

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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## Morton Halperin Urges the U.S. to Reconsider its Nuclear Policy Towards Russia and China

“The Obama Administration has inherited a nuclear posture, which essentially hasn’t changed since the Cold War,” affirmed Morton Halperin, Senior Advisor to the Open Society Institute. Halperin has served in various capacities under the Johnson, Nixon and Clinton administrations. He appeared at Columbia University to discuss the role of nuclear weapons in the 21st Century, particularly the policies of the United States, Russia and China. His talk was part of an annual lecture series co-sponsored by the Harriman and Weatherhead Institutes in honor of distinguished scholars Hugh Borton and Philip E. Mosely.

Halperin’s lecture occurred during a time when Russia and the United States are frantically negotiating to renew the 18-year-old Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty signed by the U.S. and the former Soviet Union in 1991 (START I), and then again in 1993 (START II). The new treaty was due on December 5, 2009. According to the State Department website, START II has reduced the nuclear arsenals of the two countries by 50%, and the upcoming treaty proposes even more ambitious reductions. This seems monumental, but Halperin argues that despite numerical reductions of warheads, the policy remains the same—we continue to treat Russia as our enemy.

“The adequacy of the U.S. force is still testing against a surprise Russian attack,” Halperin explained. Currently, U.S. nuclear posture calls for its arsenals to be prepared for immediate response in the case of Russian nuclear aggression, and for the capability of inflicting immense destruction on Russia. “We continue to believe that in order to deter a Russian attack, we need to uphold the Russian fear that we will strike before they do.” Halperin regards this attitude as outdated.

“There will not, in my view, be any circumstance when the President will face a Russian attack, and certainly not one that he needs to respond to within seconds,” Halperin avowed, stressing that in keeping these requirements, the U.S. runs a policy that is not only costly, but dangerous. “The greatest nuclear threat to the U.S. is Russia’s misperception of a potential attack. If we reduce our requirements, we reduce the risk of

an attack on the United States.” In addition to a hair-trigger alert, U.S. nuclear posture requires the capability to attack every important target in Russia by two warheads from two different delivery systems.

Halperin has been advocating nuclear reductions since the height of the Cold War—in the 1970s he urged the U.S. to begin the disarmament process even in the case that the Soviet Union failed to respond with its own reductions. He is a controversial figure within the political community due to his resignation as a White House aide in protest of the U.S. bombing campaign against Cambodia during the Nixon Administration, and because of a lawsuit he filed against the U.S. government in response to a wiretap on his home telephone—*The New York Times* obtained classified information about the Cambodia campaign, and the Nixon Administration investigated the leak by tapping the phones of national security aides and journalists, including Halperin, for 21 months. Halperin dismissed the suit in 1992, nearly 20 years after he filed it, in exchange for a letter of apology from Henry A. Kissinger, President Nixon’s National Security Adviser at the time of the phone-tapping.

An alumnus of Columbia College, Halperin recalled a course he took there in 1958. “Most of what I have to say today, I learned during this senior year seminar—we haven’t learned much since then, and the government has learned even less.” Halperin conveyed that the current administration has had two opportunities to modify nuclear policy—the nuclear posture review and the new strategic arms treaty with Russia. “I think it is now clear that despite the uncertainties about both, neither of them will bring about any real change.”

Halperin had anticipated discussing the nuclear posture review, which was scheduled for release earlier this year. Because it has been delayed, he offered his conjectures on what the review might contain. “As far as I can tell, there will be no reconsideration of the fundamental doctrine. This means that we will maintain a thousand or more warheads, ready to respond at a moment’s notice

to mythical surprise attacks.” Halperin expects the strategic arms treaty to be signed soon. “While I think it will be important and useful, I don’t think it will change nuclear posture,” he reflected.

Over 90% of the world’s nuclear weapons belong to Russia and the United States, and any nuclear reduction effort must begin with the efforts of these two countries. President Obama’s nuclear speech in Prague last April appeared to be a hopeful beginning for the reduction process. The President announced three goals—moving towards a world without nuclear weapons, maintaining a safe, secure and reliable arsenal until that time, and reducing the size of our reliance on nuclear weapons. “As far as I can tell, only his middle point has gotten through to the bureaucracy,” Halperin said with regret. The President’s new budget allots enormous spending for the maintenance of U.S. nuclear arsenals, while there is nothing to indicate a move towards a world without nuclear weapons. “I must confess I don’t know how to move towards such a world.”

