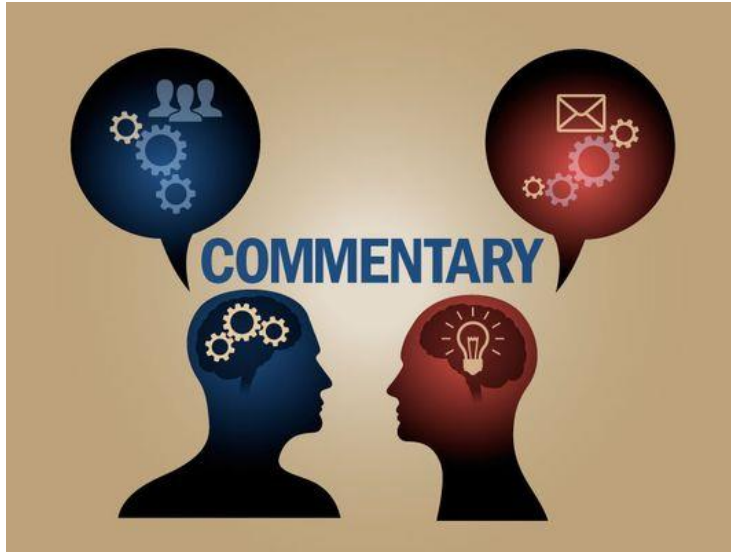


Commentary: Humanitarian Nuclear Strategy?

By **Matthew Costlow**, Defense News, February 9, 2015,

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(Photo: Staff Illustration)

At the end of 2014, Europe was treated to contrasting visions of the future of nuclear weapons. On the one hand, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov duplicitously cited international law to justify possibly placing nuclear weapons in the newly conquered Crimea.

Eight hundred miles to the east, nuclear disarmament advocates finished one of their annual events in Austria, the "Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons."

The who's who of nuclear abolitionists bemoaned the lack of cuts to nuclear arsenals, but reserved some of their harshest scolds not for Russia, but for the United States and the Obama administration, which they view as sufficiently enthusiastic in pursuit of Obama's vision of "a world without nuclear weapons."

These calls for unilateral US nuclear disarmament rarely escape the disarmament camp's echo chamber. And considering the effects of a nuclear weapon's detonation, what other conclusion could a conference considering the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons come to?

Yet it is precisely their belief that having fewer nuclear weapons greatly benefits humanity that deserves some scrutiny.

Five of the leading disarmament organizations submitted a joint statement at the Vienna conference that asserted the US and Russian nuclear stockpiles are too large and "far exceed any plausible deterrence requirements." They did not specify exactly how many nuclear weapons the

US and Russia need to maintain a stable deterrent relationship, but claim they know the current amount is too much.

But how do they justify their claim? Their answer is enough to make any proper humanitarian blush with embarrassment: Nuclear weapons can kill a lot of civilians. That's right, the joint statement cites a pair of studies done in 2001 and 2002 that examine just how many civilians might die in a simulated nuclear war between the US and Russia if one of the countries uses a countervalue, or "city-busting" strategy. The reports' conclusions are a study in the macabre.

The Physicians for Social Responsibility report examined the effects of two simulated Russian nuclear attacks against the US. In the first scenario, Russia attacks primarily nuclear forces in the United States with 2,000 nuclear warheads, killing approximately 50 million.

In the second scenario, Russia attacks only densely populated areas with 500 nuclear warheads. This attack could kill 130 million, 80 million more, although only one-fourth as many weapons were used.

These conclusions would seem to indicate that a good humanitarian should support the strategy that kills the fewest civilians, yet the authors in the ironically named Physicians for Social Responsibility report believe their findings validate the need for lower nuclear force levels, since any strategy that "can produce upwards of 100 million fatalities" satisfies "any conceivable need for a nuclear deterrent."

The other report the five organizations cite is a Natural Resources Defense Council report that also examined counterforce and countervalue scenarios, this time with a simulated US attack on Russian targets.

The authors assert that if the US attacked Russia's nuclear forces with 1,300 nuclear warheads it would kill approximately 10 million civilians. But if the US only targeted Russian cities with 150-192 nuclear warheads, approximately 45 million civilian fatalities would result.

The authors thus conclude the United States can get more deterrence bang while saving a buck if it embraced a strategy primarily targeting high-density civilian population centers.

Thankfully, the Obama administration as well as previous administrations have consistently rejected these calls.

The Obama administration recently released its unclassified "Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy," which says in part: "The new guidance makes clear that all plans must be consistent with the fundamental principles of the Law of Armed Conflict. Accordingly, plans will, for example, apply the principles of distinction and proportionality and seek to minimize collateral damage to civilian populations and civilian objects. The United States will not intentionally target civilian populations or civilian objects."

President Richard Nixon and the master of realpolitik, Henry Kissinger, were "appalled" by the civilian casualties that would result in a nuclear war and sought counterforce options to reduce possible civilian deaths. Kissinger mused, "to have the only option of killing 80 million people is the height of immorality."

While nuclear disarmers have some noble goals like finding ways to lessen the possibility of a nuclear war, their strategy — reducing US nuclear weapons to levels that would demand targeting civilian population centers — may not work and is clearly immoral. As nations like Russia modernize their nuclear arsenals while making threats to US allies, it becomes all the more important to continue basing US nuclear strategy on the goals of deterrence and assurance, not on the threat of killing millions with the fewest weapons.

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