

Shooting down minimum nuclear deterrence

Cold reality leaves Obama's nuclear-free designs on the drawing board

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Anti-nuclear activists in the United States want to reduce drastically or eliminate U.S. nuclear capabilities, unilaterally if need be. They recently have complained that the Obama administration is moving too slowly to eliminate U.S. nuclear arms and are campaigning hard to persuade the Obama administration to take up their nuclear-disarmament agenda as its legacy for the nation.

Some in the Obama administration came into power seemingly sympathetic to such a crusade against U.S. nuclear capabilities, but its nuclear policy has since reflected a more realistic appreciation of the need for nuclear capabilities to deter threats and to reassure nervous allies — leading activists to ask plaintively, "What went wrong?"

In truth, the nation should be thankful that the Obama administration has not satisfied the nuclear-disarmament policy agenda. Why so? Because its recommendations, typically presented as avant-garde thinking, are instead based on ideologically driven arguments that collapse when confronted by cold reality. When ideology trumps reality in government policies, people usually suffer. In the arena of nuclear policies, the risks of favoring feel-good ideology over reality could not be higher.

This absence of reality underlies virtually the entire nuclear-disarmament narrative. A few examples will suffice to illustrate the point. One is the claim that the U.S. nuclear posture is unchanged from Cold War days, and so, drastic nuclear reductions are long overdue. This is sheer nonsense. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has reduced its deployed nuclear arsenal by more than 85 percent, with some further cuts scheduled under the administration's 2010 New START Treaty.

Another demonstrably false assertion is that U.S. nuclear capabilities are irrelevant to America's improved post-Cold War relations with Russia and China, and will remain so for the future. This claim of no serious nuclear challengers, now or in the future, leads to the conclusion that U.S. nuclear capability is a relic of a bygone age and can safely be discarded.

Former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara claimed in 1991 that the Cold War was over and, "hardly more likely to be revived than the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries it is hard to construct even a semi-plausible military threat to the United States or to Europe west of the Soviet border." Consequently, a minimum U.S. nuclear deterrent capable of threatening "a dozen" enemy targets would suffice. This claim of no serious current or future nuclear foes is now standard issue in the minimum-deterrence argument and explains why its advocates typically look at Russian misbehavior and choose to see no evil.

The danger of basing U.S. policies on such pretense has been amply demonstrated by the decade-long resurgence of Russian nuclear weapons, Russia's intense hostility, explicit nuclear threats to U.S. allies, and manifest willingness to flagrantly violate arms-control limits as well as to change recognized territorial borders in Europe by force. Russia's military campaigns against Georgia and Ukraine demonstrate Moscow's driving ambition to restore the earlier Soviet sphere of power. The dangers of this Russian drive and the corresponding potential great value of U.S. nuclear forces to help deter the escalation of crises are realities obvious to all but U.S. anti-nuclear activists.

Another demonstrably false staple of the campaign against U.S. nuclear forces is that superior American conventional forces can deter foes and reassure jittery allies. Thus the United States can delay modernization, and reduce or eliminate its remaining nuclear forces without risk.

This claim, too, crashes hard against reality. Two-thousand years of history prior to the nuclear era demonstrate that deterrence via conventional forces often fails with catastrophic consequences. The approximately 100 million deaths in little more than 10

combined years of warfare during the first half of the 20th century remind us of the fragility of conventional deterrence. The renowned deterrence theorist, Thomas Schelling, replied to the claim that U.S. conventional forces can now deter reliably with the devastatingly realistic comment: "One might hope that major war could not happen in a world without nuclear weapons, but it always did."

In addition, the United States may not have the claimed superior conventional forces in areas that are potential flash points. There reportedly are now deep concerns within NATO that Western conventional forces are inadequate to defend some NATO allies against a Russian conventional incursion. Russian President Vladimir Putin has boasted that Russian troops could march into five NATO capitals in two days.

Correspondingly, some key U.S. allies in Europe and Asia have been explicit that they are not assured by American conventional power alone. They see a credible U.S. nuclear umbrella as indispensable to their security and are, therefore, concerned about talk of further reductions in U.S. nuclear weapons. The continuing need for a credible U.S. nuclear umbrella was recently suggested by Poland's first elected president, Lech Walesa: "Putin has been trying to intimidate us with his nuclear weapons we should borrow, [or] lease nuclear weapons and show Putin that if a Russian soldier puts one foot on our land uninvited, we will attack." The collapse of credible U.S. nuclear-deterrence capabilities would unleash this proliferation dynamic — hardly a future the United States should encourage.

Democratic and Republican presidents of the nuclear age have wrestled with and ultimately rejected minimum-deterrence arguments. While today's nuclear policy leaves room for improvement, to date the Obama administration has not adopted much of the nuclear-disarmament agenda — explicitly stating that its 2013 nuclear-employment policy is not a "minimum-deterrence" strategy." That vexes America's anti-nuclear activists, but it is a legacy the rest of us in the free world appreciate.

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