ANALYSIS

THE 1991-1992 PRESIDENTIAL NUCLEAR INITIATIVES AND THE CASCADING EFFECTS ON U.S. ALLIANCES

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Introduction

The end of the Cold War was marked by the rapid transformation of political relations between the United States and the Soviet Union that resulted in radical changes to each of their nuclear postures. The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) of 1991-1992 were radical in their scope (affecting both non-strategic and strategic nuclear forces), size (thousands of warheads), and nature (unilateral commitments with calls for reciprocal action). President George H. W. Bush saw the wholly transformed threat environment as an opportunity to adjust the U.S. nuclear posture in ways that many of his senior advisors already favored and which, if done quickly, could positively influence Soviet / Russian leadership decisions on their force posture. At the time, U.S. allies were generally quite supportive of the PNIs and hoped the vast nuclear reductions could further solidify improved political relations with Russia and usher in a "peace dividend" of fiscal savings.

Today, however, the roles have largely reversed between the United States and its allies. Instead of the United States leading a coalition of allies together through a dynamic security environment, allies are becoming increasingly vocal in their dissatisfaction with the U.S. commitment to maintaining the status quo regarding its nuclear posture. Where does this current inherent resistance to change originate from? Undoubtedly, some part of the U.S. reluctance to increase the capability or size of its nuclear forces can be attributed to the lingering post-Cold War attitude that nuclear weapons are increasingly irrelevant—an attitude Beijing and Moscow quite apparently do not share. The PNIs were a product, in part, of this U.S. perception and are thus worth studying for two reasons: first, how the PNIs affected U.S. allies in the years immediately following their announcement, and second, what the effects of the PNIs were on U.S. alliances over the long term, up to today.

This article therefore proceeds in four main parts. First, it offers a brief summary of the main elements of the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives and the reasons why U.S. officials supported these initiatives. Second, it examines how U.S. allies reacted to the PNIs when they were first implemented. Third, it examines what the PNIs' effects over the longer term with special emphasis on U.S. options entering the increasingly dangerous international security environment. Fourth and finally, this article offers a brief set of conclusions and lessons learned from a study of the PNIs and their application for U.S. officials today.

The Context and Substance of the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives

The months leading up to the first Presidential Nuclear Initiative in September 1991 were tumultuous in the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. Indeed, as detailed in Susan Koch's foundational study of the PNIs, states were, in quick succession, declaring their independence from the Soviet Union and finding themselves burdened with loads of Soviet military equipment, even nuclear weapons, on their now-sovereign territory.[1] Since many of these nuclear weapons were designed for either the battlefield (landmines, artillery) or short-range engagements (tactical missiles), their relative size, weight, and transportability—plus the political instability of newly independent states—caused U.S. officials to worry about the possibility of "loose nukes" falling into the hands of terrorists or criminals on the black market. These concerns, plus the possibility of rogue Soviet military units with access to nuclear weapons, led President George H. W. Bush and his advisors to seek ways to encourage the consolidation and security of Soviet nuclear weapons. On September 27, 1991, President Bush announced in a television address to the nation a sweeping series of actions that were meant to publicly reassure and strengthen Soviet leaders against hardliners in their ranks towards a path of nuclear reductions and security, while privately accomplishing posture adjustments the United States was willing to undertake unilaterally, irrespective of the Soviet response.

The September 1991 PNI eliminated ground launched tactical nuclear weapons; withdrew tactical nuclear weapons from the Navy and eliminated all but the nuclear-armed Tomahawk (TLAM-N); de-alerted all strategic bombers; de-alerted Minuteman II missiles slated for elimination under the START Treaty; cancelled the mobility programs for the Peacekeeper and Small ICBMs; cancelled the short-range attack missile II (SRAM-II); and consolidated nuclear command and control under the newly formed United States Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM).[2] Additionally, President Bush called on the Soviet Union to work with the United States to eliminate ICBMs with multiple warheads and permit the "limited deployment" of non-nuclear defenses to protect against "limited ballistic missile strikes, whatever their source…"[3] The Soviet Union's response was generally positive and it undertook reciprocal action on most of President Bush's initiatives relating to non-strategic and strategic nuclear weapons.[4]

A little less than three months after President Bush's September 1991 announcement, the Soviet Union ceased to exist on December 25, 1991, with the Russian Federation taking

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[1] For a detailed account of the events leading up to both the September 1991 and January 1992 PNI announcements, see, Susan J. Koch, *The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991-1992* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2012), pp. 1-22, available at https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/documents/casestudies/cswmd_casestudy-5.pdf.

