The United States’ nuclear stockpile has decreased dramatically since the end of the Cold War, from over 22,000 warheads to 5,200 as of December 2009, of which 2,200 strategic, and another 500 tactical, are actively deployed. Many factors led to this decline, but none was more important than the collapse of the Soviet Union, the main actor this arsenal was meant to deter. Today, as the Perry-Schlesinger Commission Report explains, “The nuclear deterrent of the United States need not play anything like the central role that it did for decades in U.S. military policy and national security strategy. But it remains crucial for some important problems.” A fundamental debate on the importance of nuclear weapons in U.S. military policy—and of the force structure to support nuclear deterrence—is sorely needed.

Deterrence is psychological. It is based on a would-be attacker’s perception of the ability of the targeted country or regime to retaliate. A credible deterrent, by this definition, could be less than one-fifth the size of our current arsenal, and might number no more than 500 strategic warheads. By that logic, for example, five ballistic missile submarines, each carrying 96 thermonuclear warheads, would be sufficient to deter any leader foolish enough to even contemplate a strike on the United States.

This was the rationalization for the nuclear triad, created in the late 1950s, as the U.S. arsenal surpassed 10,000 in the midst of a bitter arms race with the Soviet Union. The bombers came first. Then missiles, initially deployed from forward locations, and eventually ICBMs that could be launched from the United States. The third leg of the triad, submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), came on line in late 1960, with the deployment of the USS George Washington, the first Polaris submarine.

Estimates vary, but the U.S. arsenal peaked in 1967 at around 32,000 warheads—many of these tactical, battlefield weapons—and the total number has fallen steadily ever since. Per the terms of the Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty, the U.S. strategic arsenal is required to number between 1,700 and 2,200 deployed warheads by the end of 2012. The United States reduced its forces below the upper limit in late 2008.

Even if one questions the wisdom, or even the morality, of developing nuclear weapons in the 1940s, and of deploying them in large numbers in the 1950s and 1960s, the decision to do so at multiple locations and on a variety of different delivery vehicles was strategically defensible. However, although it is difficult to say precisely when, at some point the triad went from being prudent to questionable, and, ultimately, from questionable to absurd. In the near future, as the number of strategic warheads continues to fall—some predict that the follow-on START treaty might stipulate no more than 1,675 warheads and 800 delivery vehicles—the absurdity of maintaining the triad only grows. It is simply nonsensical to retain a cold war force structure more than 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The time when the United States had more than 20,000 warheads, and was fac-
“As we continue to make deep cuts in our nuclear arsenal, the strategic triad should become a dyad, and we should debate the merits of bombers versus ICBMs versus SLBMs using a specific set of objective criteria.”

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