United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 22, 2011

The Honorable Barack Obama
President
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Obama:

The 2010 Nuclear Posture Review report states that "following ratification and entry into force of New START, the Administration will pursue a follow-on agreement with Russia that binds both countries to further reductions in all nuclear weapons." To support these reductions, we understand the Administration is conducting an updated assessment of deterrence requirements, and that you may soon issue new nuclear weapons guidance that would direct significant reductions below New START force levels. If you choose to direct changes to U.S. nuclear weapons employment, targeting and deterrence policy, or offer proposals to the Russian Federation related to a new round of arms reductions, we urge you to consult first with Congress.

While it is your prerogative to issue guidance on U.S. nuclear targeting and deterrence policy and the size and shape of our nuclear arsenal, only through consultation with Congress can you achieve the consensus necessary to sustain any changes to the nation's strategic posture. Congress's authorization and appropriation will be necessary to permit reductions in U.S. nuclear forces, including current proposals by the Administration to significantly reduce the strategic and technical stockpiles (the "hedge").

Since the 1960s, Democratic and Republican administrations have rejected the "MAD" approach in their official strategic nuclear doctrines. For example, the Carter administration held that, while "assured destruction is necessary for nuclear deterrence, it is not sufficient…Effective deterrence requires forces of sufficient size and flexibility to attack selectively a range of military and other targets yet enable us to hold back a significant and enduring reserve."[[1]] The U.S. has adopted a nuclear force structure and targeting doctrine that emphasizes flexibility and multiple strategic force options, rather than a minimum, assured second strike retaliatory capability.

Since the end of the Cold War, U.S. strategic nuclear policy and deterrence requirements have been remarkably consistent. While successive presidents have sought to reduce the number of U.S. nuclear weapons from Cold War highs, several key principles have guided those reductions and the strategic nuclear doctrine underpinning the use of nuclear weapons. First, U.S. nuclear forces must be of great strength and flexibility to deter a wide range of threats to U.S. vital interests. Second, U.S. nuclear forces must be seen as capable of assuring our allies

[1] Harold Brown, "The Department of Defense Statement on Strategic Military Balance," U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, July 11, 1979, p. 3.

that we remain committed to their security, particularly in the face of growing WMD threats. Third, U.S. forces must remain large enough to dissuade other countries from seeking strategic equivalence with the United States. Fourth, the U.S. nuclear force posture should have the survivability and characteristics necessary to defeat potential nuclear adversaries and limit damage to the United States in the case of war. Any deviation from these key principles – perhaps in an attempt to move toward a minimum deterrence posture – would not be in our security interests.

Very low levels of nuclear forces, such as the arbitrary levels of 500 or 1000 warheads per side advocated by some in the international arms control community, would have important and as yet unknown consequences for nuclear stability; the strategic significance of cheating by others, for example, becomes more profound as force levels are reduced. Moreover, such low force levels could invite other nuclear powers to seek strategic nuclear equivalence with the United States and weaken the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent in the eyes of our allies, which have come to depend on the U.S. nuclear umbrella for their ultimate security

With the exception of the disparity in Russian and American tactical nuclear weapons, today's strategic nuclear balance is stable and the credibility of U.S. nuclear security guarantees remains high. We must be careful not to upset this favorable strategic situation by pursuing deep strategic nuclear force reductions without a clear understanding of all the strategic implications such an action will bring about. Instead, Congress and the Administration should work together to address the true dangers of nuclear proliferation: the nuclear programs of Iran, North Korea and Syria and the prevention of nuclear terrorism, both of which you appropriately highlighted in your 2009 Prague speech. There can be broad, bipartisan support for measures to deal with these threats, as was demonstrated by the nearly unanimous support for the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions and Divestment Act.

However, without close and frequent consultation with Congress, including the Senate's bipartisan National Security Working Group, any changes you choose to make to our nation's nuclear deterrence or nuclear targeting guidance policies will be difficult to achieve. This is especially the case with regard to any potential treaty or proposal for a treaty, that may be offered to the Russian Federation this year; as you know, the Senate's role in treaty making includes both advice and consent. Moreover, it would be troubling if the Administration proposed reductions to U.S. nuclear forces that reduced your commitment to modernize U.S. nuclear warheads, the TRIAD of delivery systems, and the nuclear weapons infrastructure at at least the levels you proposed and pledged during the New START treaty ratification process.

We look forward to hearing from you soon and to a regular, frequent and ongoing consultative process on these matters.

Sincerely,

Kelly Ayotte

Dan Coats

John Hanasso

Roy Blunt

John Boozman

Clara Kim

John Ensign

Tom Cohen

Ron Johnson

[illegible]

John McCain

J. E. Rich

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