Halperin acknowledged that there are promises to “vastly reduce the size of our non-deployed nuclear arsenal.” Currently the U.S. nuclear arsenal is divided into four categories—weapons that are deployed, weapons standing by to be deployed in a crisis, weapons maintained for the possibility of needing more weapons, and those earmarked for destruction. Halperin joked that the only difference between the weapons earmarked for destruction (which number in the thousands) and those we are maintaining for a contingency, is the sign labeling them.

Stressing that his joke was only a slight exaggeration, Halperin imparted that there is a 10-15 year plan for destroying the weapons awaiting destruction. “It would only take a few days to move any weapon from the ‘awaiting destruction’ pile to the ‘maintaining for a contingency’ pile.” Halperin projects that about 1,000 weapons will be transferred from the contingency pile to the awaiting destruction pile; they will be destroyed in about fifteen years. Numbers of active weapons, however, will only face modest reductions. “This means that we will maintain a thousand or more deployed warheads, and that we will continue to maintain a force on hair-trigger alert ready to respond to surprise attack.”

From the Russian point of view, “there has been a complete role reversal,” stated Halperin. “Just as the U.S. feared Russian conventional superiority during the Cold War (which I don’t think ever existed), Russia now seeks to use nuclear weapons for what it views is its conventional inferiority vis-à-vis the NATO forces.” Halperin sees Russia’s fear as more

grounded than the U.S. Cold War fear, because modern economic constraints have stalled Russia’s nuclear capacity in comparison to that of the U.S.

Russia relies less on a hair-trigger nuclear force (although Halperin believes that they do have one) than on a large-scale deployment of tactical nuclear weapons—weapons they plan to deliver close to their territory. In 1993, Russia withdrew the “no first use” pledge it made in 1982. “Russia has said that it will attack first if it needs to redress a nuclear balance.” Halperin reasoned that it will be “no more successful in making these threats appear credible than the U.S. has been.”

“The Russians are clearly concerned about the growing U.S. capacity against their strategic nuclear forces,” stated Halperin, adding that Russia has a longstanding fear of what they refer to as “decapitation”—the prevention of Russian retaliation through the obliteration of its command and control system. “They are afraid that even if some of their missiles survive an American attack, they will not be able to deliver an ‘attack’ order to their force.” Halperin illuminated that this fear is responsible for Russia’s reaction to the deployment of ballistic missile defenses in Poland. “The Russians never thought that these missiles could actually destroy their own, they worried that we would deploy surface to surface missiles that would assault their command and control system and inhibit their ability to respond to an attack.”

The United States has recently revealed plans to install missiles in Romania. This has been partially responsible for the delay in negotiations. “If we had waited with the Romania announcement, the treaty would already be signed” Halperin speculated.

Halperin urges the U.S. to adopt a policy of “minimal deterrence.” He believes “a very small nuclear force will be sufficient,” given the “extraordinarily small likelihood of a Russian attack.” As for maintaining allies, “we need to guarantee them that we will respond in the case that they are under nuclear attack—a small force is more than sufficient for this purpose as well.” Halperin argued against the requirement for immediate response (a policy which, according to *The Washington Post*, costs the U.S. \$33 billion a year to maintain). “Any possible American nuclear retaliation should be days, if not weeks after there has been an attack. Certainly not minutes and seconds, the way it is required now—the President needs time to determine what he is going to do.”

Halperin contends that U.S. doctrine should specify that we will “under no circumstances” be the first to attack. “Both sides have to agree to go to levels far below 1000 warheads,” he asserted. One thousand warheads is the current requirement

for both Russia and the United States. “Since the 1950s there have only been modest reductions in the numbers of active weapons.”

In 1997, President Bill Clinton signed a classified nuclear directive that shifted the rhetoric of U.S. nuclear strategy from preparing for a nuclear war to being ready to deter nuclear attack. While Clinton’s directive changed the language, actual policy shifts were slight. According to Halperin, “the major nuclear policy change initiated by President Clinton was the removal of the default on the U.S. targeting system. After Clinton’s directive, the system had no default, but a range of options for the President to choose from. The first option is to destroy Russia.”

