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Reducing U.S. Reliance on Nuclear Weapons While Others Do Not

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The Biden administration recently directed the U.S. Departments of Defense and State, among others, to create U.S. policy that will "...reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy..."¹ The directive does not detail how the United States will reduce the role of nuclear weapons in its national security strategy, but the Obama-Biden administration sought to do the same, as elucidated in its 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) - which perhaps may provide some clues as to how the Biden administration will implement its current guidance.

The 2010 NPR stated that the United States reduced, and sought to reduce more, its reliance on nuclear weapons both through arms control (e.g., the New START Treaty) as well as unilateral initiatives (declaratory policy and force posture changes). While reductions in the number of U.S. nuclear weapons during the Obama administration were part of its overall effort to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy, the 2010 NPR demonstrates that cuts to the U.S. nuclear arsenal are not the only means of reducing reliance on nuclear weapons.

This article will therefore examine the three areas that the Obama administration believed allowed the United States to reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons - changes in the threat



environment, improvements in regional missile defenses, and improvements in long-range conventional weapons – and how these three areas may apply to today’s circumstances that the Biden administration faces.² In addition, the Biden administration’s choice to reduce U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons is especially consequential as states like Russia, China, and North Korea have not followed the U.S. lead and have instead increased the salience of their nuclear arsenals in their defense strategies.

Shifting Threat Environment

One of the primary reasons the Obama administration believed it could reduce reliance on nuclear weapons in its defense strategy was “... the easing of Cold War rivalries...” due primarily to the fact that “... Russia and the United States are no longer adversaries, and the prospects for military confrontation have declined dramatically.”³ This belief was relatively common at the time as even the declassified Bush administration’s 2001 *Nuclear Posture Review* had also stated that benign changes in the U.S.-Russia relationship allowed for greater nuclear reductions.⁴ As the military threat from Russia appeared to shrink from the 1990s and into the early 2000s, and as the United States and Russia cooperated on more issues politically, the natural tendency for the U.S. Department of Defense was to reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons, because as conflict with a peer opponent appeared less and less likely, so too did the apparent need for nuclear-based deterrence appear less relevant.

In a narrow sense then, the Obama administration did not reduce U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons in its strategy, rather, changes in the perceived threat environment naturally reduced the salience of nuclear (and conventional) weapons in the overall U.S.-Russian relationship. In short, as the United States and Russia moved past the Cold War and from competition to cooperation, however short-lived, military power became less relevant overall in the relationship. But just as benign external shifts in the threat environment contributed to the decline in relevance of nuclear weapons in the U.S.-Russian relationship, so too did malign external shifts (mainly Russia’s belligerent policies as evidenced by the Russo-Georgian conflict in 2008 and Russo-Ukrainian conflict in 2014) in the threat environment contribute to the renewed relevance of nuclear weapons in the relationship.

So, while the Biden administration will certainly have the choice of explicitly emphasizing or de-emphasizing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. defense strategy, in another sense, states like Russia, China, and North Korea will get a vote in just how much is asked of U.S. nuclear deterrence and assurance policies, and the requisite force posture needed to accomplish those policies. For instance, if there were to be a major Russian-NATO conflict in the future, it would be advantageous for the United States and NATO overall if the conflict stayed conventional, the Alliance’s area of strength, given a long enough timeline for mobilization. Yet that same overall conventional advantage for NATO in a drawn-out conflict may incentivize Russia to employ, or threaten to employ, nuclear weapons early on in a conflict to deter a massive



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conventional Allied response. No matter how much the Biden administration may hope to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. defense strategy, the capabilities and behavior of opponents affects the value of U.S. nuclear forces.

The Biden administration may therefore attempt to reduce U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons by pursuing better relations with states like Russia, China, and North Korea – yet, as is evident by each state’s actions over only the past decade, such rapprochement will be extremely difficult considering the diametrically opposed national interests involved in each region. The Obama administration’s frustrated attempt to “reset” relations with Moscow is instructive.

