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The Myth of U.S. Nuclear Leadership

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Everyone loves a leader. “Lead by example” says the old cliché. Yet when applied to U.S. nuclear weapons policy, this cliché has proven to be a failure.

Then-U.S. Vice President Joe Biden recently spoke at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in the Obama administration’s last speech on the subject of nuclear weapons. One consistent theme in Biden’s speech stood out: leadership. “The United States,” according to Biden, “is the strongest when we lead not only by the example of our power, but by the power of our example.”¹

The message he laid out is clear: the United States must lead the world in reducing the role and number of nuclear weapons in order to secure similar reductions in other countries.

Biden is not alone in his assessment. President Obama routinely spoke of the need for U.S. nuclear reductions so the United States could have the necessary “moral authority” to stop North Korean or Iranian nuclear proliferation.² Indeed, this belief is a truism within the arms control community.

Daryl Kimball and Kingston Reif stated in an article for *The Bulletin* recently: “Now is the time to announce that the United States will reduce its strategic nuclear force to 1,000 (or fewer) strategic deployed warheads, invite Russia to do the same, and propose that the two sides agree to resume formal talks to regulate all types of strategic offensive and defensive weapons systems (nuclear and nonnuclear) that could affect strategic stability. Such a strategy could prompt Russia to rethink its expensive nuclear weapons modernization projects and possibly build-down its strategic nuclear arsenal.”³



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Will Saetren, then-Hale Fellow at the Ploughshares Fund, stated with regard to planned U.S. modernization of its air-launched nuclear cruise missiles: “A U.S. decision to cancel the LRSO could also lay the foundation for a global ban on nuclear-armed cruise missiles.”⁴

Arms control analyst Yousaf Butt made perhaps the most explicit connection between U.S. leadership and unilateral nuclear reductions: “While cooperation is desirable, there is no necessity to make further nuclear stockpile cuts contingent upon cooperation: in the post-Cold War era unilateral cuts ... should be possible. Another word for ‘unilateral’ in this context, is ‘leadership.’”⁵

“Leadership” in their minds means not waiting for other countries such as Russia or China to decide that it is time to come to the negotiating table. Instead, they believe that if the United States makes additional unilateral reductions in the role and number of U.S. nuclear weapons, other nations like Russia or China will follow and make similar reductions in the role and number of nuclear weapons in their defense strategies or come to the negotiating table with proposals in hand.

The idea’s superficial attractiveness is derived from its simplicity: U.S. reductions will lead to Russian and perhaps other countries’ reductions or arms control agreements. Cause and effect. An elegant solution to a complex problem.

History Has the Answer

But what evidence is there that such unilateral U.S. reductions in the role and numbers of nuclear weapons will lead to parallel Russian actions?

A quick review of recent history will suffice:

- The last three U.S. Nuclear Posture Reviews explicitly reduced the role of U.S. nuclear weapons for defense planning purposes.⁶ Yet, Russia has increased the role of nuclear weapons in its defense strategy.⁷
- The United States does not currently have the capability to produce new nuclear weapons.⁸ Russia, meanwhile, not only retains the capability to produce new nuclear weapons but reportedly is actively developing them.⁹
- The United States retains only a few hundred nonstrategic nuclear weapons in Europe.¹⁰ Russia maintains 2,000 – 4,000.¹¹
- The United States removed sea-launched nuclear-capable cruise missiles from its arsenal.¹² Russia retained, modernized, and even recently launched conventional variants into targets in Syria.¹³
- The United States apparently has declined to move to a mobile-basing option for its ICBMs¹⁴ while Russia maintains their road-mobile ICBM force and reportedly has begun developing a rail-mobile option.¹⁵
- The United States has kept its commitments to arms control treaties and initiatives while Russia remains in violation of the INF Treaty,¹⁶ has not fulfilled its Presidential Nuclear Initiatives commitments,¹⁷ and faces serious questions about meeting New START Treaty warhead reduction requirements.¹⁸



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- The United States generally refrains from making explicit nuclear threats even under trying circumstances. Russian officials, on the other hand, frequently issue explicit nuclear threats against U.S. NATO allies, partners, and neutral countries. This group includes Poland, Norway, Romania, Czech Republic, and Ukraine, to name a few.¹⁹
- The United States shows great concern regarding the potential for civilian casualties in all its planning.²⁰ Russia, on the other hand, has reportedly developed a submarine-launched torpedo-type vehicle meant to be launched into a foreign seaport and detonate an enormous multi-megaton nuclear warhead, causing excessive fallout and a radioactive tsunami.²¹

This list can, and does, go on. High-ranking U.S. defense officials in the past dismissed the claim that U.S. nuclear reductions would convince Russia to reduce its nuclear weapons. The most famous expression of this fact was delivered by U.S. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown in 1979: “Soviet spending has shown no response to U.S. restraint – when we build they build; when we cut they build.”²² Despite the expectations of Joe Biden and the arms control community, nothing seems to have changed.

