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Survival Matters

The Cold War is over. Let's defend the population.

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The most visible dispute in U.S.-Russian relations now pits the American desire for protection from prospective Iranian and North Korean nuclear missile threats against the Russian desire for the United States to remain fully vulnerable to Russia's offensive nuclear capabilities. Russian officials are demanding that the United States sign a legal document guaranteeing that the United States will, as a matter of policy, intentionally remain exposed to Russian nuclear weapons. This may seem extraordinary, even by Russian standards. But this demand harks back to the Cold War, when the United States ultimately made just this commitment in deference to the requirements of a supposedly "stable" balance of terror.

Russia's officials place great emphasis on this Cold War-vintage commitment to American vulnerability. Indeed, despite the fact that the words "stable" and "stability" are devoid of any agreed meaning in the post-Cold War era, Russia's favorite line now is to demand continued U.S. exposure for the sake of stability. Russian officials insisted on inserting language to this effect into the New START treaty and constantly appeal to "stability" as code for the perpetuation of a U.S. policy of vulnerability. These appeals are well received by many in the United States who are comfortable with the benign-sounding terms of the Cold War balance of terror, including the absence of U.S. defenses, and favor its continuation. In President Obama's recent unguarded, "open mike" moment, he reassured former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev that he would have "more flexibility" regarding U.S. defenses after the forthcoming presidential election.

The historical baggage associated with the question of whether to defend the U.S. population is enormous. In the 1960s and 1970s, successive presidents decided not to pursue serious defenses against Soviet strategic nuclear attack because of the belief that meaningful protection could not be sustained given possible Soviet offensive counter-moves, and because they believed that U.S. defenses would "destabilize" the balance of terror.

The public was largely unaware that its government had essentially agreed as a matter of policy to forgo defense against nuclear attack; surveys consistently revealed that Americans wrongly believed they were defended. The contemporary Russian demand for a continued U.S. commitment to vulnerability raises yet again the question of if and how to defend U.S. society.

Those who favor protracting U.S. vulnerability to Russian, and now Chinese, attack claim that this is unavoidable—not a policy choice. The implication is why resist the inevitable? This is nonsense. U.S. exposure to nuclear and other forms of attack by weapons of mass destruction is indeed a reality, but that reality is not - unalterable. The public's vulnerability to various forms of attack may be higher or lower, depending on the

decision of the U.S. government to protect Americans or not. The difference could be thousands or even millions of American lives saved or lost.

It is important to note with regard to the Cold War legacy of vulnerability that U.S. officials at the time defined meaningful defense as effective protection for more than 80 percent of the population against a large-scale Soviet nuclear attack. Anything less was deemed meaningless and not worth the effort. The effect of this type of thinking was profound.

For example, in 1964, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara called for the withdrawal of 22 U.S. squadrons of air defense interceptor aircraft because Defense Department analyses showed that they might only save up to five million American lives. That did not reach the threshold for meaningful defense, according to McNamara, and thus the squadrons were judged not worth maintaining.

This definition of what could constitute meaningful, sustainable protection and the related acceptance of virtually unmitigated vulnerability led the United States to forgo most forms of direct protection for decades. This is the Cold War policy orientation to which Russian officials still appeal with their blustery demands about stability and U.S. legal guarantees of continued vulnerability.

It is important to understand that the Cold War rejection of defenses in many cases makes no sense today. This was demonstrated on 9/11, when the United States could not muster serious air defenses in a timely way. The government's longstanding acceptance of virtually unlimited societal vulnerability had left the country with trivial capabilities for self-defense against any strategic attack.

Perpetuation of such a condition would be folly. Today there are many possible sources and types of strategic threat to the United States, including terrorist attack and limited intentional or unauthorized state-based nuclear attack (the latter nearly happened during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis). In these cases, some levels of protection for society, including what is now called “consequence management,” is feasible and may be very meaningful—indeed it would become the highest national priority if an attack occurred.

As even McNamara concluded in the 1960s, relatively simple and inexpensive civil defense measures alone could go a long way toward providing significant levels of protection for the U.S. population against nuclear attack, saving between 40 million and 90 million lives in most cases. And the combination of civil defenses and other forms of defense, including missile defense, could provide even greater protection against many limited threat scenarios.

The key issue now is not deciding if we should try to defend against thousands of nuclear warheads—that was the Cold War question. The question now is one of weighing the potential costs and benefits of societal defenses across a wide spectrum of threats, and deciding how much protection is worth the effort given the emerging threats, the prospective value of the defense, and the various costs involved.

There appears to be an emerging political consensus that defensive steps certainly should be taken against some obvious contingencies, such as terrorist nuclear or biological attack, limited rogue-state nuclear missile attack, and any unauthorized or accidental attack. But those steps cannot be taken in a vacuum. They would likely provide some concomitant protection against a Russian or Chinese strategic attack, and that concomitant protection could increase if the United States got more and more serious about protection against increasing terrorist and rogue-state threats, to include WMD.

Many of the same defensive measures that could provide some protection against a terrorist, Iranian, or North Korean strategic attack could also help protect society against a limited Russian or Chinese strategic attack. Do we forgo the former to avoid the latter? Of course not. These defenses could be very meaningful, and differentiating our readiness to defend according to the nationality of the attacker would be an absurd game of semantics. We should not forgo or limit potentially critical and affordable defenses against terrorists and rogues because they could also provide some protection against Russia or China, despite Russia's demands and crude threats on the subject.

In addition, today's strategic threats are not just nuclear. According to public reports, Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran may have biological weapons programs. And it appears that some terrorist organizations also seek biological weapons. We know that a biological attack could cause catastrophic losses comparable to a nuclear attack. Do we now forgo providing sensible measures of protection against biological attack because those same preparations could also limit U.S. vulnerability to Russian or Chinese strategic attack? Once again, of course not.

The reasonable policy question is how much of which defensive capabilities would be meaningful, feasible, and affordable against the emerging spectrum of strategic threats. Russians will continue to complain that U.S. defenses against terrorists and rogue states violate the supposed demands of stability—even while the Russian chief of the General Staff, General Nikolai Makarov, states that Russia will deploy an "impenetrable" missile defense shield by 2020.

But the downside of the unmitigated U.S. vulnerability preferred by Russia would be the absence of defensive measures that could save many American lives in the event of terrorist or rogue-state nuclear or biological attack, or any accidental or unauthorized attack.

Should we pursue feasible defensive measures against a spectrum of emerging threats, or essentially accept unmitigated vulnerability to WMD attacks by Russia or others? The American answer to that question will be apparent in our stated policies and forthcoming programs. Fortunately, the answer should not be difficult. The Cold War is over, and U.S. officials need not accept its legacy of uncontested vulnerability. The price of continuing adherence to that old, dubious tenet of the balance of terror is now too high.

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