Strengthened Regional Missile Defenses

The Obama administration also cited improved U.S. regional missile defenses as one reason the United States did not need to rely as heavily on U.S. nuclear weapons in its defense strategy. As stated in the 2010 *Ballistic Missile Defense Review*, “Against nuclear-armed states, regional deterrence will necessarily include a nuclear component (whether forward-deployed or not). But the role of U.S. nuclear weapons in these regional deterrence architectures can be reduced by increasing the role of missile defenses and other capabilities.”⁵ While the document does not explain in detail how regional missile defenses supported reducing U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons operationally, one can assume the Obama administration had in mind the contributions to deterrence of attack (deterrence by denial) made by systems such as Patriot, Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), and the Standard Missile family of interceptors.

For instance, to the extent U.S. regional missile defenses based in or near South Korea are perceived by North Korea as effective, the United States may be able to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in its regional strategy by introducing missile defense systems that contribute to deterring possible attacks by denying or frustrating a key possible North Korean tactic – missile strikes. This capability reduces the U.S. need to rely on a deterrence strategy based on credible punitive nuclear threats and more on deterring North Korean attacks via deterrence through conventional denial capabilities. In addition, regional missile defense assets can contribute to the necessary protection that allows the United States to surge its considerable conventional forces into a region in the midst of a conflict – thus reducing the possible incentive to consider employing nuclear weapons while under attack to prevent being overrun.

Should the Biden administration seek to follow the Obama administration’s example by reducing reliance on nuclear weapons through strengthening regional U.S. missile defenses, there are a number of opportunities available. Japan, for example, is considering deploying two Aegis ships with the Standard Missile system onboard that could contribute to deterring Chinese or North Korean missile attack – which, if successful in contributing to the deterrence of such attacks, would constitute reduced U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons to deter the same



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- although it would not eliminate the important role played by nuclear weapons in other areas.⁶ In addition, the United States can work with multiple NATO allies to integrate air and missile defense capabilities that could aid in deterring missile attack.⁷ Again, U.S. missile defense would not replace the role of nuclear weapons in deterring attack, but it would supplement the overall deterrence posture while raising the cost for escalation by the adversary.

Increasingly-capable regional missile defenses may also provide a way for the Biden administration to reduce U.S. reliance on nuclear forces while refraining from nuclear policies that allies have reportedly opposed in the past, such as the United States issuing a nuclear “no first use” policy.⁸ For example, senior Obama administration officials have confirmed that multiple allies were alarmed to learn the United States was considering a nuclear “no first use” policy.⁹ Yet, as one example, after the Trump administration released its 2018 NPR, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement that said it “highly appreciate[d]” the NPR.¹⁰ For states like Japan that may have significant reservations about U.S. nuclear weapon reductions or changes in declaratory policy, increased regional missile defense cooperation may provide a way to reassure allies while also making a possible step toward the Biden administration goal of reducing reliance on U.S. nuclear weapons in its defense strategy.

Improved Conventional Forces

The final reason the Obama administration believed it could safely reduce reliance on nuclear weapons in U.S. defense strategy was the widespread expectation that U.S. conventional force dominance meant that the United States could now address virtually all serious contemporary security threats with conventional forces alone. As stated in the 2010 NPR, “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.”¹¹ As the Obama administration sought to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons by increasing the capability and perceived effectiveness of conventional U.S. forces - thus improving its potential deterrent effects - it joined a long and bipartisan line of presidential administrations that sought the same.

For example, as Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger stated in 1975, “What is more, to the extent that concern about the nuclear threshold [of employment] is more than hypothetical, the most effective way of keeping the threshold high is to increase the effectiveness and readiness of our non-nuclear forces. History, I believe, will show that on those rare occasions when the use of nuclear weapons was seriously considered in the past thirty years, it was because of the impression that adequate conventional forces were not available to achieve the desired objectives.”¹² To the extent therefore that conventional weapons can deter conflict that could escalate into nuclear use, improved conventional forces may facilitate the reduced reliance on nuclear weapons in U.S. strategy.



