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Toward an Alternative Strategic Security Posture

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On December 12, the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States released its interim report.¹ The commission is charged with guiding policy for a strategic posture for the United States that meets today's security needs. This guidance will define the future of U.S. strategic nuclear, strategic conventional, and strategic defense forces.

Currently, there is no consensus in Congress on an appropriate strategic posture. As an interim report, the commission's tentative recommendations do not provide such a consensus. However, the report does describe an alternative policy that would recognize the essential role of nuclear weapons in providing for U.S. security while establishing a defense-oriented strategic posture and seeking the circumstance where comprehensive nuclear disarmament becomes a real possibility.

The final report is due on April 1, 2009. If the tentative and general recommendations in the interim report can be translated into this alternative strategic policy, then a strategic posture that is broadly supported in Congress should result.

Global Nuclear Disarmament. Individuals both within the commission and outside it fervently desire to rid the world of nuclear weapons.² The commission recognizes, however, that this goal is "extremely difficult to attain and would require a fundamental transformation of the world political order."³ This means those favoring nuclear disarmament have recognized that their preferred outcome is not appropriate under present circumstances and that there is no direct path to nuclear disarmament

at this time. Implicit in this understanding is that these same individuals will abandon unilateral steps aimed at atrophying the U.S. nuclear weapons infrastructure. They will, for example, have to abandon immediate steps to de-alert U.S. nuclear forces, cease efforts to curtail all programs for modernizing the nuclear force, put off ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and cease efforts to impose changes on the declared policy governing the use of U.S. nuclear weapons.

Strategic Defenses, Conventional Superiority, and the Prospect of Nuclear Disarmament. The commission's recommendations regarding global nuclear disarmament are not only qualified; they are conditioned on taking other steps regarding the broader strategic posture of the U.S. Included in these are steps to field robust missile defenses and preserve U.S. conventional superiority. In this context, those who strongly favor nuclear disarmament should recognize that robust strategic defensive measures—including ballistic missile defenses—and conventional superiority can create a circumstance where nuclear disarmament is appropriate.

In this context, the commission should support a longer-term approach for strengthening strategic defenses and strategic conventional forces, along with select steps for nuclear modernization, that

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recognizes that neither is provocative under the right circumstances. This option would use U.S. diplomacy to convince other states (starting with China and Russia) that a “protect and defend” strategy will serve their interests as much as those of the U.S.

Such an effort should encourage the principle of non-aggression and reducing and ultimately eliminating those strategic weapons that pose the greatest threat to civilian populations, vital national institutions, and infrastructure. This policy would start by focusing on controlling high-yield nuclear weapons that are mounted on inaccurate delivery systems and offer little or no defensive value. For its part, the U.S. should that produce lower-yield weapons mounted on highly accurate delivery systems and hold at risk those weapons that pose a threat of widespread destruction to itself and its allies. While nothing is certain, the adoption of fundamentally defensive strategies by these three nations may lead to a direct path to nuclear disarmament.

Strengthening Strategic Defenses. Regarding strategic defenses specifically, the interim report states, “Missile defenses appropriate to defend against a rogue nuclear nation could serve a damage-limiting and stabilizing role in the US strategic posture, assuming such defenses are perceived as being effective enough to at least sow doubts in the minds of potential attackers that such an attack would succeed.”⁴ Limiting the strategic defensive posture to missile defenses, however, is too narrow. Accordingly, the final report should expand this recommendation to cover the other means of delivering strategic attacks on the U.S. and its allies.

Further, the commission warns against fielding defenses that might provoke China and Russia. This point should be qualified in two ways. First, it must identify an objective standard for what might provoke China or Russia. Otherwise, any claim of China’s or Russia’s provocation would be seen as legitimate. Second, the commission should describe how the diplomatic and arms control options toward both China and Russia described earlier will cause both to see America’s defensive measures as not provocative but stabilizing, reinforcing their security against attack.

An Alternative Vision. If the proponents of nuclear disarmament on the commission honor the qualifications and conditions described here and convince Congress to do likewise, then the proponents of fielding robust strategic defenses should offer an alternative vision for the U.S. strategic posture. This alternative vision points to a future circumstance where the U.S. and other states could consider direct steps to nuclear disarmament. It would represent the indirect path to global nuclear disarmament. All concerned, however, need to recognize that the consensus outlined here does not mean an end to the debate. It will only serve to define the parameters of the debate from here forward. The fact of the matter is that substantive differences of opinions regarding the appropriate strategic posture of the United States will remain.

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1. Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, “Interim Report,” December 11, 2008, at www.usip.org/strategic_posture/sprc_interim_report.pdf (December 17, 2008).
2. See George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, “A World Free of Nuclear Weapons,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2007, p. A-15; Shultz, Perry, Kissinger, and Nunn, “Toward a Nuclear-Free World,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 15, 2008, at http://online.wsj.com/public/article_print/SB120036422673589947.html (December 18, 2008).
3. Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, “Interim Report,” p. 9.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 10.