
Toward True Security

Ten Steps the Next President Should Take to Transform U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy

February 2008

Statement from The Union of Concerned Scientists

website at www.ucsusa.org

To prevent more nations—and eventually terrorists—from acquiring nuclear weapons, the United States should drastically reduce the role that nuclear weapons play in its security policies. Toward True Security outlines 10 unilateral steps the next president should take to transform U.S. nuclear policy, which would strengthen national security and put the world on a path to eventually banning nuclear weapons. By taking this leadership role, the United States would also demonstrate to the rest of the world that it is serious about addressing what remains one of the gravest threats to human civilization.

The United States need not wait for bilateral or multilateral agreements; it should take unilateral steps to begin the process. These steps would make the United States safer, whether or not the eventual goal of a worldwide ban is ever achieved.

The greatest nuclear dangers to the United States are an accidental, unauthorized or mistaken Russian nuclear attack, the spread of nuclear weapons to more nations, and the acquisition of nuclear materials by terrorists. U.S. nuclear weapons policy, the report concludes, fails to adequately address these risks and too often exacerbates them.

By taking these 10 unilateral steps, the next president would bring U.S. nuclear weapons policy into line with today's political realities, and demonstrate to the rest of the world that the United States is serious about addressing what remains one of the gravest threats to human civilization:

1. Declare that the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter and, if necessary, respond to the use of nuclear weapons by another country. Making it clear that the United States will not use nuclear weapons first would reduce the incentive for other nations to acquire these weapons to deter a potential U.S. first strike.
2. Reject rapid-launch options by changing U.S. deployment practices to allow the launch of nuclear forces within days instead of minutes. Increasing the amount of time required to launch U.S. weapons would ease Russian concerns about the vulnerability of its nuclear weapons and in turn give it the incentive to take its weapons off alert, reducing the risk of an accidental or unauthorized Russian launch on the United States.
3. Eliminate preset targeting plans, and replace them with the capability to promptly develop a response tailored to the situation if nuclear weapons are used against the United States, its armed forces, or its allies.
4. Promptly and unilaterally reduce the U.S. nuclear arsenal to no more than 1,000 warheads, including deployed and reserve warheads. There is no plausible threat that justifies maintaining more than a few hundred survivable nuclear weapons, and no reason to link the size of U.S. nuclear forces to those of any other country. The United States would declare all warheads above this level to be in excess of its military needs, move them into storage, begin dismantling them in a manner transparent to the international community, and begin disposing—under international safeguards—of all plutonium and highly enriched uranium beyond that required to maintain these 1,000 warheads. By making the end point of this dismantlement process dependent on Russia's response, the United States would encourage Russia to reciprocate.
5. Halt all programs for developing and deploying new nuclear weapons, including the proposed Reliable Replacement Warhead.
6. Promptly and unilaterally retire all U.S. nonstrategic nuclear weapons, dismantling them in a transparent manner, and take steps to induce Russia to do the same.
7. Announce a U.S. commitment to reducing its number of nuclear weapons further, on a negotiated and verified bilateral or multilateral basis.
8. Commit to not resume nuclear testing, and work with the Senate to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.
9. Halt further deployment of the Ground-Based Missile Defense system, and drop any plans for space-based missile defense. The deployment of a U.S. missile defense system that Russia or China believed could intercept a significant portion of its survivable long-range missile forces would be an obstacle to deep nuclear cuts. A U.S. missile defense system could also trigger reactions by these nations that would result in a net decrease in U.S. security.
10. Reaffirm the U.S. commitment to pursue nuclear disarmament, and present a specific plan for moving toward that goal, in recognition of the fact that a universal and verifiable prohibition on nuclear weapons would enhance both national and international security.

The report was authored by analysts from the Federation of American Scientists (FAS), Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), and independent experts with long experience in nuclear weapons policy issues.