As another example, Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger stated, “Since we cannot match our opponents man for man or system for system, our focus is on maintaining our forces’ technological edge -- and on using it to our best advantage. For example, technologies are in hand that can increase the capability and effectiveness of our conventional forces to such a degree that we may be able to reduce significantly our reliance on nonstrategic nuclear weapons.”¹³ Advanced conventional weapons, in Weinberger’s reckoning, were useful for, “...halt[ing] an attack and restor[ing] the peace by employing forces that do not require escalating the conflict to new dimensions of warfare... It is expensive for us to maintain this technological edge; however, it is essential if we are to avoid either the costs incurred by greatly expanded conventional forces or the risk of early reliance on nuclear weapons.”¹⁴

Paradoxically however, an increased reliance on U.S. conventional forces to reduce the role of nuclear weapons may in fact cause states like China, Russia, and North Korea – who are conventionally inferior – to rely more heavily on their nuclear arsenals in what they may perceive to be an unwinnable conventional conflict with the United States. If this is the case, then it is even more essential that the United States retain a nuclear arsenal that is perceived by opponents, even desperate opponents losing a conventional conflict, to be not worth confronting. Thus, while conventional weapons cannot substitute for nuclear weapons – either in physical effects or in deterrence considerations – they can complement nuclear weapons in U.S. defense strategy, and in certain circumstances, may allow the United States to rely less on the employment or threatened employment of nuclear weapons for deterrence, assurance, and damage limitation purposes.

To the extent that the United States can implement its vision of “long range fires” – conventional weapons that can defeat key capabilities that enable an adversary’s anti-access area-denial strategy – it may be able to reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons both in deterring a conflict from ever beginning, and in reducing the perceived need to resort to nuclear employment in certain extreme circumstances. Advanced conventional weapons that can have strategic effect can shift the burden of nuclear escalation on to a potential adversary by demonstrating that the United States can defend its interests at the conventional level, while the U.S. nuclear arsenal presents a credible threat of imposing greater costs than the benefits an adversary could hope to gain by escalating to nuclear employment.

Reducing Reliance While Others Increase Theirs

While the Biden administration may satisfy itself by attempting to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. defense policy by developing and producing additional regional missile defenses and advanced conventional weapons, it will likely face pressure to adopt more radical policies to demonstrate its commitment to reducing the salience of U.S. nuclear weapons – such as adopting a policy of nuclear “no first use” or eliminating intercontinental ballistic missiles



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(ICBMs) from the nuclear Triad. As discussed, such actions would likely alarm allies and partners – even more so when states like Russia, China, and North Korea are increasing the salience of their nuclear arsenals in their military strategies.

As then-Vice President Biden acknowledged in 2017, “While we [the United States] have shifted our security doctrine away from our nuclear arsenal, they [Russians] have moved to rely more heavily on theirs.”¹⁵ Similarly, the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review noted that, “While the United States has continued to reduce the number and salience of nuclear weapons, others, including Russia and China, have moved in the opposite direction. They have added new types of nuclear capabilities to their arsenals, increased the salience of nuclear forces in their strategies and plans, and engaged in increasingly aggressive behavior...”¹⁶ The 2018 NPR also noted the increasing salience of nuclear weapons in North Korea’s military strategy.¹⁷

The increased prominence of nuclear weapons in Russian, Chinese, and North Korean military strategy is further supported by their growing nuclear arsenals – with Russia’s projected increase primarily concentrated in shorter-range non-strategic nuclear weapons, and China’s and North Korea’s projected increases reportedly originating from growth in their intercontinental-range nuclear-armed missiles.¹⁸ All three states are also seeking to improve their conventional forces as well, but the pace and size of their projected nuclear arsenal buildup indicates no less than nuclear forces retaining a fundamental role in their military strategies, and likely indicates a more expansive role.