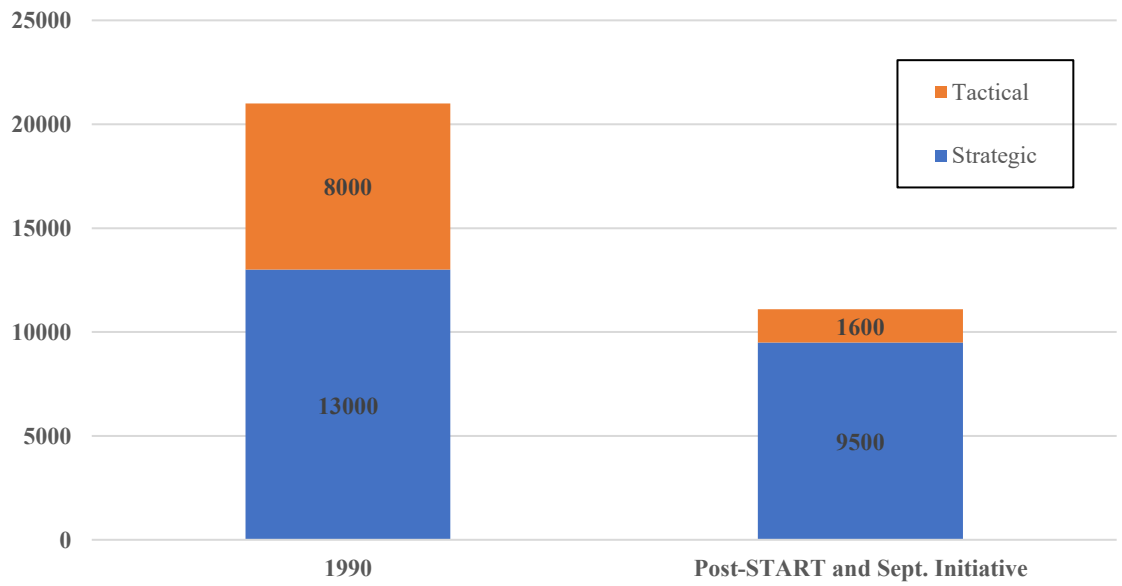
[2] For more details, see presentation of Greg Schulte, *President's Nuclear Initiatives* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1992), available at https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/NCB/09-F-0134_President's_Nuclear_Initiative.pdf.

[3] Koch, *The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives*, op. cit., p. 26.

[4] Ibid., pp. 14-17.

its place. President Gorbachev resigned and President Yeltsin became Russia's leader, immediately receiving an invitation to meet President Bush in the United States to discuss further steps related to nuclear weapons.[5] On January 28, 1992, President Bush outlined in his State of the Union address some additional steps the United States was taking unilaterally, but again, with a call for reciprocal action from Russia. What became known as PNI II concerned strategic nuclear forces and ended production of the B-2 bomber at 20, cancelled the Small ICBM program entirely, ceased production of the Advanced Cruise Missile, ceased production of the Peacekeeper missile, and ceased production of the W-88 warhead for the Trident SLBM.[6] In response, President Yeltsin re-affirmed support for President Gorbachev's actions and further clarified how Russia would implement its unilateral proposals.[7] Additionally, President Yeltsin announced the cessation of production of Backfire and Blackjack bombers, current air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs) and long-range sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs), among other actions.[8]

Figure 1. Total U.S. Nuclear Warheads[9]



In summary, the scope and scale of U.S. actions under the PNIs was, and remains, unprecedented. As seen in Figure 1, after 1990, U.S. non-strategic (or tactical) nuclear weapons were cut unilaterally by over 75% (with many of the remaining placed in storage) while strategic nuclear weapons were cut by about 25%. The difference would have

[5] Ibid., p. 18.

[6] Schulte, *The President's Initiatives*, op. cit., p. 5.

[7] For more details, see, Koch, *The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives*, op. cit., pp. 19-21, 34-39.

[8] Loc cit.

