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Issue No. 423

August 30, 2017

Arms Controllers Against Arms Control

Matthew R. Costlow

Matthew R. Costlow is an analyst at the National Institute for Public Policy and a PhD student in Political Science at George Mason University.

Moscow, by its own choices, has decided to destroy nearly every basis for good relations with the United States. One area where this erosion of trust is most greatly manifest are the tactics and priorities now supported by many in the arms control community. In the not-too-distant past, arms control advocates produced report upon report detailing proposed strategic and non-strategic nuclear arms control agreements for the United States and Russia to consider.¹ These reports, the proponents claimed, could serve as broad outlines of what could be agreed upon by both countries.

Now, however, with U.S.-Russian relations near a 30-year low,² and prospects for further bilateral nuclear reduction agreements even lower, “arms controllers” are producing far fewer of these proposed agreements and instead have shifted to proposing unilateral U.S. nuclear reductions in both roles and numbers. Arms control advocates now generally propose eliminating whole legs of the U.S. nuclear triad of bombers, submarines, and missiles either in an effort to induce by our own good example parallel Russian or Chinese cuts, or to satisfy a supposed moral or political imperative. In sum, they appear to believe the maxim that the fewer nuclear weapons there are in the world, the safer the world will be. And if that is the case, then unilateral U.S. nuclear reductions are the quickest and surest way to achieve safety.

For example, long-time arms control proponent and President of the Ploughshares Fund Joe Cirincione stated in an article recently, “Trump could even follow the example of President George H.W. Bush, who took independent action to reduce our nuclear forces. No lengthy,



boring negotiations, no formal treaty needed. Just an understanding that we have more than enough nuclear weapons for our defense needs, and the encouragement for Russia to follow suit, as it did in 1991 when Bush unilaterally eliminated 14,000 nuclear weapons from the U.S. arsenal.”³

Arms Control Association analysts Daryl Kimball and Kingston Reif also 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.”⁴

Among these diverse proposals is a common element: the idea that the United States must act now in a unilateral manner without waiting for comparable Russian or Chinese actions. In short, these long-time advocates of the traditional nuclear arms control process now appear to scorn the very process they once praised. This is a case of arms controllers against arms control.

This in turn begs the question: why the shift in urgency and tactics? Arms control proponents’ primary goal appears to remain unchanged: greater security through reductions in the number of nuclear weapons. Yet now the long and difficult process of negotiating those reductions appears to be going out of style at best and viewed as counterproductive at worst. So why the shift? Unilateral U.S. nuclear reduction proponents often give three answers.

Evaluating The Three Answers

The Weapons Themselves are Dangerous

The first answer is that the nuclear weapons themselves are the threat to global security, not who has and could employ those nuclear weapons, thus the apathy concerning negotiations. In fact, multiple “communications strategies” reports produced for and by arms control supporters encourage them to frame the public debate in ways that emphasize the supposed inherent volatility of nuclear weapons.⁵ One such report promotes the idea that, “... the risk lies with the weapons themselves and not primarily with who has them, otherwise there is no real case to be made for the U.S. addressing our own nuclear arsenal since most Americans view the U.S. to be a good and decent country...”⁶ If the weapons themselves are the problems, so the thinking goes, it would be better to reduce our own forces in the hope that others will do likewise. If others do not reciprocate that too would be ok.



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Yet, while focusing on the tool and not the operator may make for a good communications strategy, it is absurd if taken to its logical conclusion. If nuclear weapons should be feared for their destructive power without taking into account who holds them, then France and Great Britain are to be feared by Washington. The obvious fact that they are not proves that in reality, it really does matter which country has its finger on “the button.”

Purported Financial Benefits

A second answer as to why arms control proponents are jettisoning negotiations in favor of unilateral U.S. nuclear reductions is because U.S. nuclear modernization programs are just beginning. It is much easier in Washington D.C. to kill a program when relatively little money has been appropriated to it and the larger bills are yet to arrive. This tactic allows arms control proponents to include fiscal “prudence” to the claim of greater safety through unilateral reductions.

Yet this explanation too is unsatisfactory. While superficially appealing in this era of tight defense budgets, the fiscal savings that could be gained by the nuclear reductions many groups have proposed are relatively small when compared with the overall U.S. defense budget. For example, a Center for American Progress report proposes unilateral U.S. nuclear cuts to all three legs of the triad that would add up to a projected savings of \$120 billion over 30 years,⁷ or \$4 billion per year, or about one half of one percent of the defense budget annually. Savings that small should certainly be contrasted with the risks such cuts may pose to the effective deterrence of war, and the (much larger) cost of failing to deter a major war. As Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Goldfein stated recently, “The only thing more expensive than deterrence is fighting a war, and the only thing more expensive than fighting a war is losing the war.”⁸

Unilateral Cuts Will Lead to Multilateral Cuts

A third answer to explain the shift in tactics is that proponents for unilateral U.S. reductions believe that U.S. cuts will “help create the conditions for moving toward a world without nuclear weapons” that the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review advocated.⁹ However, there are compelling reasons not to believe that proposed unilateral U.S. nuclear reductions will lead others to embrace nuclear reductions, and their eventual elimination.

