Post-Cold War U. S. Nuclear Strategy:
A Search for Technical and Policy Common Ground

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I have been involved with nuclear weapons through my entire career. More than forty years ago I analyzed intelligence for President Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis, when nuclear war seemed imminent. I worked on the development of new defense technology – stealth and smart weapons – during the mid-seventies, when it seemed that the Soviet Union might win the nuclear arms race. During that same period, I was awakened at three o'clock in the morning by the watch officer at NORAD, telling me that his computers indicated that 200 missiles were on their way from the Soviet Union to the United States. Happily, that was a false alarm.

I served as the Secretary of Defense during the mid-nineties, when Russia and Eastern Europe were in dangerous turmoil, and instituted a crash program to help them get their loose nukes under control. So I was close enough to the real dangers of the Cold War that the risk of a nuclear war never seemed academic to me.

But I have never, I have never been as worried as I am now that a nuclear bomb will be detonated in an American city. I fear that we are racing towards an unprecedented catastrophe. Unlike during the Cold War, the danger is not that another nuclear power will attack us. Deterrents remain powerful and compelling. The danger is that a transnational terror group will get their hands on a nuclear weapon and detonate it in a truck or a freighter in one of our cities, with disastrous consequences.

A less likely, but still important danger, is that the hair trigger alert still on Russian and American ICBMs will precipitate an accidental launch. Either of those would result in an unprecedented catastrophe. Both of them are preventable with actions that are well understood,

but those actions are not being taken by the American government or by the Russian government. And inexplicably, both governments have taken some actions that actually increase the probability of a catastrophe.

It is past time for our government to set, as its highest priority, the prevention of this catastrophe and then, having set the priorities, act on those priorities. Those actions would include as a minimum three imperatives.

The first imperative is to get the loose nukes problem under control. Using the momentum already achieved with the G-8 statements on nuclear terrorism, the United States should seek to establish a global initiative to place all fissile material, as well as the nuclear bombs, under strict control. Nuclear bombs, highly enriched uranium and plutonium should get the same protection as the gold that we guard at Fort Knox. The theft of a hundred kilograms of plutonium could have far more serious consequences than the theft of a hundred kilograms of gold.

The Nunn-Lugar programs has made a good start on securing nuclear bombs and military fissile material and should be continued. But the fissile material used in commercial reactors is quite vulnerable to theft. It is effectively the weakest link and thus the one that a terror group is most likely to target. Senator Lugar has recognized this problem and has proposed expanding the Nunn-Lugar program to deal with it. Inexplicable, his proposal is running into opposition in the Congress, and getting little support from the administration. Senator Lugar needs and deserves our support on this important initiative.

But the United States cannot do this job alone. The moral support given by the G-8 was an important first step. At the next G-8 meeting the American President should put all of his weight behind persuading the G-8 nations to act on those initiatives. We need money, not just promises.

The second imperative is to prevent additional nations from going nuclear. As in dealing with the loose nukes problem, the proper vehicle is already established. In this case, the Nuclear

Nonproliferation Treaty. But the NPT has loopholes that North Korea and Iran are both exploiting. The solution to this problem is not to give up on the NPT, but to fix it. There are several proposals on how to do this, including an op-ed piece by myself, Brent Scowcroft, Arnold Kanter and Ash Carter, and the Carnegie Endowment has written perhaps the most thorough article on the subject. Without going into the important details discussed in these papers, their conclusion is that we can fix the NPT if we can muster the political will to do it. Basically, the nuclear nations have to agree to cut off support to any non-nuclear nation trying to establish a closed-fuel cycle. At the same time, the Security Council should establish that any nation that goes to the nuclear brink under the NPT and then withdraws from the NPT to go nuclear would face serious consequences. But whatever is done to fix the NPT, we are already confronted with an emergency situation with the ongoing proliferation of North Korea and Iran. We should put at the highest national priority the goal of keeping North Korea and Iran from developing a nuclear weapon production capability, and mobilize the other leading nations to join in a serious effort to prevent that disaster from occurring.

I am not suggesting that this will be easy, or that such a policy does not have risks. But if we fail to stop North Korea and Iran, the entire nonproliferation regime is likely to unravel.

The third imperative is to eliminate the risk of an accidental nuclear launch. This would require that we engage Russia in a serious discussion with the goal of removing from high alert the ICBMs of our two countries. The risk of accidental launch has always been a risk associated with keeping our forces on high alert so that they were not susceptible to a disarming first strike. During the Cold War we made a conscious decision to accept that risk because we believed that the probability of a disarming first strike was high enough to warrant it. I suggest that the probability of a disarming strike is low enough today that it no longer makes good sense to continue to accept the risk of accidental launch.

This issue was discussed in an excellent article by Sam Nunn, former senator and co-chairman of the NTI, the Nuclear Threat Initiative. And NTI has commissioned a paper by Sergey Rogov to get a Russian's view on how to accomplish the de-alerting necessary to reduce the risk of accidental launch.

All of the actions that I have proposed have two things in common. First, they are designed to greatly reduce the probability of a nuclear bomb being detonated in one of our cities. Second, they require deep cooperation from other nations, especially the other nuclear nations. All of these nations should share our objectives. The threat is to them as well as to us. But even so, the deep cooperation required will be hard to get. It will require real American leadership, and it will require America to demonstrate by its actions that it is serious about these objectives. At a minimum it will require the United States government to recommit itself to working with other nations to solve important problems in a spirit of international cooperation. And it will certainly require the United States to renounce its own development and testing of new nuclear weapons. We should be working, not only to reduce our nuclear weapons stockpile, but to clarify that our remaining stockpile is strictly for deterrence, not for war fighting.

I do not argue that nuclear weapons have no utility in war fighting, but I do argue that their relative utility is marginal in light of the dominant military position we hold today with our conventional military forces. And that the danger of a transnational terror group detonating a nuclear bomb in one of our cities far outweighs that marginal contribution. Only with a clear position of moral leadership in the nuclear field can we hope to lead the world in this critically important effort. And only by that leadership can we collectively take actions that prevent this nuclear catastrophe from occurring.

Similarly, I do not argue that there is no utility in keeping our ICBMs on high alert. Indeed, I supported such a posture during the Cold War, but I do argue that the danger of an accidental launch far outweighs that consideration in the present geopolitical situation.

I will close by reminding you of what Andrei Sakharov wrote to my colleague, Sid Drell, during the Cold War: "Reducing the risk of annihilating humanity in a nuclear war carries an absolute priority over all other considerations."

And so it did, and so it does today. By giving that goal absolute priority during the Cold War we were able to avert the catastrophe then. We should do no less today.