[9] Data and labels adapted from chart in Schulte, *The President's Initiatives*, op. cit., p. 7.

appeared even starker to allies at the time since only a few years before the PNIs, in 1987, the United States eliminated an entire class of weapons deployed in Europe under the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

These totals are also notable when compared to what the United States assessed at the time were the Soviet Union's totals: 17,000 tactical nuclear warheads, of which approximately 10,000 would be destroyed and 2,000 placed in storage if the Soviets acted reciprocally to the United States.[10] Within only a few years, however, U.S. officials were voicing their doubts publicly that Russia was following through on its commitments.[11] Nevertheless, U.S. and allied officials generally believed that improved political relations with Russia was the highest priority in the immediate post-Cold War era and a welcome reprieve from the tensions that plagued the Cold War only a few years earlier.

Immediate Allied Reactions

U.S. allies in NATO were supportive of reductions in U.S. non-strategic weapons deployed in Europe, due in part to pressure from their domestic constituencies, and their preferences led to changes in the U.S. nuclear posture even before the PNIs. As documented by Susan Koch, "The NATO Allies… had begun discussing withdrawal of those [non-strategic] forces after the fall of the Warsaw Pact. Those changing Allied views led directly to President Bush's May 1990 decision to cancel Follow-On to Lance and nuclear artillery warhead modernization, and to the July 1990 NATO Summit call for a negotiated elimination of short-range nuclear artillery in Europe."[12] Thus, NATO allies were already primed for further U.S. action on non-strategic nuclear weapons when President Bush made his announcements of the PNIs.

Indeed, as Koch points out, NATO's Nuclear Planning Group decided in October 1991, shortly after the first PNI announcement in September 1991, that it would reduce the number of nuclear gravity bombs reportedly from 1,400 to 700.[13] This action, when paired with the U.S. elimination of intermediate-range nuclear forces under the INF Treaty, and the elimination of ground-launched non-strategic nuclear forces under the September PNI, left the United States with only a greatly reduced number of dual-capable aircraft delivered nuclear gravity bombs forward-deployed in Europe. In Asia, the effects were even more pronounced—a complete removal of all forward-deployed nuclear weapons from South Korea.[14] As with NATO allies in Europe, South Korea's political leaders supported and even

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[10] Dick Cheney, as quoted in, "Press Briefing," *Department of Defense*, September 28, 1991, p. 18, available at https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/NCB/09-F-0134_Dick_Cheney_Press_Briefing.pdf.

[11] Koch, *The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives*, op. cit., p. 21.

[12] Susan J. Koch, *The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991-1992* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2012), p. 6, available at https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/documents/casestudies/cswmd_casestudy-5.pdf.

[13] Koch, *The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives*, op. cit., pp. 11-12.

[14] South Korean President Roh announced in December 1991 that "there does not exist any nuclear weapons whatsoever, anywhere in the Republic of Korea." James Kim, "Roh Declares South Korea is Free of Nuclear Weapons," *UPI.com*, December 18, 1991, available at https://www.upi.com/Archives/1991/12/18/Roh-declares-South-Korea-is-free-of-nuclear-weapons/6592693032400/.; See also, Dick Cheney, *President's Initiative and Korea* (Washington, D.C.:

touted the U.S. decision to withdraw the weapons, although recently declassified documents indicate they may have sought "conventional enhancements" to offset the removal of nuclear weapons.[15]

Long Term Effects of the PNIs

As U.S. officials grappled with the sweeping changes in the immediate post-Cold War, they made a conscious effort to effect prudent change, but they also stressed the importance of not being swept up in the moment and expecting the present good relations with Russia would necessarily become permanent. As Secretary of Defense Cheney stated at the time:

> I want to emphasize that as we have put forward a sweeping package here and moved to dramatically change our overall nuclear posture, that here in the Department [of Defense] we have carefully considered the consequences of these reductions from the standpoint of being able to maintain the nation's security. I am absolutely confident, based upon the work that we've done, that we can have confidence that our security and that of our allies is protected, even with these initiatives. That we will retain sufficient nuclear forces, and that we are committed to keeping them up to date and effective. The world has changed, but insurance is still a good idea. Under this plan, we believe we will have enough.[16]

Thus, U.S. officials generally struck a cautiously optimistic tone in the years after the PNIs about future military requirements, but, as seen below, not all of their assumptions held up over the long term.