U.S. policy towards China differs from its policy towards Russia. China, which developed its nuclear force in the late 1950s, was initially treated by the U.S. as an extension of the Soviet Union. It was assumed that if there was a Soviet attack, the Chinese would also be a part of it and that we would retaliate against them simultaneously. “Until the Sino-Soviet split came to the attention of people in Washington, we only had one plan—‘The Single Integrated Operational Plan.’” After the split the American government created a separate deterrent against China. “We had to have a separate force that we withheld from Russian attack in order to have it for China in case we got into a nuclear war with them after we ended a nuclear war with the Soviet Union,” elucidated Halperin.

“One of the changes made—I think under the Bush administration—was to decide that a Chinese attack was a lesser threat. We no longer withhold part of our forces for the possibility of using them against China.” Halperin stressed that we still maintain the capacity to inflict tremendous destruction. China, on the other hand, continues to sustain a small nuclear force.

“Chinese nuclear policy has always puzzled American strategic analysts, and led to incorrect predictions about the size and deployment of the Chinese nuclear force,” Halperin disclosed. “In the 1950s and 60s, we were worried that Mao didn’t understand how destructive nuclear weapons are. In fact, he understood better than we did.” Halperin affirmed that the Chinese are aware that it only takes a small quantity of nuclear weapons to deter attack. “They have a very small nuclear force and it would take them a considerable amount of time to launch a nuclear strike.” Currently, China adheres to a “no first use” pledge.

The biggest point of contention between China and the U.S. has been on the issue of Taiwan, which the Chinese government has long sought to reunite with the mainland, and the U.S.

government has pledged to protect in the case of an armed confrontation. Taiwan has depended on the U.S. for military protection since Truman sent a fleet to the Taiwan Strait in the 1950s. In the mid 1990s, China angered the international community by conducting aggressive missile testing in Taiwan waters, an event known as the Taiwan Straits Crisis. In 2001 U.S. nuclear posture revealed that the U.S. might be willing to use nuclear arms to defend Taiwan in the case of a clash with China. The matter continues to cause tension between China and the U.S.—just last month Obama announced the sale of \$6.4 billion worth of arms to Taiwan, an action which China threatened to respond to with economic sanctions. “If a nuclear confrontation with China occurs, it is most likely to happen in the event of a conflict in the Taiwan Straits,” stated Halperin.

“The U.S. needs to engage in discussion with China. We haven’t done it, in part because we don’t know what our position is.” Halperin urges that we demonstrate to China that we are working to change our nuclear policy. He fears that if the U.S. keeps developing its nuclear force, it will drive the Chinese to develop theirs. “Russia and the U.S. reached a policy of nuclear deterrence.” The two countries acknowledge that they would destroy each other if they ever engaged in a nuclear war. “We have not reached this conclusion with China.” Halperin lamented that we treat China as a “renegade nuclear power whose nuclear capability we want to destroy.” He advocates that we stop treating China as an enemy, otherwise “it is unrealistic to expect that they will cooperate with us the way we need them to.” Unfortunately, Halperin predicts that the nuclear posture review will not address these issues. “It seems to give even less attention to China than it did to the overall posture with Russia. I think nothing will change as a result of the review.”

China’s cooperation is essential to the U.S., if it wants to move forward on international nonproliferation issues. The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which was adopted by the United Nations in 1996, has yet to come into effect. This treaty seeks to ban nuclear testing, a step that would make it difficult for countries to build nuclear weapons. President Clinton signed the treaty in 1996, but, due to a mostly Republican opposition, the Senate failed to ratify it three years later. China has also signed but not ratified the treaty, while Russia was able to ratify it in the year 2000.

Obama has pledged that his administration will pursue ratification. Once ratified, the U.S. still needs to persuade India, Pakistan, Israel, Egypt, Iran, North Korea and China. “In order to

convince other countries, it is essential that Russia, China and the U.S. cooperate,” Halperin encouraged, adding that the three countries need to reach an agreement about “what is prohibited, what isn’t under the treaty, and effective inspection measures.”

Halperin believes that cooperation with Russia and China is the only way that we can approach a world without nuclear weapons. “Cooperation on arms control measures will make possible the reduction of American and Russian nuclear arsenals to levels far below 1000, perhaps a

hundred or several hundred. It will allow the countries to reach an agreement that they will not threaten anyone with the use of these weapons, but maintain them solely for the purpose of making sure that no other state uses them. In my view this is the closest we can come to a world without nuclear weapons,” Halperin concluded.

*Reported by Masha Udensiva-Brenner*