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Why Revive the Cold War?

Russia and the U.S. were reducing their nuclear arsenals without 'arms control.'

By DOUGLAS J. FEITH AND ABRAM N. SHULSKY

The Cold War ended nearly 20 years ago. Isn't it time we abandoned policies specifically designed to deal with it? Arms-control talks are a case in point. Why should U.S. officials act as if only a Cold War-style treaty can save the United States and Russia from a destabilizing nuclear arms race?

Despite President Barack Obama's strange, pre-Moscow summit remark last month in a New York Times interview that the U.S. and Russia are continuing to "grow" their nuclear stockpiles, both countries have in fact reduced their stockpiles drastically since the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991. Those reductions resulted from unilateral decisions, not from arms-control bargaining.

Thus, on Nov. 13, 2001, President George W. Bush announced that the U.S. would unilaterally reduce its "operationally deployed strategic nuclear warheads to a level between 1,700 and 2,200 over the next decade." This was far less than the 6,000 limit allowed under the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). Russian President Vladimir Putin promptly said in December 2001 that Russia would similarly reduce its nuclear forces.

Thus, benefiting from the happy reality that the Cold War was over, each country felt free to cut its arsenal, whether or not the other committed itself to do so. The 2002 Moscow Treaty, which simply made legally binding the reduction pledges each president had already announced, was negotiated as a friendly gesture to Russia. U.S. officials did not see it as a strategic necessity, but Mr. Putin wanted formal acknowledgment that Russia retained nuclear-arms parity with the U.S., though it could no longer be seen as America's peer overall.

Now, with START set to expire in December, it is Mr. Obama who's intent on signing a new treaty. He says U.S.-Russian arms reductions will help stem nuclear proliferation.

Mr. Obama here is mixing up pretext and policy. When criticized for pursuing nuclear weapons, proliferators like North Korea and Iran make diplomatic talking points out of the size of the great powers' arsenals. They try to shift the focus away from themselves by complaining that the Americans and Russians aren't working hard enough to reach disarmament goals envisioned in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. But depriving proliferators of such talking points won't affect their incentives to acquire nuclear weapons—or the world's incentives to counter the dangers that the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs pose to international peace.

Nor would cutting the U.S. and Russian arsenals by a few hundred weapons do anything significant to achieve Mr. Obama's goal of a world without nuclear weapons. The roadblock is the fact of U.S. dependence on nuclear deterrence. So long as the security of the U.S. and of our allies and friends requires such dependence, a non-nuclear world will remain out of reach. Inventing a way to dispense with nuclear deterrence will require a political or technological breakthrough of major magnitude. Retaining our dependence on nuclear weapons even at somewhat lower levels is an admission by the Obama administration that the proposed reductions don't actually bring us closer to a non-nuclear world.

With Mr. Obama openly eager for a START follow-on treaty, Russian leaders have chosen to play coy and become demanding. So what might the U.S. have to pay for it? The price is likely to be high, as suggested by the "Joint Understanding" the U.S. and Russian presidents announced last month in Moscow.

Point 5 of the Understanding specifies that the new treaty is to contain "a provision on the interrelationship of strategic offensive and strategic defensive arms." Russia will use this language (which Bush administration officials repeatedly rejected) to try to derail U.S. plans for a Europe-based missile system designed to counter Iranian missile threats. If Russia succeeds here, the new treaty would increase the value to Iran of acquiring nuclear weapons. By making it easier for a nuclear-armed Iran to threaten all of Europe and eventually the U.S., the new treaty would promote rather than discourage nuclear proliferation.

Similarly, according to Point 6, the new treaty is to contain a provision on how non-nuclear, long-range strike weapons may affect strategic stability. Russia wants this to impede U.S. development of such weapons, probably by requiring that they be counted as if they had nuclear warheads. Hence the new treaty could shut down one of the more promising avenues for reducing U.S. dependence on nuclear arms for strategic strike.

All in all, the Obama administration's nuclear weapons policies appear confused and self-defeating. Mr. Obama seems willing to pay for arms reductions that Russian officials have made clear will occur soon, due to aging or the planned modernization of systems, with or without a new treaty. Moreover, the Obama administration is opposing modernization measures designed to protect against the risk that the aging of U.S. weapons will compromise their safety or reliability.

There is an important connection between proliferation risks and modernization. But the Obama administration seems to have it backwards. If the U.S. fails to ensure the continuing safety and reliability of its arsenal, it could cause the collapse of the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Countries such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia and others might decide that their security requires them to acquire their own nuclear arsenals, rather than rely indefinitely on the U.S. The world could reach a tipping point, with cascading nuclear proliferation, as the bipartisan Congressional Strategic Posture Commission warned in its May 2009 report.

The Obama administration's nuclear weapons policies—including its treaty talks with Russia—affect the way America's friends and potential adversaries view the integrity of the U.S. deterrent. The wrong policies can endanger the U.S. directly. They can also cause other states to lose confidence in the American nuclear umbrella and to seek security in national nuclear capabilities.

If that happens, the dangers of a nuclear war somewhere in the world would go up substantially. It would not be the first time a U.S. government helped bring about the opposite of its intended result—but it might be one of the costliest mistakes ever.

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