One reason is that Russian officials have stated repeatedly that they will not participate in further arms control agreements with the United States until a series of unacceptable “poison pill” demands are met: dissolution of U.S. missile defense systems in Europe, limits on U.S. conventional forces, a ban on weapons in space, and a ban on hypersonic weapons.¹⁰ Then, and only then, will Russian officials agree to consider further nuclear arms control.

Unilateral U.S. nuclear reductions would not meet these Russian demands; and, even if those demands are to be taken at face value, Russia would most likely demand further concessions:



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perhaps a pledge to not allow expanded NATO membership, removal of B-61 nuclear bombs from Europe, limits on U.S. and allied missile defense in Asia, or limits on the F-35 dual-capable aircraft. If intransigence netted Russia these prospective gains, one can be sure they would use the same tactic again.

And if arms control proponents are still unconvinced that unilateral U.S. nuclear reductions would not change Russian behavior and intentions, one need only look at the two battalions of INF Treaty-violating missiles Russia reportedly just deployed.¹¹ Despite full U.S. compliance with the INF Treaty and multiple meetings with Russian officials to explain U.S. concerns, Russia still blatantly violates this hallmark arms control treaty. Unilateral U.S. nuclear reductions will most likely do nothing to move Russian officials on a more enlightened path. To the contrary, they would only show that Russia does not need to comply with existing agreements to secure future U.S. reductions. It is hard to imagine a more lethal way to undermine a useful arms control process. The United States would end up with lower numbers certainly, but Russia would retain its same high numbers with little incentive to come down. As then-Commander of U.S. Strategic Command Admiral Cecil Haney explained, the Russians are “not going to give it [their nuclear arsenal] away or dissolve it. We have to be able to take that seriously.”¹²

A second reason unilateral U.S. nuclear reductions will not lead to global nuclear reductions is that history simply does not show a clear relationship between U.S. nuclear reductions and other countries either reducing their arsenals or halting their bids to acquire nuclear weapons. At the end of the Cold War the United States began an enormous reduction in the size of its nuclear arsenal, a trend that continues to this day. In contrast, China’s nuclear arsenal has grown in both size and sophistication since the end of the Cold War while India, Pakistan, and North Korea all began testing their nuclear weapons in earnest during the U.S. drawdown. And Iran’s acceptance of the multilateral agreement limiting its nuclear program clearly had nothing to do with the particular status of U.S. nuclear systems.¹³

Proponents of unilateral U.S. nuclear reductions bear the burden of proof (or at least plausibility) that such reductions would cause countries like Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and North Korea (not to mention allies such as Great Britain and France) to willingly divest themselves of the weapons they view as so essential to their security.

Conclusion

If arms control proponents wish not to be dismissed in their approach to global nuclear disarmament they must first recognize the hard truth that power politics in international



relations is not going away any time soon. Countries are still pursuing their own perceived national interests and negotiations still require leverage. If mutual cooperation and amity were enough to bring about complete nuclear disarmament, then those agreements would be reached by now. Instead, in order to obtain negotiated cuts with other nations the United States will require substantial leverage, leverage that would be thrown away by unilateral cuts. As then-Assistant Secretary of Defense Robert Scher recently testified, the United States structures its nuclear forces in part so that it “retains leverage for future arms control agreements,”¹⁴ a prudent nod to international reality. Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Paul Selva echoed this assessment stating, “The places we’ve had success in negotiating types and classes of weapons out of adversary nuclear arsenals in our strategic arms reductions talks has been when we possess a similar capability that poses a tactical, operational, and strategic problem for our adversaries.” U.S. unilateral reductions would, according to Selva, put the United States “at a strategic disadvantage over a length of time.”¹⁵

Seemingly well-intentioned unilateral U.S. nuclear reductions would surely fail to bring Russia and China to the negotiating table, much less induce parallel unilateral cuts. Instead of projecting leadership, the United States would be left on the sidelines with reduced leverage and the prospect of negotiated nuclear reductions ever more distant.

This may be a bitter pill for proponents of global nuclear disarmament to swallow, but recognizing the political and security realities surrounding unilateral U.S. nuclear reductions is the surest foundation for the future of not just arms control, but U.S. and allied security.

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2. Sergei Ryabkov, Russia’s deputy foreign minister, as quoted in “Top Russian official: Our relationship with US at lowest point since Cold War,” *FoxNews.com*, February 28, 2017, available at <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/02/28/top-russian-official-our-relationship-with-us-at-lowest-point-since-cold-war.html>.
3. Joe Cirincione, “Trump could reduce nuclear dangers,” *The Register-Guard*, February 19, 2017, available at <http://registerguard.com/rg/opinion/35278005-78/trump-could-reduce-nuclear-dangers.html.csp>. Of course, the reality, unacknowledged by Cirincione, is that Russia did not fully “follow suit” and has instead violated its earlier commitment to do so.



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