

Zero nuclear sense

Is reckless disarmament the plan for second Obama term?

The Washington Times

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Tuesday, May 29, 2012

A report recommending deep U.S. nuclear reductions - to levels as low as 10 percent of the current arsenal - was released recently by an apparently self-appointed Global Zero Nuclear Policy Commission. This report was led by James Cartwright, a retired Marine general and former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Other contributors include folks closely associated with the "nuclear zero" campaign that President Obama embraced early in his administration. The White House has since elevated the campaign for nuclear zero to the pinnacle of the U.S. nuclear-policy agenda, and a supportive report led by a former top-ranking military officer is sure to gain considerable visibility.

It is difficult to know whether Gen. Cartwright's report is meant to serve as the icebreaker for the Obama administration's intended nuclear agenda following the 2012 election or a stalking horse so far to the anti-nuclear left that the administration's post-election plans can appear moderate by comparison. Whatever the intent, the immediate response from Gen. Norton Schwartz, the Air Force's chief of staff, was not sympathetic: "I don't agree with his assessment nor the study." This response is well-deserved, even understated. The report's recommendations for deep reductions within 10 years rest on a set of assertions contrary to obvious facts and no small amount of unwarranted idealism regarding international relations.

For example, while the report calls for a realistic understanding of the post-Cold War security situation, it begins with, "Security is mainly a state of mind, not a physical condition." Why this fatuous statement? Because if security is just a state of mind, old-fashioned security concerns can be banished easily by new thinking. But security is not mainly a state of mind; it often is predominantly a physical condition. Nations usually feel insecure because they are under threat or attack. Just ask the survivors of invasions, various genocidal campaigns and aerial bombardment or the folks in Syria who must dodge government attacks to survive. Real threats often underlie fears, and they require real solutions. Those who chalk this all up to "mainly a state of mind" and resist real solutions to real security problems often later are called "victims."

This false start is well-suited for a study that calls for realism but studiously avoids it with regard to friends and foes. For example, the study asserts that allies will be assured of their security by the United States without the traditional "nuclear umbrella": "Non-nuclear forces are also far more credible instruments for providing 21st century reassurance to allies whose comfort zone in the 20th century resided under the U.S. nuclear umbrella." This is a critical claim because one of the reasons the United States has nuclear capabilities is to provide a nuclear umbrella that covers key allies. If it is unnecessary, the need for U.S. nuclear weapons to do so vanishes. The claim, however, contradicts readily available evidence. Key allies, including some NATO allies, South Korea and Japan, stress again and again the importance they attach to a credible U.S. nuclear umbrella. In 2006, immediately following a North Korean nuclear test, Japanese leaders sought

assurances from U.S. officials of the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella. The former defense ministers of NATO members Poland, Latvia and Lithuania recently stressed that "any possible reduction in America's nuclear capabilities" in Europe would be contrary to "Europe's security and NATO's cohesion."

U.S. officials surely can try to change allies' thinking on this matter, and if security truly is "mainly a state of mind," that should take care of the need. But so far, many allies confronted by Russia, China or emerging nuclear powers North Korea and Iran do not believe that their security problems are mainly in their minds. They confront real external threats and want the assurance of security that resides in the U.S. nuclear extended deterrent. As John Adams said, facts are stubborn things.

The study's portrayal of contemporary and potential foes is similarly divorced from reality. For example, it frequently repeats the points that Russia and China are not enemies and that the risk of a nuclear confrontation with Russia or China is a thing of the past. Consequently, the nuclear balance supposedly no longer is a salient factor in U.S. relations with Russia or China, and it is "increasingly improbable" to be so ever again.

If these characterizations of the present and predictions of the future could be taken to the bank, the report's recommendation would make more sense. Unfortunately, anyone who cares to check will find that virtually all open Russian and Chinese discussions of nuclear weapons and their vigorous nuclear modernization programs point to the great continuing salience of nuclear weapons in their relations with the United States and others. Proponents of deep nuclear reductions may wish this were not true, but as the saying goes, if wishes were horses, beggars would ride.

The report's claim that nuclear weapons are a thing of the past in Russian and Chinese thought again contradicts easily available evidence. Nuclear weapons are the centerpiece of Russia's foreign policy. Indeed, Russian leaders list modernization of nuclear capabilities as Russia's highest military priority, Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev recently commented publicly that the use of nuclear weapons remains a real possibility, Russia crudely threatens U.S. friends and allies with pre-emptive nuclear strikes, and, according to open official Russian commentary, Russia's nuclear-war exercises posit the U.S. as the opponent.

The report's forecast of ever-rosy U.S. nuclear relations with Russia and China is equally imbalanced. We should hope optimistically that such idealistic and surprise-free forecasts will be realized, but hope is no foundation for a realistic strategy when the past gives no reason for such idealism.

The report acknowledges as an afterthought that the future may not be as friendly as it forecasts, and thus the United States "may feel more secure if it possesses the capacity to build up its nuclear forces." Here again, security is about feelings, not physical reality. More important, the report's recommended deep U.S. force reductions, including the elimination of intercontinental ballistic missiles and tactical nuclear weapons and limits on the nuclear infrastructure, would severely constrain the nation's capability to rebuild its nuclear forces if the future is not rosy. A

realistic strategy is not one that only grudgingly acknowledges the possibility of a darker future and undercuts the capability to respond.

Finally, the report recommends U.S. unilateral nuclear reductions if necessary because this would "encourage" Russia and China "to consider comparable unilateral actions." Here we see the oldest and most discredited promise in the arms-control playbook: If the United States reduces forces unilaterally, the Russians and Chinese will see the folly of their ways and follow our good example. One would have thought this canard would never surface again after Jimmy Carter's secretary of defense, Harold Brown, rightly observed, "When we build, they build; when we cut, they build." But no, it is revived yet again in a report that cries for realism in U.S. planning.

Arguments for deep U.S. nuclear reductions and nuclear zero always highlight the risks involved in maintenance of a robust nuclear arsenal and claim there would be few if any risks in its elimination. Deep nuclear reductions supposedly won't threaten the U.S. capability to assure friends or deter enemies because friends and foes alike see little or no continuing salience for nuclear weapons. Before deciding to build U.S. strategy and forces on this view, as is recommended in the report by Gen. Cartwright and colleagues, it would be useful to do a reality check and realize that almost none of the pertinent leaderships outside Washington appear to believe this stuff. That is the reality.

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