

# The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction

[Government](#)



The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) has become a metaphor for 21st-century security concerns. Although nuclear weapons have not been used since the end of World War II, their influence on international security affairs is pervasive, and possession of WMD remains an important divide in international politics today (Norris 61).

The nuclear postures of the former Cold War rivals have evolved more slowly than the fast-breaking political developments of the decade or so that has elapsed since the former Soviet Union collapsed. Nevertheless, some important changes have already taken place. By mutual consent, the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty of 1972 was terminated by the United States and Russia, which have agreed to modify their nuclear offensive force posture significantly through a large reduction in the number of deployed delivery systems. Nuclear weapons are no longer at the center of this bilateral relationship.

Although the two nations are pursuing divergent doctrines for their residual nuclear weapons posture, neither approach poses a threat to the other. The structure, but not the detailed content, of the future U. S. nuclear posture was expressed in the 2002 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), which established a significant doctrinal shift from deterrence to a more complex approach to addressing the problem of proliferated WMD.

The Russian doctrinal adaptation to the post-Cold War security environment is somewhat more opaque. The government appears to be focused on developing and fielding low-yield weapons that are more suitable for tactical use, though the current building of new missiles and warheads may be associated with new strategic nuclear payloads as well. Despite the

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diminished postCold War role of nuclear weapons in the United States, the cumulative deterioration of Russia's conventional military force since 1991 has actually made nuclear weapons more central to that government's defense policy.

The end of the adversarial relationship with the Soviet Union (and later, the Russian Federation) had to be taken into account in the NPR. The current nuclear posture is evolving in a manner parallel to the modernization of the U. S. non-nuclear military establishment. In stark contrast to Cold Warera military planning, the 21st century is likely to be characterized by circumstances in which the adversary is not well known far in advance of a potential confrontation.

The U. S. Department of Defense (DOD) is adjusting to these new circumstances by developing highly capable and flexible military forces that can adapt to the characteristics of adversaries as they appear. This makes the traditional path to modernization through investment in weapons systems as the threat emerges economically infeasible. Modern information technology lets the military change the characteristics of its flexible weapons and forces in much less time than it would take to develop whole new weapons systems. Thus, DOD is attempting to create a military information system: the integrated effect of command-control-communications-computation-intelligence-surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR). This system is inherently more flexible for adapting to changes in the threat environment.

WMD and the means to deliver them are mature technologies, and knowledge of how to create such capabilities is widely distributed. Moreover,  
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the relative cost of these capabilities declined sharply toward the end of the 20th century. Today, the poorest nations on earth (such as North Korea and Pakistan) have found WMD to be the most attractive course available to meet their security needs (Lieggi 2). Proliferation of WMD was stimulated as an unintended consequence of a U. S. failure to invest in technologies such as ballistic missile defense that could have dissuaded nations from investing in such weapons.

The United States' preoccupation with deterring the Soviet Union incorporated the erroneous assumption that success in that arena would deter proliferation elsewhere (Barnaby 7). This mistake was compounded by the perverse interaction between defense policy and arms control in the 1990s. Misplaced confidence was lodged in a network of multilateral agreements and practices to prevent proliferation that contributed to obscuring rather than illuminating what was happening. Confidence placed in the inspection provisions of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), for example, obscured efforts to obtain knowledge of clandestine WMD programs. NPT signatories were among those nations with clandestine WMD programs.

Without a modernization of defense policy, the ready availability of WMD-related technology will converge with their declining relative cost and a fatally flawed arms control structure to stimulate further proliferation in the 21st century. The process whereby WMD and ballistic missile technology has proliferated among a group of nations that otherwise share no common interests are likely to become the template for 21st-century proliferation.

The scope of this problem was recognized in part as a result of a comprehensive review of intelligence data in 1997-1998 by the Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States (the Rumsfeld Commission). This recognition swiftly evolved into a set of significant policy initiatives that responded to changes in the international security environment. The arms control arrangements most closely identified with the adversarial relationship with the former Soviet Union were passé. In 1999 the Senate refused to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty; the United States and Russia ended the 1972 ABM Treaty and agreed to jettison the START process, which kept nuclear deployments at Cold War levels in favor of much deeper reductions in offensive forces in 2002.

U. S. policy began to evolve in response to these developments. The incompatibility between the Cold War legacy nuclear posture and the 21st-century security environment stimulated a search for approaches to modernize policies pertinent to nuclear weapons. In response to statutory direction, the Bush administration published the Quadrennial Defense Review, the Nuclear Posture Review, the National Defense Strategy of the United States, and the National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction. Taken together, these documents constitute the most profound change in U. S. policy related to nuclear weapons since the Eisenhower administration (Krepon 1).

The unique capabilities of nuclear weapons may still be required in some circumstances, but the range of alternatives to them is much greater today. The evolution of technology has created an opportunity to move from a

policy that deters through the threat of massive retaliation to one that can reasonably aspire to the more demanding aim--to dissuade.

If adversary WMD systems can be held at risk through a combination of precision non-nuclear strike and active defense, nuclear weapons are less necessary (Albright 2). By developing a military capability that holds a proliferators' entire WMD posture at risk rather than relying solely on the ability to deter the threat or use of WMD after they have been developed, produced, and deployed, the prospects for reducing the role of WMD in international politics are much improved.

The 21st-century proliferation problem creates a set of targets significantly different from those that existed during the Cold War. Few targets can be held at risk only by nuclear weapons, but the ones that are appropriate may require different characteristics and, in many circumstances, different designs than those currently in the nuclear stockpile. The nature of the targets and the scope of the potential threat also alter the character of the underlying scientific, engineering, and industrial infrastructure that supports the nuclear weapons posture. This research paper will therefore seek to discuss the problem of nuclear devices or WMDs (as they are presently termed) and try to address to current policy issues surrounding the matter.