ADM David Jeremiah, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1992, provided one of the most complete explanations about U.S. nuclear force posture changes and the assumptions driving them. Testifying before Congress, he stated:

> But at the same time, I also want to assure you that we carefully examined the risk to our overall national security before recommending such sweeping changes. We believe that we can safely project a requirement for only [deleted] weapons, and possibly as few as 6,300 [deleted] because:
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> It is no longer feasible for the former Soviet Union to launch a massive conventional attack on Western Europe;

Department of State, October 15, 1991), pp. 1-4, available at https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/MDR_Releases/FY18/FY18_Q1/The_Presidents_Initiative_10Oct1991.pdf.

[15] Paul Wolfowitz, *Consultations in Seoul* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, November 1, 1991), p. 2, available at https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/MDR_Releases/FY18/FY18_Q1/Consultation_1Nov1991.pdf.

[16] Dick Cheney, as quoted in, "Press Briefing," *Department of Defense*, September 28, 1991, p. 4, available at https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/NCB/09-F-0134_Dick_Cheney_Press_Briefing.pdf.

> The demise of the former Soviet Union has reduced the number of strategic weapons and military sites we must hold at risk to achieve strategic deterrence;
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> The evolving geopolitical situation has allowed us to broadly reconsider our tactical nuclear weapon doctrine and targeting policy;
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> And Operation Desert Storm demonstrated the capability of advanced conventional munitions in holding targets at risk.
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> Furthermore, we think the planned reductions in stockpile size enable us to improve significantly the safety of the enduring stockpile. We are preferentially eliminating older weapons that don't possess the full suite of modern safety features.[17]

As the Soviet/Russian border receded away from NATO, and the newly independent states had not yet joined NATO, there was no apparent role for U.S. ground-based short-range non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe. This consideration, plus the promise of a safer and smaller arsenal, with all the attendant fiscal savings, made the PNIs relatively uncontroversial.

That does not mean, however, that there were no negative long term consequences due to the shift in the threat environment and U.S. thinking. Department of Energy officials, for instance, were among the first to note the importance of maintaining the full range of nuclear weapons development, testing, and production capabilities. As one official reflected on the changed international environment and smaller U.S. nuclear posture, "… for the first time since 1945, the United States is not building any new nuclear weapons. The challenge this presents is to find ways to reduce costs, which we are doing, while at the same time maintaining a viable research, development, testing, and production capability, which will service a decreasing, but nonetheless vital stockpile of nuclear weapons."[18] Another Department of Energy official echoed this sentiment, stating, "As long as we rely on nuclear weapons for deterrence, it is an absolute necessity that our remaining nuclear stockpile be supported by a fully capable nuclear weapons complex that can perform all the tasks associated with maintaining a nuclear stockpile, from the design and testing stages, through producing nuclear materials and warheads and fixing problems as they occur, to dismantling the warheads once they have been retired."[19]

Yet the allure of financial savings proved too tempting for Congress which began cutting back DOE programs to the point where officials in charge of nuclear weapons production were publicly warning the cuts were too much too soon. As Assistant Secretary for Defense Programs Richard Claytor testified, "Indeed, I think we have cut back substantially and I

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[17] ADM David E. Jeremiah, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as quoted in, U.S. House of Representatives, *Hearings on National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1993—H.R. 5006 and Oversight of Previously Authorized Programs* (Washington, D.C.: Committee on Armed Services, April 30, 1992), p. 1005.

[18] Richard A. Claytor, as quoted in, U.S. House of Representatives, *Energy and Water Development Appropriations for 1993* (Washington, D.C.: Committee on Appropriations, March 10, 1992), p. 1490.