Given the obvious divergence between the U.S. stated goal of reducing reliance on nuclear weapons, and Russian, Chinese, and North Korean actions to the contrary, some may respond that the difference can work to the U.S. advantage. They may argue that the United States will have a more credible moral standing to oppose others’ increasing reliance on nuclear weapons if it reduces its own – setting an example for others to follow and thus increasing the possibility for garnering international support to pressure the non-conforming states.

It is not clear though why the United States, which has transparently reduced its nuclear forces about 85% since the height of the Cold War and led the world in nonproliferation efforts, should need any more credibility to rally international pressure against Russia, China, and North Korea – who, it should be noted, have shown no tendency to shift their despotic policies despite the international outcry against them.

The example of China serves as case in point. Post-Cold War, the United States, Great Britain, France, and Russia all substantially reduced their nuclear forces, while China steadily increased – and still increases – the size and capabilities of its nuclear forces. Meanwhile, the United States led the world in nonproliferation efforts like Nunn-Lugar programs, the Proliferation Security Initiative, and Nuclear Security Summits. The United States also signed the Moscow and New START Treaties, and further encouraged dialogue on important nuclear issues through efforts



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like the Creating the Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND). Yet even after repeated good-faith efforts to reduce the role and number of nuclear weapons in its defense strategy, the international community is no closer to making progress halting – or even slowing down – Chinese nuclear expansion. Thus, the burden of proof lies on those who support further U.S. nuclear reductions or policies such as nuclear “no first use” to explain *precisely* how these efforts will induce Chinese cooperation when past efforts have not.

Conclusion

The Biden administration clearly seeks to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. defense strategy, just as the Obama administration did. The Obama administration believed three main factors allowed it to safely reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. defense strategy: benign shifts in the threat environment, the increased capabilities and availability of regional missile defenses, and more capable conventional forces. While shifting threat perceptions might have temporarily allowed the Obama administration to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. defense strategy, aggressive Russian and Chinese behavior soon required the U.S. nuclear arsenal to return to great relevance – demonstrating that U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons must be shaped in part by the capabilities and actions of others. Increasingly-capable regional missile defenses and long-range conventional weapons supplemented U.S. nuclear forces in deterring, and if needed, could aid in limiting damage in a conflict and relieving some of the burden placed on nuclear weapons. Yet even these increases in missile defense and advanced conventional weapons only marginally reduced the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. defense strategy. U.S. nuclear capabilities remain the likely key to preventing opponents’ nuclear escalation.

Given past experience, it is clear that states like Russia, China, and North Korea make their own nuclear policies based on their threat perceptions, among other factors – not in some mechanical action-reaction dynamic in response to their perception of how much the United States values its nuclear arsenal. Nor do they refrain from actions because the United States has done so. Any U.S. reduction in its reliance on its nuclear arsenal does not necessarily equate to a lowering of tensions between the United States and others, nor does it seem to greatly affect the doctrinal choices of others. Indeed, U.S. conventional dominance following the Cold War appears to have been a factor in opponents’ placing greater emphasis on their nuclear arsenals. In addition, it is not clear that the United States needs to adopt any radical measures like eliminating ICBMs or adopting a nuclear “no first use” policy to shore up international support to pressure states like Russia, China, and North Korea – given how little these states respond to international pressure on any number of other issues which are even more pressing and receive greater focus in the news.

The U.S. drive to reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons in its defense strategy is like any other aspirational goal – it is subject to the conditions of the security environment. Recent history



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demonstrates that U.S. commitment to a goal is not sufficient to change the trajectory of the military doctrines of states like Russia, China, or North Korea – nor does it appear to be sufficient to induce strong enough international support to do the same. Thus, while there may be some U.S. opportunities to support increased regional missile defense and advanced conventional forces, these moves could contribute to unintended secondary effects and even increased reliance on nuclear weapons by potential adversaries. As the past 30 years of the post-Cold War era have demonstrated, reliance on nuclear weapons is at least as much, if not more, affected by the threat perceptions and capabilities of others as it is by U.S. policy itself.

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