
A New Deal on Disarmament: The Case for American Leadership in Combating Nuclear Proliferation

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As the United States enters a new stage of non-state threats to national security we must still grapple with the ever-present danger of nuclear capabilities developed during the Cold War. As the world changes before our eyes, the U.S. must take bold steps to reduce any likelihood that such weapons will be mobilized, accidentally or deliberately.

Looking ahead 10 to 15 years, it is difficult to predict what kind of a country Russia in particular will be and how its relationship with the United States will evolve. Looming above this uncertainty is one very serious risk: the existence within Russia of some 20,000 nuclear warheads. During the Cold War there were concerns that the Soviet Union might either deliberately or accidentally launch nuclear weapons at the United States. The probability of either such event has diminished markedly with the easing of tensions between the two superpowers. Unfortunately, the risk that nuclear weapons will be used, even on a small scale, has not disappeared. Consider the following five scenarios:

Russia: A loss of control by either political or military authorities in Russia, combined with a perception that the United States deliberately caused Russia's current problems, could lead to the use of nuclear weapons.

India and Pakistan: The fragile state of relations between these two countries could lead to the use of nuclear weapons. They are the first two nuclear-armed nations in history that actually go to war with each other from time to time. A nuclear exchange between these two powers would not impact the United

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States directly, but what would the United States need to do to keep such a situation from spiraling out of control?

Iraq: For almost two years, United Nations inspectors have been unable to keep track of what is happening in Iraq with respect to nuclear weapons. When the U.N. entered the country following the Gulf War in 1991, it appeared that Iraq was very close to achieving the capability to manufacture nuclear weapons. If it builds them now, will Iran and Saudi Arabia feel compelled to follow suit? How would Israel react? The Middle East could become a nuclear tinderbox given such a scenario.

North Korea: In 1994 the United States induced North Korea to halt its program for developing nuclear weapons. How long can one expect this arrangement to last?

Terrorism: Since the events of September 11, we certainly know how heinous terrorism can be. It is frightening to think of the possibility that such terrorists may acquire a nuclear weapon, possibly resulting from a lack of firm controls over nuclear materials worldwide or from terrorist groups gaining access to weapons inside the countries that harbor these groups today.

The impulse behind these and other possible thrusts towards nuclear weapons has been strengthened by the superlative military performance of the United States in the 1991 Gulf War. The outcome of that conflict made it clear that the possibility of successfully challenging the United States in conventional warfare is very slim. Other nations must wonder, however, whether possessing even a few nuclear weapons might deter the United States from engaging them militarily. If the proliferation of these weapons places them in the hands of nations and leaders who some consider irresponsible, the occasional use of small numbers of nuclear weapons is a very real and frightening possibility.

Reflecting on the past decade of American nuclear policy, one realizes how little the U.S. government has done to ward off the prospect of such occasional use scenarios. Not one nuclear weapons reduction agreement was consummated between America and Russia during the entire Clinton administration. Thus the new Bush administration's skepticism towards traditional nuclear arms control through negotiated treaties is quite warranted. Historically, a series of treaties has led to a reduction in nuclear weaponry by about 50 percent since 1972. That may seem impressive in relative terms, but in absolute numbers the score sheet shows that after almost 30 years there are still over 30,000 nuclear warheads in the world. These numbers are almost as dangerous as the 70,000 nuclear weapons in existence in the early 1970s.

Advocates of traditional arms control envision a worldwide regime of legally binding treaties. This is a laudable long-term objective, but there is a pressing need to move more rapidly today. During the Cold War, the reduction of nuclear weapons was not seen as a truly urgent issue. Sobered by the nuclear

standoff over missiles in Cuba in 1962, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union thought that a nuclear war would actually occur, and hence there was no sense of urgency behind nuclear arms control. A sense of urgency is needed, however, lest nuclear weapons proliferation today makes it even more difficult to prevent the actual use of these weapons in the future.