[19] Robert B. Barker, as quoted in, Ibid., p. 1605.

would even say we might be teetering on the brink of losing our nuclear competence."[20] When asked by then-Representative Jon Kyl to elaborate on "losing our nuclear competence," Claytor responded that his worries were not confined only to nuclear weapon testing and laboratory experiments: "… we really are cutting back our production work force such that if we had to get into heavy production of a weapon it would probably take us a couple years to get up speed again. We can deal with individual problems, small problems. We simply don't have capability to get back into quick production right now. We are down to that kind of level."[21]

Clearly the PNIs are not alone responsible for the long-term deterioration of the U.S. nuclear infrastructure, including its workforce, but they are representative of how major changes in the U.S. nuclear force posture can produce unintended consequences. Specifically, some of the assumptions behind the PNIs, such as an improved political climate and diminished adversary military capabilities, proved transient. Today, the factors that combined at the right time and place in history to produce the PNIs are not present between the United States, Russia, and China. But, much like the late Cold War, allies are asking the United States to alter its nuclear posture in response to a dramatically changed threat environment. So far, the United States has done little in that respect, whether because of infrastructure constraints or the lack of political will.

The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives were among the most consequential arms control efforts of the Cold War and its immediate aftermath—not simply because they fundamentally reshaped the U.S. nuclear force posture, but also because they removed capabilities and options in U.S. nuclear strategy, both for deterrence and extended deterrence. With only one shorter-range forward based non-strategic nuclear capability in its arsenal, the U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal must now bear a greater extended deterrence burden in defense of its allies. The disparity in number and types between the U.S. non-strategic nuclear arsenal and Russia's non-strategic nuclear arsenal is concerning for the United States and its allies as Russia's coercive nuclear threats intensify. Indeed, it is an open question whether allies will perceive as credible a U.S. nuclear strategy that, by necessity, may resort to strategic nuclear employment in response to Russian non-strategic nuclear employment. The lack of U.S. non-strategic nuclear options in the Indo-Pacific only worsens the outlook for allies there, especially if, as seems likely, the United States will be relying more on its strategic nuclear arsenal to deter opportunistic aggression during a future potential conflict with Russia or China. And, to make matters even worse, U.S. conventional forces are not postured for two major regional wars overseas, much less in two distinct and geographically distant theaters.

The non-strategic nuclear capabilities covered under the PNIs were critical to extended deterrence and allied assurance during the Cold War, but as the threat they were built to deter disintegrated, so too did their role in U.S. nuclear strategy. Regrettably for the United

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[20] Richard Claytor, as quoted in, U.S. House of Representatives, *Hearings on National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1993—H.R. 5006 and Oversight of Previously Authorized Programs* (Washington, D.C.: Committee on Armed Services, April 30, 1992), p. 1012.

[21] Ibid., p. 1013.

States and its allies however, their hopes for an enduring benign threat environment lasted longer than merited given the rapid pace of growing adversary nuclear threats. Now, with an aging nuclear infrastructure and no new non-strategic nuclear capability in the program of record until perhaps the mid-2030s, the United States faces a crisis of allied confidence in U.S. extended deterrence threats at a time when it is least able to offer credible assurances to strengthen its alliances.

For much of the Cold War, the United States forward deployed shorter-range nuclear weapons overseas to fulfill multiple roles, including: extending deterrence on behalf of allies, compensating for conventional inferiority, and assuring allies of U.S. credibility as a security partner. Today, allies once again see U.S. extended deterrence and assurance as irreplaceable, especially in the face of conventionally superior adversaries—but the long-lasting effects of the PNIs effectively prevents the United States from strengthening its regional nuclear deterrence capabilities in a timely manner. Given Russia's focused modernization and buildup of its theater nuclear capabilities and China's increasing commitment to the same, the relative lack of U.S. counters to these growing threats will be a growing concern for allies. In short, the gap between what is needed for U.S. extended deterrence credibility and what the United States can provide will widen over the next decade as adversary threats continue apace and the United States struggles to stand up a single regional nuclear program, SLCM-N—the culmination of many unintended consequences born of the PNIs.

Conclusion

This article's purpose is not to render a net assessment of whether the PNIs on balance improved U.S. and allied security, it treats the PNIs as historical events and assesses their short term and long term impacts on the United States and its allies. In that sense the results are mixed. Certainly the removal and elimination of many U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe satisfied allies, produced fiscal savings, and strengthened the hand of democratic forces in Russia against the hardliners. On the other hand, the assumptions behind the PNIs about the international threat environment proved transient. Even while the security environment changed for the worse, the United States did not modernize its nuclear infrastructure accordingly—hopeful that better political relations would return, and conventional weapons could take on a greater role for deterrence.

