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APRIL 7, 2010 4:00 A.M.

Disarmament Danger

From the April 19, 2010 issue of NR.

The Obama administration has placed nuclear disarmament at the top of its foreign-policy agenda. Other possible goals, such as modernizing U.S. nuclear forces for deterrence purposes, are now considered either transitory or subordinate to taking steps toward “nuclear zero.” In itself, banning nuclear weapons is not a new U.S. goal; Ronald Reagan also supported it. But this prioritization is unprecedented.

In the past, Republican and Democratic administrations have maintained a balance between the parallel goals of modernizing U.S. nuclear programs for deterrence and pursuing nuclear-arms reductions when feasible. This balancing act can be seen in the Clinton administration’s policy of “lead and hedge,” which sought to lead in the reduction of nuclear arms while hedging against threats by sustaining a robust nuclear arsenal. Indeed, in pursuit of this balance, the Clinton administration successfully did what the Obama administration has now declared verboten in the push for nuclear zero: It developed and deployed new nuclear capabilities deemed necessary for deterrence.

The George W. Bush administration sought to maintain a similar balance. It successfully negotiated the 2002 Moscow Treaty, which reduced U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear forces from approximately 6,000 to approximately 2,000 deployed nuclear weapons each. This two-thirds reduction was the largest in history.

The moral here is that in pursuit of a balanced nuclear policy, the Clinton administration did not ignore the need to advance U.S. nuclear-deterrence capabilities, and — despite the revisionist history now in play — the Bush administration was willing to embrace deep nuclear-force reductions.

Why should we be wary of the Obama administration’s shift away from this traditional, balanced dual track? Because nuclear zero cannot be achieved unilaterally, or even bilaterally. It will require many countries to make the strategic decision that nuclear weapons are unnecessary for their security. And despite the warm rhetoric inspired by the nuclear-zero vision, much of the rest of the world — including U.S. allies, friends, and foes — sees great continuing value in nuclear weapons.

For example, some close allies with centuries of painful experience recall the old non-nuclear world as a destroyer of nations. There were no nuclear weapons to deter those bent on war in 1914 and 1939. The result: approximately 40 million casualties in World War I, and 50 to 70 million casualties in World War II. This contrasts sharply with the decades since 1945, in which another such war did not erupt despite multiple crises and titanic conflicts.

The rapid succession of two world wars during the first part of the 20th century, and the absence of a third world war during the subsequent nuclear era, demonstrates in the most dramatic way possible the great deterrent value of nuclear weapons. Indeed, after centuries of annual slaughter, the percentage of the world's population lost to war each year dropped dramatically with the onset of nuclear deterrence. Former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher poignantly observed that the casualties of World Wars I and II are silent testimony to this fact: "There are monuments to the futility of conventional deterrence in every village in Europe."

It is for this reason that Winston Churchill warned the United States, "Be careful above all things not to let go of the atomic weapon until you are sure, and more than sure, that other means of preserving peace are in your hands." Many allies rightly fear Obama's enthusiasm for nuclear zero because they do not believe that we are close to meeting Churchill's requirement — that is, we have not yet found an alternative basis for preventing war.

As a Czech commentator recently observed, "A starry-eyed view of the world could not only put the United States at risk, but also cause its allies to lose their confidence in the superpower's ability to meet its allied commitments." If that happens, these allies may see the need for their own or alternative nuclear-deterrent capabilities. Several allies and friends have spoken openly about this dilemma. How can we prudently lead the world to nuclear zero when many of our closest allies and friends see U.S. nuclear weapons as a pillar of their security and the reason they remain non-nuclear?

In addition, even if most of the world gave up nuclear weapons, some nations that possess them now would have good reason to keep them. Should Israel be expected to give up its nuclear deterrence when Syria would still have its reportedly ample stock of chemical weapons? Other allies and friends would continue to face deadly biological-weapons threats. Are we to expect them to forgo nuclear deterrence? That would be naïve.

American proponents of nuclear zero have offered no plausible basis for squaring this circle, other than to assert that nuclear deterrence no longer is necessary — a dubious thought when Russia or China is your neighbor. The reality is that our allies' apprehensions about nuclear zero are understandable, and their fears are reasonable.

Some who are not our allies are no less eager to retain nuclear weapons, seeing U.S. enthusiasm for nuclear zero as a gambit to undercut their security. Russian officials have openly said this. According to the *Washington Post*, when nuclear-zero proponents “tried the idea on [Russian president] Putin in a private meeting in July 2007, the Russian scoffed at the proposal as just another trick to weaken his country.” More recently, Russian president Dmitri Medvedev emphasized that “the possession of nuclear weapons is a defining condition for Russia to conduct an independent policy and to preserve its sovereignty.”

Numerous senior Russians, including former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev, have said that because their country’s conventional weapons are so weak compared with those of the United States and NATO, nuclear zero would threaten to put it in an intolerable position of inferiority. Russia understandably clings tightly to its nuclear weapons as the great equalizer. This undoubtedly is why it continues to modernize its tactical nuclear weapons and adamantly refused to include them in the recent START negotiations — despite the fact that it has a ten-to-one advantage over the United States in these weapons.

Again, proponents of zero have not offered a plausible solution to this reality. In fact, they often fan Russian fears by claiming that the United States’ conventional-force superiority should enable it to pursue nuclear zero. Russia has no such luxury.

Finally, an effective nuclear-zero agreement would require the present system of competing sovereign states, with its inherent instability, to be replaced by a reliable, cooperative global collective-security system. Then and only then will the conditions called for by Churchill as necessary for nuclear disarmament be in place.

Unfortunately for the goal of nuclear zero, the existing international system of sovereign states is extremely resistant to this sort of fundamental transformation. The creation of a reliable global collective-security system has been a dream unmet for almost 100 years — first by the League of Nations and now by the United Nations. It is sure to remain unmet, because sovereign states follow their individual, competing security interests, and there is no evidence that this reality is fading. The international community’s failure to cooperate well enough even to control the nuclear weapons of a weak pariah state like North Korea reflects this continuing fundamental problem.

When might the international system escape this unfortunate condition? Brian Urquhart, a former undersecretary-general of the United Nations, suggested that international unity and common purpose will become feasible “when there is an invasion from Mars.” Perhaps — although this may be an optimistic expectation, given the potential that Martians will play Earthlings off against each other.

In summary, there are numerous reasons to be wary of nuclear zero. Premature steps toward the

elimination of nuclear weapons could degrade the deterrence of war, and a world war fought with today's non-nuclear weapons alone could easily destroy civilization. Such steps also could degrade America's extended deterrence, leaving its allies more vulnerable to attack and causing some to seek their own nuclear weapons. It is important to remember in this regard that their vulnerabilities are our vulnerabilities — their wars become our wars.

Where is the moral superiority in a policy that would remove the nuclear deterrent to war and make the world again safe for global conventional conflict? The late British nuclear expert Sir Michael Quinlan summed the situation up in a single sentence: “Better a world with nuclear weapons but no major war, than one with major war but no nuclear weapons.”

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