How can proliferation be discouraged? It is clear that the United States cannot lead the world in a campaign against proliferation while simultaneously holding onto thousands of warheads. As the most powerful nation on earth, it is illogical to require thousands of these

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immense weapons to maintain American security while contending that Iraq, Iran, or North Korea do not need one or two for their own purposes. This is not to say that a change in the U.S. nuclear posture will dampen the enthusiasm of those nations to proliferate. It does mean, however, that we are in a position today to persuade other responsible nations of the world not to abet such proliferation. It is necessary to convince China, Russia, Germany, France, and others not to sell components or materials that could be used to create nuclear weapons. We must persuade those nations and many others to join together in an intelligence-collecting network that will provide insights into how and where countries such as Iraq, Iran, and North Korea are seeking to acquire the capability for building nuclear weapons. Until the United States reduces its own arsenal and communicates clearly to the rest of the world that we are devaluing these weapons to a point where, domestically, they are no longer considered instruments of war, we will not have the moral stature to pressure others to constrain proliferation.

It is now necessary to take a time-out on treaties and find new avenues for immediately reducing nuclear weapons. Our model should be guided by former President George Bush's actions in 1991. The then-President unilaterally withdrew most of America's smaller, tactical nuclear weapons from positions overseas. Mikhail Gorbachev and Russia very quickly undertook similar initiatives. There was no treaty, there were no inspections, but the world is safer in nuclear terms today than it was before these moves.

One limitation to possible unilateral initiatives today is a practical limit to the number of nuclear weapons, approximately several thousand warheads per year, which the Americans or Russians can demobilize in any given period. It is necessary to move more quickly than this. We must look for a comprehensive way to demobilize nuclear weapons that will have an immediate, visible impact. Only then can we become more comfortable when thinking about the status of Russia's nuclear arsenal.

The approach needed is “strategic escrow.” An example of this method would be if the United States military were to remove 1,000 warheads from missiles, bombers, or submarines, and place them in storage at least 200 miles away. The Russians would be invited to place observers on these storage sites. Those observers would have the authority only to count incoming and outgoing items, but they could not restrain any actions. In such a scenario there would be no risk to the United States, as these weapons could be reconstituted in only a matter of days should the need arise. The hope, of course, is that the Russians would follow suit. In fact, they would be forced to. The Russian nuclear arsenal is in inexorable decline today, which explains why President Putin is advocating that both the United States and Russia immediately reduce their arsenals to approximately 1,000 warheads each. The problem facing Russia is that their nuclear weapons were designed to last approximately 15 years. The intent was to replace them *in toto* at the end of that time. This contrasts with U.S. plans to keep its weapons much longer through continual refurbishment and replacement of components. With Russia having failed to replace a significant number of its weapons since 1991, its arsenal is spiraling into disrepair. They must welcome any plan, like strategic escrow, that would encourage commensurate U.S. reductions.

A U.S. failure to seize the opportunity to reduce its arsenal could lead to a large disparity between the Russian and U.S. arsenals. The consequences of such a situation could be very dangerous, either by driving Russia to sit on hair-trigger alert or to retain its obsolescent weapons on-line. If, however, the U.S. could institute the practice of strategic escrow, both sides could cut their numbers of ready nuclear warheads to fewer than 1,000 in four to five years.

The next step would be to bring other countries with nuclear weapons, namely Britain, France, China, Pakistan, India, and (presumably) Israel, into the program. The objective would be to incorporate these nuclear powers into a “condominium” where each would retain not more than 200 nuclear warheads, all in strategic escrow, under international observation. Some nations may object to this approach, arguing that it would leave the rest of the world in an inferior position to the eight existing nuclear powers. While that would be true, the nuclear might of those eight would at least be considerably circumscribed. Until the world can find some way to bring about total nuclear disarmament, a condominium of eight nuclear powers with no nuclear weapons ready for immediate use represents the best compromise currently available.

Today, President Bush seeks to combine unilateral reductions in nuclear weapons with the creation of a national missile defense system. Countries around the world have raised several objections to this plan. One argument is that the construction of missile defenses will fracture the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, supposedly the “cornerstone” of nuclear arms control. The purpose of this treaty was to ensure that either the United States or the Soviet Union would be

vulnerable to a retaliatory attack if it were to start a nuclear war. What is being overlooked today is the reality that each country will remain vulnerable to retaliatory nuclear attack even if it were to build extremely effective national missile defenses.

