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U.S. Strategic Nuclear Forces: Background, Developments, and Issues

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Introduction

During the Cold War, the U.S. nuclear arsenal contained many types of delivery vehicles for nuclear weapons. These included short-range missiles and artillery for use on the battlefield, medium-range missiles and aircraft that could strike targets beyond the theater of battle, short- and medium-range systems based on surface ships, long-range missiles based on U.S. territory and submarines, and heavy bombers that could threaten Soviet targets from their bases in the United States. The short- and medium-range systems are considered nonstrategic nuclear weapons and have been referred to as battlefield, tactical, and theater nuclear weapons. The long-range missiles and heavy bombers are known as strategic nuclear delivery vehicles.

In 1990, as the Cold War was drawing to a close and the Soviet Union entered its final year, the United States had more than 12,000 nuclear warheads deployed on 1,875 strategic nuclear delivery vehicles.¹ As of July 1, 2009, according to the counting rules in the original Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), the United States had reduced to 5,916 nuclear warheads on 1,188 strategic nuclear delivery vehicles.² Under the terms of the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty (known as the Moscow Treaty) between the United States and Russia, this number was to decline to no more than 2,200 operationally deployed strategic nuclear warheads by the end of 2012. The U.S. Department of State reported that the United States had reached that level, with only 1,968 operationally deployed strategic warheads in December 2009.³ The New START Treaty, signed by President Obama and Russia's President Medvedev on April 8, 2010, reduced those forces further, to no more than 1,550 warheads on deployed launchers and heavy bombers.⁴ According to the U.S. Department of State, on September 1, 2021, the United States had 1,389 warheads on 665 deployed ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers, within a total of 800 deployed and nondeployed ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers.⁵

Although these numbers do not count the same categories of nuclear weapons, they indicate that the number of deployed warheads on U.S. strategic nuclear forces has declined significantly in the decades following the end of the Cold War. Yet, nuclear weapons continue to play a key role in U.S. national security strategy, and the United States does not, at this time, plan to either eliminate its nuclear weapons or abandon the strategy of nuclear deterrence that has served as a core concept in U.S. national security strategy for more than 60 years. In a speech in Prague on April 5, 2009, President Obama highlighted "America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons." But he recognized that this goal would not be reached quickly, and probably not in his lifetime.⁶ And, even though President Obama pledged to

¹ Natural Resources Defense Council. Table of U.S. Strategic Offensive Force Loadings. Archive of Nuclear Data. <http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/nudb/datab1.asp>. The same source indicates that the Soviet Union, in 1990, had just over 11,000 warheads on 2,332 strategic nuclear delivery vehicles.

² Russia, by the same accounting, had 3,909 warheads on 814 delivery vehicles. See U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Verification, Compliance and Inspection. Fact Sheet. START Aggregate Numbers of Strategic Offensive Weapons. October 1, 2009. Washington, DC.

³ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty: Promoting Disarmament*, Washington, DC, April 27, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/141497.pdf>.

⁴ The parties are to meet this limit within seven years of entry-into-force, which could occur in early 2011. For more information on the New START Treaty, see CRS Report R41219, *The New START Treaty: Central Limits and Key Provisions*, by Amy F. Woolf.

⁵ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of State, Bureau of Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance, *New START Treaty Aggregate Numbers of Strategic Offensive Forces*, Fact Sheet, Washington, DC, <https://www.state.gov/new-start-treaty-aggregate-numbers-of-strategic-offensive-arms/>.

⁶ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, *Remarks by President Obama*, Prague, Czech Republic, April 5,