

# Nuclear Utopianism

## The wishful thinking of U.S. arms control.

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George Kennan, the celebrated architect of U.S. Cold War doctrine, called arms control policy during the 1920s and 1930s a species of wishful thinking and a vapid distraction from the serious business of responding to the international threats that culminated in World War II. Contemporary U.S. arms control increasingly reflects the characteristics lamented by Kennan.

Today's international threat conditions are explosive. Russian leaders state openly that America is Russia's primary foe and that the development of nuclear weapons is Russia's highest defense priority. Russia and China reportedly have extensive programs to improve and expand their nuclear forces. Both have cushioned Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons and run interference for Syria's murderous rampage against its own citizens. North Korea, now nuclear armed, continues its bellicose actions and rhetoric, while Iran threatens to annihilate Israel and to close down the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20 percent of the world's oil transits. Nuclear-armed Pakistan swings precariously toward political instability, and several of America's foes apparently possess biological weapons that, like nuclear weapons, are capable of causing catastrophic casualties. In this toxic atmosphere, frightened allies and friends in Asia and the Middle East wonder aloud about U.S. credibility and their possible need to go nuclear themselves.

Allied fears and potential interest in their own nuclear weapons should be no surprise. In response to today's gathering storm clouds, the Obama administration openly states that movement toward nuclear zero, not U.S. deterrence capabilities, sits "atop" its "nuclear agenda," and that the United States will reduce the role and the number of nuclear weapons in its arsenal. To this end, the White House is reviewing current U.S. nuclear force requirements to find additional and possibly unilateral U.S. nuclear reductions beyond those already effectively mandated by the 2010 New START treaty. Tasked to identify possibilities for further nuclear reductions, the Department of Defense reportedly has responded with options that include a further 80 percent cut in U.S. weapons—far below public accounts of Russian and even Chinese nuclear force levels.

This agenda appears to be part and parcel of an approach to arms control that places ever-greater limitations on U.S. nuclear deterrence strategies and embraces unilateral reductions. According to senior administration officials, the gesture of reducing the role of U.S. nuclear weapons is intended to provide an example that will encourage others, including North Korea, to give up nuclear weapons. The immediate, belligerent North Korean response to this U.S. gesture gives ample reason to conclude that it is naïve and risky. Why risky? To reduce U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons, the administration seeks to make the deterrence of nuclear attacks the "sole purpose" of our nuclear arsenal. This "sole purpose" policy may sound progressive, but it carries an inestimable risk: It would tell opponents that their use of chemical or biological weapons would be safe from the U.S. nuclear deterrent, despite the fact that no one knows if the United States can prevent devastating biological or chemical attacks without the benefit of nuclear deterrence. Administration assertions that nonnuclear deterrence will prevent such attacks can reflect nothing more than a hope.

Nevertheless, this "sole purpose" policy direction reportedly has led at least one senior U.S. intelligence official to observe that the Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons could be a good thing because Iran then would be

on an “even playing field” with the United States. That is, the U.S. nuclear deterrent would apply to Iran under the administration’s preferred “sole purpose” policy if Iran has nuclear weapons, so we can find solace in Iran’s acquisition of nuclear arms. With the exception of the U.S. promotion of the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact to ban offensive warfare by international agreement, it is hard to find precedent for a more naïve view of the world.

Further, in its pursuit of arms control the administration has established rules for counting nuclear weapons that have little to do with the actual number of nuclear weapons, but do cloud the fact that the administration’s New START treaty effectively required only U.S. reductions. The administration’s frequent claim was that New START demanded 30 percent reductions in Russian nuclear forces. In fact, Russian officials happily state that New START demanded no Russian force reductions and that “during the negotiations the United States did not seek to eliminate, reduce, or limit any of [Russia’s] weapons or programs.” Russian officials also have stated openly that the number of Russian strategic nuclear forces in seven years should be 1,000 weapons above the putative New START ceiling of 1,550. Russia’s existing bomber force alone reportedly could legally carry 860 deployed strategic nuclear weapons above the treaty ceiling simply because they would not be counted under the treaty. The use of such contrived counting rules facilitates false comfort with regard to the nuclear balance.

Another such practice is the distinction made between so-called tactical and strategic nuclear weapons. This distinction was established long ago, largely for arms control accounting purposes. Tactical weapons, deployed on a variety of short-range delivery vehicles, are nearly impossible to count and keep track of, while strategic weapons on longer-range systems, such as intercontinental ballistic missiles and heavy bombers, may be counted and tracked more easily—although there remain difficulties here as well.

This distinction between tactical and strategic is a convenient arms control artifice, but it contributes to a significant misunderstanding of the nuclear balance. U.S. officials claim with satisfaction that we maintain nuclear parity with Russia because the number of deployed strategic nuclear weapons is roughly the same. Yet Russia likely has thousands of tactical nuclear weapons that are not included in such an accounting, while the United States reportedly has hundreds—a 10:1 Russian advantage. Based on open sources, a comparison of total operationally available nuclear weapons that includes reported tactical nuclear weapons shows a Russian numeric advantage of at least 2:1. One may or may not care whether Russia has that advantage; but the claim of parity in deployed nuclear weapons should be recognized as a semantic game based on contrived counting rules.

U.S. arms control policy today appears to involve as much wishful thinking as those policies of the inter-war period so rightly condemned by George Kennan. They warrant the same sharp critique: “The evil of these utopian enthusiasms was not only, or even primarily, the wasted time, the misplaced emphasis, the encouragement of false hopes. The evil lay primarily in the fact that these enthusiasms distracted our gaze from the real things that were happening.”

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