What does it take to make Russia or the United States feel vulnerable to nuclear attack? It is not the 6,000 to 7,000 nuclear warheads which the United States has held pointed at the former Soviet Union for many years and which could wreak unimaginable devastation there. Even 100 nuclear warheads detonated on major cities of either country would change those societies permanently. One method of assessing the amount of prospective nuclear destruction that would deter the United States from initiating nuclear war is to explore the trade-off the American public would be willing to accept. Considering public reactions to the devastating loss of life after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, I find it extremely unlikely that the United States would start a nuclear war with Russia if there existed a threat of even a handful of retaliatory warheads reaching American shores. In fact, the United States is deterred by the prospect of just one nuclear warhead leaking through any combination of offensive and defensive structures we might erect. Furthermore, it is impractical to think that we could create a combination of offense and defense that would ensure against such small leakage. The nineteenth century German military strategist Karl von Clausewitz reminds us that there is always "friction" in war because something always goes wrong with equipment or personnel. No American president would ever feel comfortable initiating a nuclear war on the assumption that the United States would sustain zero damage in return. No military officer would ever assure a president of 100 percent performance by any military system, be it offensive or defensive.

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There are, of course, other central questions to be considered: Would Russian psychology differ from American and would Russian society be willing to accept large numbers of nuclear detonations on their soil in order to perpetrate a nuclear war against the United States? These are difficult questions to answer. The more pertinent concern, however, is that this is an issue of life or death. No head of state could contemplate plunging the world into nuclear conflict without considering both the mortal threat to his or her citizens, and also the likelihood of his or her own death, underground shelters notwithstanding. The presumption that heads of state prefer to live than to die gives us one benchmark. Another is

the Cuban missile crisis, in which both Leonid Khrushchev and President Kennedy quite visibly backed away from the prospect of very limited nuclear war. Finally, Russia's economy, being about the size of Belgium's, is so small that its leaders would be well aware that recovery, even from a small nuclear attack, would be a very lengthy process. In terms of nuclear detonation threats, the United States must consider Russian deterrence as very close to its own.

Russia is not, however, the only country with nuclear weapons that the United States must consider. There are those who contend that China, with more than one billion inhabitants, would be sufficiently indifferent to loss of life to be willing to endure several nuclear detonations before being deterred. It is, indeed, more difficult to estimate Chinese psychology than Russian. There is, however, one benchmark in this case as well. For several years, China has limited itself to no more than 20 nuclear warheads able to strike the United States. In short, the

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Chinese appreciate that very low numbers of nuclear weapons act as an effective American deterrent. Such an understanding does not necessarily mean the Chinese are similarly deterred, but it does give a good indication that the two countries have similar views.

Interestingly, if deterrence does take effect at low numbers, most objections to national missile defenses are invalid. Such arguments rest on the assumption that with good defenses the United States would feel free to initiate nuclear war against even Russia or China. By extension, those countries would need to enhance their nuclear arsenals to ensure a robust retaliatory capability. Yet, if effective deterrence of the United States only requires one or two prospective detonations on its soil in retaliation, there would be no need for any such augmentation.

Whether the United States should actually build national missile defenses is not a question of how other nations will react or how many treaties will be broken. It is a question of how comfortable we want to feel about deflecting small nuclear attacks. These attacks could be initiated from Russia or China as a result of accidents or the loss of firm control over their nuclear weapons. There is also the prospect of a rogue nation or terrorist organization acquiring nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles to employ against the United States, despite the prospect of unimaginable damage in retaliation. In short, the U.S. must assess and balance the costs and capabilities of a prospective national missile defense system against the prospect of an actual assault on the country using these weapons.

As the country that developed nuclear weapons, the United States has a crushing responsibility today. It must assume a much more vigorous leadership role to ensure that the world does not devolve into a condition allowing for even the occasional use of nuclear weapons. The American public, however, mesmerized for decades by the myth that nuclear weapons give us security and provide military utility, is preventing this from happening. In fact, such weapons are unusable simply because their enormity makes any use dangerous to the user as well as to the opponent. There is no way to forecast what the ultimate outcome would be in any nuclear exchange, no matter how small. The public, therefore, needs to demonstrate enough interest in this unpleasant but critical topic to ensure that political leaders in both the Congress and the executive branch take this issue more seriously. If we are not moving towards strategic escrow, we must progress toward some other solution that will demonstrate America's determination to solve this problem quickly. For the sake of our children and grandchildren, this issue must be elevated on the national agenda. ■

