believe that President Bush acted unwisely in removing tactical nuclear weapons from ships and submarines; in many regional conflicts, the United States may have no access to air bases on land and so will need to rely on naval forces.

It is noteworthy that the "deterrence study group" of the new Strategic Command has recommended a dramatic change in nuclear targeting policy. For 40 years, U.S. nuclear forces have operated under the "single integrated operating plan," or SIOP, which was designed for large-scale retaliation against the Soviet Union. The study group proposes to replace SIOP with a system of operating plans for limited response to a variety of more likely scenarios. This system of plans would add greater flexibility to launch limited strikes, thus improving the capacity to control escalation. It is a major advance in the continuing challenge to control nuclear weapons.

Photo: Deutch (L. BARRY HETHERINGTON)

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By JOHN M. DEUTCH

JOHN M. DEUTCH, Institute Professor at MIT, was formerly provost and dean of science. He has also been undersecretary and director of energy research of the U.S. Department of Energy.

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