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FORUM: COLD WAR THINKING ON NUCLEAR POLICY?

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In a recent article on nuclear policy (Jan. 10, "Forward thinking on nuclear policy), Rep. David Hobson, Ohio Republican, demonstrated how, more than a decade after the end of the Cold War, outdated axioms still have a lock on thinking about nuclear policy. Even though dressed up as newthink, Mr. Hobson's arguments are wholly Cold War vintage.

The thorough Cold War grounding of Mr. Hobson's views on nuclear policy is best illustrated by his discussion of the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator (RNEP). The study of RNEP, requested by the Bush administration but opposed by Mr. Hobson, is intended to help U.S. officials understand how and whether modifying an existing nuclear weapon would enable the United States to hold at risk deeply buried, underground bunkers and facilities, possibly containing Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD).

In dismissing the proposed RNEP study as reflecting "the desires of Cold War fighters," Mr. Hobson misses the wholly contemporary deterrence need to know how and if these buried bunkers can be held at risk by a modified nuclear weapon. If leaders of rogue, terrorist states like North Korea believe they and their most fearsome weapons enjoy sanctuary from U.S. retaliation, they may be emboldened to commit aggression.

We know the secretive North Korean regime gives high priority to digging tunnels for its weapons. And U.S. officials have acknowledged publicly that our conventional weapons are inadequate to destroy some of these "sanctuaries."

The RNEP study is about how to help foreclose the possibility rogue leaders who have shown a willingness to take extreme risks will risk striking the United States or our allies in the belief they can then hide safely in their underground sanctuaries. This is a part of post-Cold War deterrence.

Mr. Hobson also argues the RNEP study sends "the wrong signal" to the rest of the world, encouraging countries such as North Korea and Iran to seek nuclear weapons. He says it is "hypocritical" for the United States to pursue such a study while advocating nuclear nonproliferation for others.

This notion a U.S. nuclear initiative will move others toward nuclear weapons and thereby undermine nonproliferation goals is the epitome of Cold War logic, and reflects a

complete misunderstanding of the main features of the post-Cold War security environment. An enduring Cold War axiom was, if the United States took a nuclear step, the Soviet Union would surely follow suit. This supposed "action-reaction" mechanism was thought to drive the arms race.

Mr. Hobson takes this old Cold War "action-reaction" axiom, and simply applies it to current rogue states, as if there are no differences between now and then, between the U.S.-Soviet Cold War rivalry and contemporary threats. It is hard to imagine a more confused picture of the post-Cold War world.

Rogue states such as North Korea and Iran want nuclear weapons largely to intimidate their neighbors, not to mimic U.S. nuclear programs. They also seek nuclear weapons as a way to deter U.S. assistance of friends and allies, who would be the victims of rogue aggression.

This way, some rogues seek to trump U.S. conventional military superiority, which they can not hope to defeat otherwise.

Mr. Hobson confuses these contemporary rogue motives to acquire nuclear weapons with those we attributed to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs, however, have nothing to do with that old "action-reaction" process. These countries do not seek to guard nuclear "parity" by following our nuclear steps. In fact, the United States could abandon nuclear weapons altogether and rogue countries like North Korea and Iran would continue pursuing nuclear weapons with equal or greater vigor.

RNEP has nothing to do with increasing rogue motivation to acquire nuclear weapons. Rather, in the post-Cold War environment, RNEP is much likelier to contribute to nuclear nonproliferation. How so? RNEP is a study designed to help sustain a credible U.S. nuclear deterrent as countries such as North Korea dig deep underground sanctuaries.

The continuing credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrence allows U.S. allies and friends, increasingly under nuclear threats from regional bullies, to forgo nuclear weapons. They can feel secure without having nuclear weapons when the United States has a strong, credible nuclear deterrent. Remove that credibility and those allies and friends long reliant on the U.S. nuclear umbrella will be pressed to find their own nuclear deterrent. There could hardly be a greater spur to nuclear proliferation.

The United States continues to shoulder special alliance responsibilities, particularly for extended nuclear deterrence.

Think the role of the nuclear umbrella is a thing of the past, or of little value to allies? Ask the Japanese who are threatened daily by North Korea. Far from inspiring nuclear proliferation, initiatives such as RNEP that help sustain a credible U.S. deterrent will contribute more to nuclear nonproliferation than any single other factor.

The United States is not "hypocritical" in seeking to sustain the credibility of its nuclear deterrent while advocating nuclear nonproliferation. Extended nuclear deterrence is a nuclear nonproliferation policy.

In sum, Mr. Hobson and others use old Cold War axioms and thinking to oppose RNEP and other elements of the president's strategic policy. The proposed RNEP study surely deserves debate, along with nuclear policy in general.

That debate, however, should be free of obsolete Cold War thinking, which now surely misleads more than enlightens.