

A More Dangerous World

Nuclear Zero Goal Is Not Practicable

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On Sept. 24, at a meeting of the U.N. Security Council, U.S. President Barack Obama called for nuclear disarmament. According to the British Guardian, he rejected the initial draft of the 2009 Nuclear Posture Review as "being too timid" and called instead for "more far-reaching options consistent with his goal of eventually abolishing nuclear weapons altogether."

The president's vision of abolishing nuclear weapons is not new, per se. Unprecedented is the apparent degree to which the administration believes that the goal of nuclear disarmament should shape contemporary U.S. nuclear policies. The beauty of the vision is obvious; but the stubborn fact is that global nuclear disarmament is infeasible in the world as we now know it. U.S. policies formulated in disregard of that fact could endanger U.S. and allied security.

Why so? First, more than 30 U.S. allies in Asia and Europe seek protection under the U.S. nuclear umbrella to deter emerging weapons-of-mass-destruction (WMD) threats in their region. Many U.S. friends and allies insist that their willingness to remain non-nuclear is tied to their confidence in the credibility of this U.S. extended nuclear deterrent. U.S. official enthusiasm for nuclear zero threatens to undermine that confidence and could lead some friends and allies to seek their own nuclear weapons.

As one Czech commentator recently observed, an American "starry-eyed view of the world" could cause allies to "lose confidence" in the nuclear umbrella.

Second, proponents of zero claim the United States no longer needs nuclear weapons for deterrence because superior U.S. conventional capabilities are sufficient to deter and win wars. Yet it is the superiority of U.S. conventional forces that helps motivate some adversaries to acquire nuclear weapons and other WMD. They see U.S. proposals for nuclear zero as a trick to disarm them of the special weapons they need to offset U.S. conventional superiority.

Russia's military doctrine, for example, places great and indeed increasing emphasis on nuclear weapons to help compensate for its conventional force weaknesses. Profound changes would be needed in Russia's perception of its requirement for nuclear weapons before it could become the type of partner necessary for any plausible path to nuclear zero. This is a problem that cannot be resolved by sincere U.S. offers to reduce nuclear weapons because they are not the cause of this Russian dilemma.

Third, global nuclear zero would require an airtight verification and enforcement regime because some states would cheat on their commitments, and even a small number of covertly stored nuclear weapons could provide a cheater with tremendous military advantages. For states to feel sufficiently secure to give up their nuclear weapons and other forms of WMD, they would need extraordinary confidence that a global verification and enforcement regime could keep would-be cheaters in line.

However, the same understandable lack of international trust that makes airtight verification and enforcement necessary also prevents states from ceding their ultimate authority to the international body needed to provide global verification and enforcement. How could they, when untrustworthy enemies might not disarm and the international body, once created, might not provide adequate security, or might itself become hostile?

The experience to date with existing international agreements to ban chemical and biological weapons demonstrates that such disarmament efforts do not result in anything approaching "zero."

Fourth, Mohamed ElBaradei, the director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said that for nuclear zero to be feasible, "The Security Council must be drastically reformed so the world can rely on it as the primary body for maintaining international peace and security, as foreseen in the U.N. Charter."

True. But, the centurylong failure of first the League of Nations and then the United Nations to meet this most basic goal illustrates the enduring limits of possible international cooperation. The measures necessary to compel recalcitrant countries such as North Korea and Iran to give up their nuclear programs will be more than many members of the international community will support.

Finally, the path to nuclear zero would have to include an international context where states' calculations of interest would allow them to forgo nuclear weapons. This could result from the emergence of an unprecedented benign world order that appears to be permanent, or such great confidence in impartial, predictable and effective collective security that states are willing to give up their autonomous means of security.

The realization of either system would represent a more dramatic change than anything since the decline and eventual fall of the Western Roman Empire in AD 476.

This does not suggest that nuclear zero is forever impossible. But it is not cynical to observe that there is no plausible path to nuclear zero in sight and steps taken now in defiance of that stubborn fact could easily lead to a more dangerous world.

By Keith Payne, head of the Graduate Department of Defense and Strategic Studies, Missouri State University. His most recent book is "The Great American Gamble: Deterrence Theory and Practice," 2008.

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