Will the United States Start an Arms Race?

If U.S. “leadership” in reductions in the role and number of nuclear weapons do not produce symmetric actions by the Russians, then what about U.S. “leadership” in nuclear weapon modernization? Will U.S. nuclear modernization programs cause an “arms race” as some fear?²³ U.S. defense officials are now skeptical.

Then-Secretary of Defense Ash Carter recently stated: “... the Russians are also very rapidly modernizing their own nuclear arsenal. I don't associate that with what we're doing. I associate it with the dynamics of their own feelings that nuclear weapons are one of the only things that guarantee their status in the world.”²⁴

Then-Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security, Rose Gottemoeller echoed this idea in testimony before the U.S. Senate on U.S. modernization of nuclear cruise missiles, the Long Range Stand Off Weapon (LRSO):

... Russia is engaged in its own nuclear modernization program to replace Cold War era systems, and we believe Russia will proceed on this course irrespective of U.S. modernization, including the LRSO. There is no evidence that the LRSO or our nuclear modernization program are prompting an action-reaction cycle or catalyzing arms races. The Russians have already developed their next-generation nuclear-armed air-launched cruise missile, the KH-102, and have employed its conventional variant, the KH-101, in Syria. Any notion that LRSO is spurring on Russia's advanced cruise missile development is simply not borne out by the facts.²⁵

If U.S. nuclear reductions do not cause a parallel Russian action, and U.S. nuclear modernization is not causing a parallel Russian action, then why do analysts and U.S. officials continue to believe U.S. “leadership” in reductions will inspire similar Russian reductions?



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The answer may lie in a series of unprecedented historical events, the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives.

The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives: The Success of Unilateral Disarmament?

The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives, produced under President George H. W. Bush in 1991 and 1992, were historic agreements between U.S. and Soviet (and later Russian) leaders that mostly focused on reducing non-strategic, or tactical, nuclear weapons. As the United States saw the Soviet Union disintegrating, concern grew among U.S. intelligence analysts that Soviet nuclear weapons could end up in the wrong hands if left unguarded. Thus, President Bush proposed the United States unilaterally reduce its stockpile of non-strategic nuclear weapons in the hopes that the Soviets would react in kind.²⁶ In one sense, it worked.

The Soviet, and later Russian, leaders pledged parallel cuts in their non-strategic nuclear arsenals and initially made some moves towards reductions. But that is not the end of the story.

After the shock of the end of the Cold War faded, and the vision of a “new world order” espoused by President Bush receded from memory, Russian leaders renewed, modernized, and even built new systems that violated their PNI commitments. Russia retained non-strategic nuclear weapons in its navy and recently used the conventional-variants of the nuclear cruise missile in Syria. Russian President Vladimir Putin helpfully noted that these cruise missiles were “new, modern and highly effective high-precision weapons that can be equipped either with conventional or special nuclear warheads.”²⁷ Declassified CIA documents suggest Russia, as recently as 2000, was actively seeking to build new types of nuclear weapons whose delivery systems would most likely be covered under the PNIs.²⁸

So can the PNIs really be considered a validation of the U.S. unilateral nuclear reduction approach? No. The U.S. show of goodwill and reductions did not lead to Russia’s compliance with its own PNI pledges, and Russia continues to violate other arms control agreements.

Conclusion

U.S. “leadership” in this direction has not led Russia to a more enlightened path on nuclear reductions. Russia, far from taking its cue from U.S. actions, produces its nuclear plans based on its own threat perceptions, internal and external goals, values, and missions. Even then-Vice President Biden himself had to admit U.S. leadership is not enough to change Russian minds, saying, “While we [U.S.] have shifted our security doctrine away from our nuclear arsenal, they [Russia] have moved to rely more heavily on theirs.”²⁹

Well-intentioned if naïve analysts and officials may say the United States should continue making nuclear reductions in the hopes of Russian reciprocity, but as the famed economist Milton Friedman once said, “One of the great mistakes is to judge policies and programs by their intentions rather than their results.”



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Instead, the United States should form its nuclear policies based on a realistic assessment of the security environment and its own goals, not a vain attempt to gain an international following. As an unknown muse once said, “A leader without followers is simply out for walk.”

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