U.S. allies were among the first to signal to the United States that these factors did not materialize as hoped and changes were necessary. Recent commentary on NATO's nuclear deterrence requirements, and the need for additional and more capable options, illustrates one of the unintended consequences of the PNIs.[22] At the time, no newly independent state that was once in the Warsaw Pact had joined NATO, and alliance unity was assured. Over the

[22] See, for instance, Artur Kacprzyk, *NATO Nuclear Adaptation: Rationales for Expanding the Force Posture in Europe* (Warsaw, PL: The Polish Institute of International Affairs, November 2023), available at https://www.pism.pl/publications/nato-nuclear-adaptation-rationales-for-expanding-the-force-posture-in-europe.

next 30 years, however, former Warsaw Pact states joined NATO, even ones that bordered Russia, and they have sought changes to the U.S. nuclear posture—and yet, the requirement for anything more than nuclear gravity bombs delivered by DCA did not change.[23]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a U.S. report that helped lay the foundation for NATO's "dual track" decision, pursuing theater nuclear modernization simultaneously with renewed arms control negotiations with the Soviets, presented one of the more comprehensive assessments of the benefits of NATO theater nuclear modernization. In June 1978, President Jimmy Carter tasked an interagency group led by National Security Council staff to study how "possible increased long-range theater nuclear force capabilities" might impact the prospect of arms control discussions with the Soviet Union.[24] The interagency group submitted its report in response to Presidential Review Memorandum 38 and stated that DCA are limited in important ways that affect both deterrence and assurance: "The DCA in the theater nuclear role are subject to attrition while carrying out their conventional missions, and subject to further losses when penetrating Warsaw Pact air defenses while executing long-range missions."[25]

On the other hand, the report found that land-based theater nuclear force (TNF) had unique advantages that included presenting a visible manifestation of political will and alliance unity. Additionally, it stated that land-based TNF provided "… additional options which can prevent the enemy from predicting with confidence NATO's specific response, thus encouraging him to conclude that an unacceptable degree of risk would be involved regardless of the nature of his attack."[26] This insight is especially pertinent for U.S. and NATO officials today as nuclear gravity bombs delivered by DCA are the only NATO nuclear response option available to the Alliance—a direct consequence of the PNIs. As such, while Russia may not be able to predict with certainty whether NATO would respond to a particular provocation with nuclear weapons, or with how many if it did, Russia could however could easily anticipate it would likely involve DCA with gravity bombs and prepare accordingly. Russian confidence that it could predict (at least well enough) NATO's response to a Russian attack, and prepare itself in advance, would likely be detrimental to deterrence and potentially the source for allied concern.

Thus, one important lesson from the PNIs for U.S. and allied officials is that while nuclear reductions can, in some circumstances, satisfy allied requirements, they may inadvertently plant the seed for dissatisfaction in the future. This is not to say that nuclear reductions are

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[23] For example, Julian Borger, "Poland Suggests Hosting US Nuclear Weapons amid Growing Fears of Putin's Threats," *The Guardian*, October 5, 2022, available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/05/poland-us-nuclear-wars-russia-putin-ukraine.

[24] Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Presidential Review Memorandum / NSC-38: Long Range Theater Nuclear Capabilities and Arms Control* (Washington, D.C.: NSC, June 22, 1978), available at https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/pdf_documents/assets/documents/memorandums/prm38.pdf.

[25] National Security Council, *PRM 38, Section II: Possible Long Range Theater Nuclear Modernization* (Washington, D.C.: NSC, August 16, 1978), p. 12, available at https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/NCB/05-F-0738_DOC_16C_final_response-OCRD.pdf.

[26] Ibid, p. 16.

therefore never advisable, only that it is difficult to foresee how the factors that indicated nuclear reductions might be in the U.S. national interest at one point in time might change radically in the opposite direction at another point in time. The PNIs eliminated or restricted many U.S. nuclear options that were justifiably seen as unnecessary at the time, and many officials thought that if changes were necessary in the future, then the modernized U.S. nuclear infrastructure could produce the required capabilities. Instead, that assumption proved false and the United States today is hampered by decisions made 30 years ago—limiting its ability to adapt to shifting deterrence, extended deterrence, and assurance requirements. Today, U.S. strategic nuclear forces bear a far greater extended deterrence burden due to the relative lack of regional nuclear systems—a capabilities gap that widens every day as Russia and China improve and increase their non-strategic nuclear arsenals and allies perceive a growing need for more credible U.S. extended deterrence threats.

