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Strategic Posture Commission's Report Provides Necessary Guidance to Congress

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On May 6, the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States issued its final report at the United States Institute of Peace.¹

Unfortunately, press reports are emphasizing the fact that the commission failed to reach an agreement on U.S. ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).² This emphasis obscures the fact that the commissioners did achieve consensus on a wide variety of issues regarding the overall strategic posture of the U.S. Therefore, Congress would do well to pay attention to the commission's areas of agreement while exercising caution regarding CTBT ratification due to the lack on consensus on that issue.

Toward a More Defensive Strategic Posture. The Strategic Posture Commission is careful to broadly define the terms “strategic deterrence” and “strategic posture.” At the outset, it refers to protection capabilities as a part of these terms.

The commission specifically focuses on ballistic missile defense—the most visible element of the transition from a strategic posture based on retaliation to a more defensive one. The report states that missile defenses are “an integral part of the strategic posture of the United States after the Cold War.” It goes on to state that such capabilities “can play a useful role in support of the basic objectives of deterrence, broadly defined, and damage limitation against limited threats.”

The commission, however, does not limit its recommendations in favor of a broadly defined policy of deterrence to ballistic missile defense. Additional

defensive measures—such as homeland defense measures and protection against the effects of an attack with electromagnetic pulse weapons—are cited as important. Finally, the commission's report appropriately makes a strong statement that this broad definition of deterrence includes extended deterrence and assurance measures for the benefit of U.S. allies around the world.

Preserving the U.S. Nuclear Posture. The commission is unequivocal about the need to maintain a nuclear deterrent force as a part of the broader strategic posture of the U.S.—a force that is effective in meeting America's security needs and those of its allies for as long as nuclear weapons exist. In accordance with its recommendation for a broad definition of strategic deterrence, the commission recognizes the contributions that nuclear forces can make to deterrence by retaining “damage-limitation capabilities.” Separately, the commission's report recommends that the U.S. declare that it would consider using nuclear weapons only under extreme circumstances. On the other hand, it counsels against issuing a “no first use” declaration.

Accordingly, the report recommends the retention of the nuclear triad of intercontinental ballistic

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missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and bombers. Further, it recognizes that preserving the triad will require selective modernization. The report also recommends that the U.S. retain the ability to deliver non-strategic nuclear weapons.

Regarding the nuclear stockpile, the commission recommends that the U.S. retain “a stockpile of nuclear weapons that is safe, secure, and reliable, and whose threatened use in military conflict would be credible.” It also expresses concern about the current state of the nuclear weapons complex that manages the stockpile. While it points out that the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) has a plan to transform the complex, the commission also urges Congress to increase support to the complex.

Finally, the commission chose not to provide a specific recommendation regarding the overall size of the nuclear force. Rather, the commission recommends that the size of the force be determined by a careful and deliberate process, starting with the presidential-level direction.

Arms Control and Nonproliferation and Nuclear Disarmament. The commission recognizes that arms control can play an important role in lessening nuclear dangers and enhancing deterrence. In the case of nonproliferation, the commission stresses that the proliferation threat cannot be overstated. In this context, it sees both U.S. extended deterrence guarantees to its allies and support for the applicable treaty regime as necessary to preventing the rise of new and potentially dangerous nuclear powers.

The commission’s report states that the most effective means of arms control must begin with Russia. The commission also demands that any reductions be pursued in tandem with Russia and not on the basis of unilateral U.S. reductions that Russia may not match. Finally, it recommends that

negotiations with Russia proceed in accordance with a step-by-step approach.

According to the report, the nonproliferation effort needs a multifaceted diplomatic approach. Specifically, the commission believes that the U.S. should:

- Strengthen the international nuclear watchdog agency, called the International Atomic Energy Agency;
- Develop a stronger working relationship with Russia on nonproliferation issues;
- Negotiate a treaty to end the production of fissile material;
- Expand threat reduction activities; and
- Adopt new approaches for ensuring that nuclear energy cooperation does not lead to weapons proliferation.

Finally, the report expresses regret that the U.S. has not effectively publicized the steps it has taken to meet its disarmament obligations under the Nonproliferation Treaty.

Regarding President Obama’s clearly stated goal of achieving a world without nuclear weapons, the commission essentially adheres to the position spelled out in its interim report that nuclear disarmament requires “a fundamental transformation of the world political order.”³ Accordingly, the commission states that the U.S. must be prepared to retain nuclear weapons for the indefinite future.

CTBT Ratification. The CTBT, which the Senate rejected in 1999, is a treaty that would prohibit nuclear testing. While the Strategic Posture Commission did not reach agreement on the matter of whether the Senate should heed President Obama’s demand that it consent to the ratification of the CTBT now, it did agree that before the Senate considers the matter, the Obama Administration should conduct a net assessment of the treaty’s costs, risks,

1. William J. Perry *et al.*, “America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States” (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2009), advance copy.
2. For example, see Walter Pincus, “Expert Groups Largely Back Obama’s Nuclear Stance,” *The Washington Post*, May 2, 2009, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/01/AR2009050103404.html> (May 7, 2009).
3. Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, “Interim Report,” December 11, 2008, at http://www.usip.org/strategic_posture/sprc_interim_report.pdf (May 7, 2008).

and benefits. It also recommends that the definition of what the treaty permits and prohibits in the way of test activities be clarified among the five recognized nuclear weapons states (China, France, Great Britain, and Russia, as well as the U.S.).

These agreed-upon CTBT recommendations, when coupled with the failure to reach a consensus regarding ratification, make it clear that the Senate should, at a minimum, exercise extreme caution before taking up the treaty. In fact, it is not clear whether President Obama has the relationship between CTBT ratification and his goal of nuclear disarmament reversed: He sees CTBT ratification as a necessary step for bringing about the transformation in the world political order that the Strategic Posture Commission believes is necessary for nuclear disarmament. In reality, CTBT ratification may benefit from being postponed until the required change in the global political order has put the world on the path to nuclear disarmament.

Adjusting the strategic posture of the United States to meet the current and emerging security needs of the United States and its allies, by necessity, is a long and difficult process. Ultimately, such an adjustment requires defining *deterrence* both differently and more broadly than during the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union:

- It must include defensive options; and
- It must permit a careful balancing of nuclear, defensive, and conventional forces with arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament efforts.

The report of the Strategic Posture Commission should mark the beginning of the end of the adjustment process. This is why Congress should follow its guidance.

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