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**U.S. National Security Strategy  
And the Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons**

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Course IV  
25 February 1993

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## **U.S. National Security Strategy And the Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons**

This paper proposes a new national security strategy. The recommendation is based on the synthesis of two arguments: first, the Bush national security strategy is seriously flawed; and second, proliferation of nuclear weapons is the most dangerous threat to U.S. national security. The broad elements of a new national security strategy are presented together with an analysis of strengths and a rebuttal of potential arguments against the proposal.

### **The Bush National Security Strategy**

The national security strategy of the United States is seriously flawed because it fails to define our vital interests and provide criteria to determine the most dangerous threat to our security. The Bush strategy is marginally effective and grossly inefficient because it fails to provide national security policy makers with a clear rationale for decision making.

The end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union ushered in a new strategic environment and national security strategy. The new Bush strategy of "engagement and leadership" identifies broad political, economic, and military "challenges" to our national security. The fundamental basis of this strategy is the lack of a "single defining threat

which dominate(s) our policy, budgets, (and) force structure"<sup>1</sup> Instead, we are faced with multiple threats that "are more complex, ambiguous and diffuse than ever before."<sup>2</sup>

The new Regional Defense Strategy (a subset of national security strategy) is also based on the belief of multiple uncertain threats. The strategy is characterized as a shift from a "focus on the global threat posed by the Soviet Union to a focus on the regional threats and challenges we are more likely to face in the future."<sup>3</sup> This supporting strategy seeks to "preclude hostile, nondemocratic powers from dominating regions critical to us," without saying which regions are critical or identifying the most dangerous threats.<sup>4</sup> The Regional Defense Strategy proposes a capability-based military force structure as the answer to an uncertain threat.

A national security strategy that fails to define what is vital or provide criteria for prioritizing threats is marginally effective because it is inherently short sighted. Decision makers lack a standard measure to allocate resources between regions or threats. Policy tends to follow the established course despite changes in the environment, and decision makers tend to reprioritize resources only in response to crisis situations. This sort of strategy is ineffective because it fails to focus on the prevention of crisis situations. U.S. policy in the Middle East prior to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait is an example of reacting to a crisis rather than preventing it. A short-sighted approach is also ineffective because it exacerbates the problem of inconsistent policy. This lowers our credibility in the eyes of foreign states and hinders our ability to secure national interests. Our actions concerning conventional arms control highlight inconsistency in policy.

A national security strategy that fails to define what is vital or provide criteria for prioritizing threats breeds inefficiency. Decision makers can not match resources against requirements without a measurement tool. Who is a threat? What is a vital interest, and which vital interest is in the most danger? How many Army light infantry divisions are enough? Force structure and budget proposals are difficult to justify without a dominant threat. Critics attack Chairman Powell's base force and the FY94 DOD budget because there are no measures to demonstrate adequacy.

### **The Threat Posed by Nuclear Weapons**

The proliferation of nuclear weapons is the most serious threat to U.S. national security. Current nonproliferation efforts will fail to prevent such anti-American states as Iran, Libya, or North Korea from obtaining nuclear weapons. We could not avoid conflict with these states because they are geographically linked to our historical vital interests. And we could not deter all forms of nuclear aggression in a conflict. Nuclear proliferation will render U.S. instruments of power less effective in protecting our interests.

A hostile state will eventually obtain a nuclear weapon if we continue to follow the same policy course. U.S. policy for halting the spread of nuclear weapons is embodied in a web of treaties and agreements. This non-proliferation regime has not succeeded. The Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and its safeguard system of inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) are riddled with loopholes. For example, nuclear enrichment and reprocessing facilities are not subject to IAEA inspections.<sup>5</sup> The most glaring weakness of the NPT is its dependence on the willingness

of signatories to cooperate. Nuclear supplier controls, another part of the regime, have not stopped states from exporting technology and equipment that could support the construction of nuclear weapons.<sup>6</sup> The failure to prevent and detect Iraq's nuclear weapons program highlights the ineffectiveness of U.S. nonproliferation policy. Leonard Spector, a renowned proliferation expert, points to a documented trend of "the steady, though largely concealed, advances of undeclared nuclear weapon efforts in the developing world - efforts which increasingly involve countries hostile to the United States...."<sup>7</sup>

The U.S. could not avoid conflict if a hostile state in East Asia, the Middle East, or Latin America / the Caribbean obtained a nuclear weapon. Treaty commitments, the economic importance of oil, the strategic importance of the Panama Canal, or a nuclear threat close to U.S. soil would trigger immediate U.S. involvement. A hostile nuclear armed state in these regions would significantly increase the risk of a confrontation escalating into a nuclear conflict. For example: animosity between North and South Korea could easily lead to a preemptive nuclear strike. A host of factors make the Middle East even more dangerous. The Arab-Israeli conflict provides the most fertile soil for state leaders to rationalize the employment of a nuclear weapon. Even if the Arab-Israeli conflict were resolved, other factors in the region would provoke conflict. Contemporary disputes between arab states over oil, borders, water, or religion could provoke a nuclear attack. Internal pressures from economic problems or high population growth rates could also lead to conflict.