Naturally, this leads to a second "lesson learned" from the PNIs which is that U.S. officials should place a priority on building adaptability, and retaining that adaptability, in the U.S. nuclear infrastructure. NATO allies greatly valued the diversity of options provided by U.S. theater nuclear forces and they proved invaluable for both extended deterrence and the conclusion of arms control agreements. Indeed, the bipartisan and consensus report of the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission recognized this insight and recommended modifications to the U.S. theater nuclear force posture to "address allied concerns regarding extended deterrence."[27] To aid in that effort, the Commission also recommended that the Department of Defense and Department of Energy / National Nuclear Security Administration "urgently expand strategic infrastructure" so that the infrastructure can "respond to emerging requirements in a timely fashion."[28]

As noted above, however, the United States cannot currently respond rapidly to urgent calls for major modifications to the U.S. nuclear force posture. The PNIs, a perceived more benign threat environment, and the allure of a "peace dividend" of fiscal savings all combined to cut back on the U.S. nuclear infrastructure which leaves the United States unable to adjust its nuclear forces to meet dynamic allied extended deterrence and assurance requirements. Indeed, over 30 years since the PNIs, the Administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration has described how the U.S. nuclear infrastructure remains "fragile," making current modernization programs "difficult to produce."[29]

One of the more significant consequences of a reduced U.S. nuclear infrastructure is the lack of margin to meet increased allied extended deterrence and assurance requirements in response to a shift in threat perceptions. For instance, China's "breathtaking" nuclear

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[27] Madelyn R. Creedon and Jon L. Kyl, Chair and Vice Chair, *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Senate Armed Services Committee, 2023), p. 48, available at https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/americas_strategic_posture_the_final_report_of_the_congressional_commission_on_the_strategic_posture_of_the_united_states.pdf.

[28] Ibid., p. 60.

[29] Jill Hruby, "NNSA Administrator Jill Hruby Remarks at Strategic Weapons in the 21st Century Symposium," *Department of Energy*, April 18, 2024, available at https://www.energy.gov/nnsa/articles/nnsa-administrator-jill-hruby-remarks-strategic-weapons-21st-century-symposium.

breakout took just a few years to manifest itself—but since the United States did not anticipate this development when it was planning its future nuclear force requirements in 2010, and had no margin in its nuclear infrastructure, it is forced to build capabilities such as the nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile in a manner that does not interfere with current modernization efforts, pushing SLCM-N till a 2034 deployment date.[30] One of the advantages of the short-range non-strategic nuclear weapons that were eliminated by the PNIs is that they were more easily deployable on relatively short notice—and thus could be shifted overseas based on changed allied threat perceptions.

As the United States develops its nuclear deterrence requirements to meet the emerging two nuclear peer threat environment, the prospect of major nuclear reductions in concert with either Russia or China appears incredibly unlikely. Nevertheless, a close study of the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives can yield valuable insights for U.S. and allied officials seeking to improve their security against growing threats. The U.S. and allied response will almost certainly produce unintended consequences in a future threat environment that nobody can predict with certainty. What the PNIs demonstrate, however, is the value of adaptability to meet unexpected requirements. The challenge, however, is retaining adaptability when it seems the least necessary—when the requirements for flexibility and responsiveness appear too costly and anachronistic. Even though the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives were the products of a far different time and security environment, their effects still linger today, offering lessons for those U.S. and allied officials willing to learn from them.

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[30] On the "breathtaking" pace of China's nuclear breakout as assessed by then-Commander of United States Strategic Command, ADM Charles Richard, see, David Vergun, "China, Russia Pose Strategic Challenges for U.S., Allies, Admiral Says," *Defense.gov*, August 12, 2021, available at https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2729519/china-russia-pose-strategic-challenges-for-us-allies-admiral-says/.; On the unanticipated nature of China's nuclear developments, see, Creedon and Kyl, *America's Strategic Posture*, op. cit., p. 38.; and, on SLCM-N's initial operational capability date, see, Hruby, "NNSA Administrator Jill Hruby Remarks at Strategic Weapons in the 21st Century Symposium," op. cit.