

Under Secretary of State Ellen O. Tauscher
Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing on the Nuclear Posture Review
Wednesday, April 22, 2010 at 9:30 AM

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member McCain, and distinguished members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the State Department's shared role in protecting the United States and our allies from today's most pressing threats. I am honored to appear with my colleagues Jim Miller, Tom D'Agostino, and General Chilton.

As you know, President Obama outlined several concrete steps last year in a speech in Prague to strengthen our national security by reducing the role and numbers of nuclear weapons.

In the past few weeks, the Obama Administration has advanced some of those goals even as we reaffirm our commitment to maintain a safe, secure, and effective deterrent to protect the United States and our allies so long as nuclear weapons exist.

Last week, the President brought together 46 world leaders to advance his goal of securing all vulnerable nuclear material over the next four years. At the Nuclear Security Summit, President Obama worked with allies and partners to help secure vulnerable nuclear material and prevent nuclear smuggling.

Earlier this month, President Obama and President Medvedev signed the New START Treaty, which upon entry into force will make verifiable and mutual cuts in the U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear arsenals.

Finally, the Obama administration issued the Nuclear Posture Review, which we are going to discuss today.

This review constitutes a clear break from past reviews, both in terms of process and scope. The Administration took a broad, whole-of-government approach to addressing our nuclear policy and identifying concrete steps to enhance our national security.

The Department of Defense led the review, but for the first time the Department of State fully participated in discussing the issues and making recommendations to the President.

And, for the first time, the Review is an unclassified document. There is no classified version.

I want to address the diplomatic implications of the Nuclear Posture Review as well as the rationale behind some of the most discussed issues, including the updated Negative Security Assurance. But I first want to say a few words about the New START Treaty and how it relates to the NPR.

The United States and Russia can safely reduce our nuclear forces because the threat environment has changed. The relationship between the United States and Russia has improved and today's most pressing nuclear threats come from terrorists and additional countries seeking nuclear weapons. A large-scale nuclear attack is no longer the most pressing threat. The conclusions of our recent Nuclear Posture Review reflect that reality.

I spent much of March at the table in Geneva to help conclude the New START Treaty. It will improve U.S. and international security by reducing and limiting U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear forces. It will promote strategic stability by ensuring transparency and predictability regarding U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear forces over the life of the Treaty. And it will advance our nuclear nonproliferation agenda.

The U.S. push for meaningful, lower limits on deployed warheads and their delivery vehicles and launchers was guided by rigorous analysis in the early months of the Nuclear Posture Review. The Treaty's verification regime will provide each side confidence that the other is upholding its obligations. The new Treaty gives our military the flexibility to structure, deploy, and maintain our forces in ways that best meet U.S. national security interests.

The Treaty does not constrain U.S. missile defense programs or long-range conventional strike capabilities.

The United States will continue to improve our missile defenses, as needed, to defend the U.S. homeland, our deployed forces, and our allies and partners.

Russia's unilateral statement on missile defenses is not an integral part of the New START Treaty. It's not legally binding. It won't constrain U.S. missile defense programs. As the administration's Ballistic Missile Defense Review and our budget plans make clear, we will deploy the most effective missile defenses possible, and the New START Treaty does not impose any additional cost or inconvenience to those efforts.

Of course, under the new Treaty, the United States will continue to maintain a safe, secure, and effective strategic nuclear force to protect ourselves and our allies and partners.

The President also set forth a goal to bolster our nonproliferation efforts and the NPR identifies many of the steps this administration is taking and will pursue to achieve that objective. One of the ways to do that is to show non-nuclear weapon states that there are security benefits to complying with the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and other nonproliferation obligations.

We want to reinforce and enhance the global nonproliferation regime and to give greater incentives to non-nuclear states not to seek or acquire nuclear weapons. To do this, we have updated our Negative Security Assurance (NSA) to make it clear that non-nuclear weapon states party to the NPT who abide by their nuclear nonproliferation obligations do not have to fear a nuclear attack from the United States.

Some have suggested that the new policy might lead some states to be less fearful of the consequences of using chemical and biological weapons against us.

Others have alleged that the new policy takes options off of the table to deal with states like Iran or North Korea, as well as nuclear-armed states.

Let me address both starting with the first critique. For non-nuclear-weapon states-parties to the NPT in compliance with their nuclear nonproliferation commitments, we are removing only the possibility of nuclear retaliation. We retain the option and willingness to use devastating conventional force to deter and respond to any aggression, especially with chemical or biological weapons, against the United States, our forces, or our allies and partners by such states.

No one should doubt the resolve and conventional military capabilities of the United States to respond to such aggression with devastating effect and to hold accountable those responsible whether national leaders giving the orders or military officers carrying them out. Deterrence depends on the credibility of a possible response. A massive and potent U.S. conventional response to such non-nuclear aggression is highly credible. By reducing unnecessary ambiguity in our declaratory policy, we lose little if nothing in terms of our capabilities or our deterrent posture, and gain a critical tool in pursuing a more robust and effective nonproliferation system.

Furthermore, we prudently reserve the right to readjust the Negative Security Assurance if warranted by the future evolution and proliferation of the biological weapons threat and U.S. capacities to counter that threat.

Second, the updated Negative Security Assurance does not alter our current policy on the use of nuclear weapons toward nuclear-armed states or states not party to the NPT or not in compliance with their nuclear nonproliferation obligations, such as North Korea and Iran. In other words, for this group of states, we have left all options on the table.

I want to stress that our updated assurance does not suggest an increased threat of using nuclear weapons against countries not covered by this pledge. In the NPR, we state the United States would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners.

Nevertheless, there remains a narrow range of contingencies in which U.S. nuclear weapons may still play a role in deterring a conventional, chemical, or biological attack against the United States or its allies and partners. We therefore are not prepared to adopt a policy declaring that the “sole purpose” of nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack. But we will work toward creating the conditions that would enable such a policy to be safely adopted. There is no timetable for such a step and, as President Obama has said, while we move forward on our vision of a world without nuclear weapons, we must confront the world as it is.

Nuclear weapons have not been used in nearly 65 years. The bar for their use is high and this NPR recognizes and seeks to reinforce that fact. It is in the U.S. interest and that of all other nations that the long record of nuclear non-use be extended forever.

Let me close on this issue of declaratory policy by noting that former Secretaries of Defense William Perry and Jim Schlesinger, the leaders of the bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission, said the NPR approach was “a sensible variation on a theme that the U.S. should support nonproliferation while preserving deterrence for itself and its allies.”

In general, they noted that the NPR was “compatible” with their commission’s recommendations and that the review provides a “comprehensive and pragmatic plan for reducing nuclear risks to the United States.”

Our commitment to defend our national security interests and our allies and partners in Europe, the Pacific and elsewhere has never been stronger.

In this regard, the NPR reaffirms the principle of close cooperation with our allies around the world and maintains our firm commitment to mutual security.

We will work with our partners to reinforce regional security architectures, such as missile defenses and other conventional military capabilities.

And, I want to repeat what I said earlier, the United States will continue to maintain a safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent for ourselves and our allies so long as these weapons exist anywhere in the world.

Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member McCain, I look forward to working with this Committee and the Senate on these important matters.

Thank you for holding this important hearing and I look forward to any questions you might have for me.

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