

The Truth About Nuclear Disarmament
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Sixty Generals and Admirals from around the world recently endorsed a nuclear disarmament statement organized by senior retired military leaders and former Senator Alan Cranston. Having had an opportunity to review the statement, I would like to offer a few comments. At first glance it seems reasonable, even pleasing to the soul. It reflects an obviously sincere yearning for the world to be a safer place, free of the terrible threat posed by the potential for nuclear war. Yet, the statement, and the thinking behind it, is like cotton candy, sweet but without substance and probably unhealthy.

If it had no potential policy impact, I would say, why not set aside practical concerns and sign-on as a way of demonstrating my regard for humanity and my sophistication in knowing that nuclear weapons are very destructive.

But, of course, it does not take much sophistication to know that nuclear weapons are very destructive. And real problems with this statement arise once I am unwilling to set aside practical considerations. For example, one of the primary reasons leaders see value in nuclear weapons is because they provide an instrument for deterrence against opponents with superior conventional force potential. That is, if a state is unwilling/unable to compete at the conventional force level, then nuclear deterrence can become very critical for its security. This linkage between conventional imbalance and the need for nuclear deterrence was the dynamic behind U.S./NATO Cold War nuclear policies, and is the case for Israel, South Korea and Pakistan.

If the conventional force disadvantages that compel a state to rely on nuclear deterrence are not addressed, how can we in conscience ask those states relying on nuclear deterrence to give up that crutch? This is one of the fundamental problems with this call for a nuclear abolition: it does not address the underlying security concern that causes states to turn to nuclear arms in the first place-it doesn't even acknowledge their problem.

Ironically, when U.S. leaders talk of moving away from nuclear deterrence and relying instead on our great superiority in conventional forces we give some regional powers every incentive to seek nuclear weapons. They are not dumb: why compete with the United States at the conventional force level when the U.S. is sure to win? It would be much better to have a nuclear deterrent to counter U.S. conventional superiority. For the U.S. to give up nuclear weapons and crow about its conventional superiority does not provide an "anti-nuclear" model for "rogue" regional powers to emulate; it gives them every incentive to seek nuclear weapons.

The same problem arises with regard to chemical and biological weapons (CW and BW). We in the U.S. have agreed to give up both CW and BW. Other states have

not agreed to do so, and verifying such agreements is infeasible vis-a-vis those states who have committed to forego CW and BW. Until we have addressed the potential for CW and BW attack in reality (as opposed to in rhetoric), how can we, in good conscience, tell U.S. leaders and forces that they must address CW and BW threats with conventional force only-without nuclear deterrence? The statement agreed to by so many retired generals is silent on the issue-it doesn't even acknowledge the problem. The apparent importance of the perceived U.S. and Israeli nuclear threats during the Gulf War for deterring Iraqi CW/BW attack should be instructive here. Prominent Iraqi political and military leaders at the time of the Gulf War have said that Iraq did not use its chemical and biological weapons because of the U.S. and Israel: nuclear deterrents. Unless these retired U.S. military officers have an alternative means for deterring or otherwise preventing a future rogue's use of CW or BW against our troops, their call for nuclear abolition is irresponsible. My main point is that nuclear weapons do not exist in a vacuum. They are linked to concerns about conventional force imbalances, and in the future, they will increasingly be the only non-conventional response available to us against CW/BW threats.

Yet, this much bally-hoed statement treats nuclear weapons as if they exist in a vacuum, as if the felt need for nuclear weapons can be addressed by their elimination. That is an extraordinarily uninformed and potentially dangerous perspective (dangerous for those countries relying on nuclear weapons for the reasons discussed above).

There are other serious problems with the statement. For example, the fact that the elimination of nuclear weapons is unverifiable under any foreseeable set of circumstances should give us pause. But why worry the details?

Similarly, I am very skeptical that some of the specific measures mentioned in the statement would be helpful in moving toward an "abolition" (assuming it could be verifiable). For example, "ending the deployment of non-strategic nuclear weapons" (p. 3) could easily reduce German and Japanese confidence in the U.S. nuclear umbrella-compelling both to "go nuclear." Officials in Japan have stated this very proposition publicly, as have Germans privately.

In summary, while there is ample reason for skepticism regarding the reliability of nuclear deterrence this statement is ill-informed and potentially damaging. It is not thoughtful. It is similar to much of the rhetoric of the 1970s and early 1980s anti-nuclear activism, cotton candy.