

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2274  
February 5, 2009

## Concerns on Proposed Reduction of U.S. Nuclear Stockpile to 1,000 Weapons

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According to press reports, President Obama has directed the U.S. to seek a future strategic arms control treaty with Russia that will reduce the U.S. nuclear stockpile to 1,000 weapons, an 80 percent reduction.<sup>1</sup> This leads to the question of how President Obama chose this number of 1,000. Unfortunately, circumstances make it clear that President Obama and his Administration have chosen this number arbitrarily.

When the U.S. undertakes an effort as sensitive and fundamental to its security as negotiating a strategic nuclear arms control treaty, it should do so on the basis of careful planning:

1. The President and his Administration must settle on a clear strategy and define the means by which the treaty will bolster that strategy;
2. This strategy must identify the military and political requirements the U.S. nuclear force must fulfill over the expected life of the treaty; and
3. Such a strategy must establish a clear means of verifying compliance with the expected treaty and have specific plans for enforcing the terms of the treaty during its implementation.

These are the fundamental standards for effective arms control.

**A Clear Lack of Planning.** When the press reports announcing the pending arms control treaty were published, President Obama had been office precisely 17 days. It is utterly implausible that he and his Administration have taken any of the planning steps necessary to implement such an ambi-

tious strategic nuclear arms control treaty. Obama's national security strategy, at a minimum, is months away from completion.

More importantly, there is no indication that the President has established the criteria for assuring the political and military utility of the U.S. nuclear stockpile and active arsenal that would remain in place following the ratification and execution of the planned treaty. Politically, it must be determined, among other things:

- How the remaining nuclear arsenal will increase stability and lessen the likelihood of strategic strikes against the U.S. and its allies,
- Whether the force will be based primarily on deterring strategic attacks by countering them or by relying on retaliatory strikes; and
- How to extend the U.S. nuclear umbrella for the protection of its allies.

On the military side, planning will determine what targets the U.S. nuclear force must hold at risk and whether both the weapons and their delivery systems will meet these targeting requirements. Finally, clear standards for verification and enforcement must be established.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/wm2274.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/wm2274.cfm)

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison  
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

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The Obama Administration has made no public assertion that any of these planning steps have been taken. What makes this lack of planning particularly disturbing is that there has been a torrent of recent reports that the state of the U.S. nuclear weapons infrastructure—including how the Air Force handles the weapons under its purview—is in decline.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, on October 28, 2008, Secretary of Defense Gates told an audience at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace that in his view the long-term prognosis for the nation's nuclear force was "bleak."<sup>3</sup>

### **Doubting the Utility of Nuclear Weapons?**

President Obama's apparent lack of concern over the management of the U.S. nuclear weapons infrastructure and arsenal—let alone the need to carefully prepare for arms control negotiations—leads to two conclusions:

1. The President sees the U.S. nuclear force as providing no national security, political, or military benefits; and
2. He would not be prepared to use nuclear weapons under any circumstance.

In this context, Obama's selection of the 1,000-weapon threshold for negotiations with Russia at least makes sense. He sees this figure as a round number that serves only as a marker along an intended path of U.S. unilateral nuclear disarmament. Proceeding down this path requires none of the planning the U.S. has undertaken in the past regarding nuclear arms control. If nuclear weapons

have no value, then any path to zero U.S. nuclear weapons is acceptable. The problem for President Obama, however, is that he has proclaimed the value, indeed the necessity, of a capable U.S. nuclear force until the time his goal of zero nuclear weapons worldwide is realized. Specifically, the White House website states: "Obama and Biden will always maintain a strong deterrent as long as nuclear weapons exist."<sup>4</sup>

**The Need for Caution.** If President Obama's stated commitment to maintain a strong deterrent until global denuclearization is something more than subterfuge, then he should state that reports asserting that he has directed the U.S. to engage in negotiations with Russia to reduce the U.S. nuclear stockpile to 1,000 weapons are inaccurate. Such a statement should also make it clear that any such negotiations will be undertaken in substantive terms only after Obama's Administration has concluded a careful planning process. It is a gross understatement to say that a policy based on the assumption that nuclear weapons have no value—and that nuclear arms control is therefore a low stakes game—is fraught with danger. President Obama needs to be more careful and deliberate.

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1. Tim Reid, "President Obama Seeks Russia Deal to Slash Nuclear Weapons," *Times Online*, February 4, 2009, at [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us\\_and\\_americas/article5654836.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/article5654836.ece) (February 5, 2009).
2. For example, see U.S. Department of Defense, "Report of the Secretary of Defense Task Force on DOD Nuclear Weapons Management, Phase II: Review of the DOD Nuclear Mission," December 2008; Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, "Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Nuclear Deterrence Skills," September 2008; United States Air Force, "Reinvigorating the Air Force Nuclear Enterprise," October 24, 2008.
3. Robert M. Gates, speech before the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., October 28, 2008, at <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1305> (February 5, 2009).
4. The White House, "Move Toward a Nuclear Free World," at [http://www.whitehouse.gov/agenda/foreign\\_policy](http://www.whitehouse.gov/agenda/foreign_policy) (February 5, 2009).