International Physicians
for the Prevention of Nuclear War

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New US Nuclear Posture enhances safety and security;
Only a world without nuclear weapons can ensure human survival

The long-awaited Nuclear Posture Review released on April 6 by President Obama is the most important and thorough re-evaluation of US nuclear policy since the Cold War. While it is not a blueprint for rapid nuclear disarmament, it marks the first time the US has made the elimination of nuclear weapons a guiding principle, focusing more on reducing the dangers of nuclear weapons than on finding roles and rationales for them. This is a very welcome and long overdue course correction.

Like the New START agreement with Russia, the NPR begins to anticipate a world in which nuclear weapons no longer exist. Nevertheless, the pace for disarmament set by this review, which is intended to establish the framework for US nuclear policy for 10 years or more, is still too slow.

For more than 45 years, physicians have documented and described the horrifying medical and humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons explosions. We have warned that the unique nature of nuclear weapons—their unprecedented destructive power and the radiation they release, causing cancers, birth defects, and genetic disorders across generations—removes any justification for their use and requires their abolition.

While IPPNW welcomes many of the changes embodied in the new US policy framework, more is needed—and more is possible—to make the abolition of nuclear weapons a realizable goal, not just a declaratory vision postponed until some distant future. We are opposed to an enduring role for nuclear weapons and the doctrine of deterrence. We concur wholeheartedly with the assertion in this Nuclear Posture Review that “It is in the U.S. interest and that of all other nations that the nearly 65-year record of nuclear non-use be extended forever.”

One of the most positive and welcome changes is the unprecedented assurance from the US that it will not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states as long as they are NPT members in good standing. That assurance is phrased carefully to carve out potential exceptions for Iran and North Korea, but it is a much needed and responsible policy shift that enhances US and global security. The US has also promised, for the first time, that it will not use nuclear weapons in response to a threat from chemical or biological weapons.

A more important change — a declaration that the US would not be the first to use nuclear weapons — was rejected, as was a call for limiting the doctrine of deterrence to the sole purpose of preventing the use of nuclear weapons by others. Instead, the NPR defines this as the “fundamental” purpose, leaving other options open. A no-first-use pledge would have been far more constructive.

We are also disappointed that the thousand or more strategic weapons that can now be launched on short notice will remain on alert. Taking these weapons off high alert and increasing the decision time available to the President in the event of a nuclear strike or a suspected missile launch would all but eliminate the possibility of an accidental nuclear exchange killing millions of innocent people.

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We enthusiastically welcome the US pledge to keep its moratorium on nuclear testing, the assurances that it will not develop new warhead designs or produce warheads with new capabilities and will propose no new missions for nuclear weapons. But we continue to question the major new investments in nuclear infrastructure requested by the administration. To the extent that up-to-date facilities and well-trained personnel are needed to keep existing nuclear weapons safe and secure until they can be dismantled and destroyed, we have no quarrel with these plans. But infrastructure modernization also serves the purpose of ensuring that nuclear weapons will be around for decades to come, and that the production of new weapons can easily be resumed. We urge the administration to hold a firm line against modernization of nuclear forces.

IPPNW is convinced that nuclear weapons serve no legitimate security purpose, and that basing national security on threats to kill hundreds of millions of people and to cause irreparable environmental damage is fundamentally immoral and irresponsible. Therefore, we are disappointed at the extent to which deterrence — including extended deterrence — remains the basis of US nuclear policy under this review. Seeking a world without nuclear weapons on the one hand, while insisting upon the necessity for a deterrent posture and the nuclear forces to back it up on the other, is a fundamental contradiction that has to be resolved if we are ever to rid the world of these instruments of mass murder. The only nuclear policy that should be promulgated by the United States, Russia, and the other nuclear-weapon states, is one that recognizes the moral and political imperative of eradicating nuclear weapons as soon as possible, and that charts a clear and irreversible course toward that goal.

While the NPR foresees even deeper reductions in US and Russian nuclear forces after the ratification of the New START agreement, it also emphasizes the US commitment to missile defenses, a program that Russia considers a threat to its security. IPPNW has argued that reductions to as few as 500 warheads in each country would leave the other nuclear weapon states with no further excuse from joining negotiations on a Nuclear Weapons Convention. The pursuit of missile defenses as a key objective of the new NPR needlessly undermines the urgent goal of dramatic deep reductions.

IPPNW and other NGOs committed to the abolition of nuclear weapons will continue to challenge some of the elements of nuclear policy embodied in this NPR and we will offer alternatives. But we take great hope and encouragement from the fact that the elimination of nuclear weapons is presented here as the overriding goal of US policy. We urge President Obama, President Medvedev, and the leaders of the other nuclear-weapon states to move even more decisively and more quickly in the most positive directions opened up by this course shift in US policy and to make the abolition of nuclear weapons the focal point of all efforts from this point forward.

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