Continued nuclear proliferation threatens U.S national security because traditional strategies of nuclear deterrence would prove ineffective. A hostile state could shield itself from nuclear retaliation by

using a transnational extremist group to deliver and detonate a nuclear weapon. The delivery of a crude nuclear weapon via a truck or shipping container would be very difficult to prevent. Nuclear blackmail would generate tremendous pressure to accept terrorist demands. Traditional strategies of deterrence would also prove ineffective against an irrational enemy. Extreme hatreds could cause a state or extremist group to disregard the threat of retaliation which lies at the heart of deterrence. Continued proliferation would increasingly render U.S. power less effective in securing our vital interests.

### **A New National Security Strategy**

A new national security strategy is needed, and its centerpiece should be twofold: first, the clear identification of U.S. vital interests; and second, the global neutralization of all nuclear threats. We would appropriately name the combination of these dual themes "Nuclear Containment." This strategy would employ the full spectrum of political, military, and economic, power to achieve the following objectives: nuclear disarmament, nuclear nonproliferation, a global ban on the use of nuclear weapons, and defense against all forms of nuclear attack.

A strategy of nuclear containment would effectively and efficiently secure our vital national security interests. The strategy would be forward looking. It would address the most serious threat to U.S. national security by anticipating and preventing nuclear conflict. A nuclear containment strategy would provide the rational to build a coherent set of security policies and prioritize resources. Vital interests, nuclear capabilities, and suspected hostile intentions would be the criteria used to establish priorities. Regions and threats would be prioritized. Regions linked to our

vital interests which contained a nuclear-armed hostile state would receive first priority. Regions with vital interests but free of nuclear weapons would be a second priority. Hostile nuclear-armed states within a region would be our first priority. Hostile nonnuclear states would be a second priority.

Nuclear Containment would be the central organizing concept for our political, defense, and economic security agenda. Our political security strategy would focus diplomatic efforts on nuclear disarmament, establishing a more effective international nuclear nonproliferation regime, building new alliances, and encouraging democracy and free markets. Our defense strategy would focus on deterring or defeating nuclear threats to our vital interests and enforcing sanctions from a new nonproliferation regime. This would include developing and fielding ballistic missile defenses and nuclear weapon detection systems. Our economic security strategy would focus on halting the spread of nuclear weapon technology and manufacturing equipment, and strengthening economic ties and free trade in regions that contain our vital interests.

### **Arguments Against a Nuclear Containment Strategy**

Critics may offer several arguments against the proposed nuclear containment strategy. The first argument believes that policy makers must keep our vital interests vague in order to maintain maximum political flexibility and enhance deterrence. This logic is faulty because it assumes that the American people will automatically support the commitment of our armed forces to secure a "vital" interest. The term "vital" is used to distinguish a special category of interests - those that we are willing to



wage war over in order to secure. Designating an interest as vital should be an open public decision.

A second argument views economic, social, and ecological sources of instability as the most dangerous threats to our security. This argument ignores reality. Although global issues such as population growth and the greenhouse effect have gained considerable importance, they simply do not sufficiently threaten our survival to justify being called a vital national security interest. For example, we would not wage war against a state in order to protect the environment.

A third argument believes that the Bush national security strategy is on target and that deterring nuclear attack is already the highest defense priority of the nation. This line of reasoning fails to examine how resources are prioritized. Although deterring a nuclear attack is the stated first defense priority, it is not used as a basis to prioritize threats or translate policy into force structure. Nuclear proliferation is treated as a separate issue and not accorded any set priority.

A fourth argument forecasts a doomed effort because many countries would view the U.S. strategy as an assault upon their sovereignty. This line of reasoning ignores the mutual benefits of a successful strategy and the moral forces in favor of nuclear disarmament. The U.S. has no imperial intentions. The neutralization of nuclear weapons would benefit all nations by significantly contributing to global and regional stability and promoting peaceful change. The fear of nuclear weapons is a powerful moral force that would work in our favor. A goal of eliminating the threat of nuclear war would receive wide approval and enlist many international and domestic advocates.

## Conclusion

The Bush national security strategy is seriously flawed because it fails to define our vital interests and provide criteria to determine the most dangerous threat to our security. Such a strategy is both ineffective and inefficient in protecting America's security interests. The proliferation of nuclear weapons is the most serious threat to U.S. national security. Current nonproliferation efforts will fail to prevent hostile states from obtaining nuclear weapons. This will render U.S. instruments of power significantly less effective in protecting our vital interests. A new national security strategy is needed that articulates U.S. vital interests and neutralizes all nuclear threats. A nuclear containment strategy would clearly lay out vital interests and focus U.S. political, military, and economic power on nuclear disarmament, nuclear nonproliferation, a global ban on the use of nuclear weapons, and defense against all forms of nuclear attack. A nuclear containment strategy would provide decision makers with the tools to prioritize resources and determine a sufficient military force structure.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The White House, National Security Strategy of the United States (Washington, DC: GPO, Jan. 1993) 1.

<sup>2</sup> National Security Strategy 1.

<sup>3</sup> Dick Cheney, Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy (Washington, DC: GPO, Jan. 1993) 5.

<sup>4</sup> Defense Strategy 12, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Spector and Jacqueline Smith, Nuclear Ambitions (Boulder, Colorado: Westview P, 1990) 422,423.

<sup>6</sup> Spector 31-48.

<sup>7</sup> Spector 3.