
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.**The Dangerous Illusion of 'Nuclear Zero'**

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Moving toward "nuclear zero" is a signature theme of this administration. President Barack Obama's vision of a world without nuclear weapons is certainly grand. The problem is that our current policies lack coherence and rest on other-worldly assumptions.

Consider the administration's recently released Nuclear Posture Review (NPR). One of the conditions that would permit the United States and others to give up their nuclear weapons "without risking greater international instability and insecurity" is "the resolution of regional disputes that can motivate rival states to acquire and maintain nuclear weapons." Another condition is not only "verification methods and technologies capable of detecting violations of disarmament obligations," but also "enforcement measures strong and credible enough to deter such violations."

The first condition would require ending the Arab-Israeli conflict, settling the Korean War, resolving Kashmir and the other India-Pakistan disputes, and defusing Iran's tensions with its neighbors and with the U.S. It also means solving any other significant conflicts that might arise.

Verification would be tough, but even if technology could solve the problem, the question remains: What kind of "enforcement measures" do those who drafted the NPR imagine?

As of now, the U.N. Security Council is the only conceivable policing agency and its record is weak. What, for example, did the Security Council do when Iraq violated the Geneva Convention on poison gas in the 1980s, or when North Korea recently violated the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty? There simply are no good grounds for relying on the Security Council's will to enforce treaties.

U.S. efforts to organize sanctions in response to Iran's illegal pursuit of nuclear weapons have been exercises in frustration. The Security Council deal announced on Tuesday falls far short of the "crippling sanctions" the administration had once intended. This experience undermines the credibility of any threat of enforcement measures -- even against a state not allied with a veto-wielding Security Council member. And if China, Russia or an ally of either were someday to cheat on the ban, enforcement would be precluded by veto.

Is some kind of "world executive" envisioned to implement, or at least authorize, enforcement measures over objections from major powers? If so, it's hard to see how the U.S. or any other great power would relinquish its sovereign rights to independent action and self-defense.

"Strong enough" enforcement would have to include military measures. Is the idea here a U.N. military force that could fight large wars, as some diplomats proposed when the U.N. Charter was negotiated in the late 1940s? Or would military enforcement be the duty of the strongest state, presumably the U.S.? Only an arrangement verging on world government -- an entity that could deploy overwhelming military power against a violator without interference by other powers -- could possibly fill the bill.

The administration recognizes that knowledge about physics cannot simply be eradicated. "In a world where nuclear weapons had been eliminated but nuclear knowledge remains, having a strong infrastructure and base of human capital would be essential to deterring cheating or breakout, or, if deterrence failed, responding in a timely fashion," the NPR says. So even in a world of nuclear zero, the U.S. would have to remain able to rebuild its nuclear capability in a "timely" fashion. Presumably other nuclear-capable states would conclude the same for themselves.

In the event of a serious crisis, countries would race to reconstitute their nuclear arsenals. The winner would enjoy a fleeting nuclear monopoly, and then come under severe pressure to use its nuclear weapons decisively. The resulting instability could make the competitive mobilizations of the European armies in 1914 look like a walk in the park.

So what are the benefits of endorsing nuclear zero as America's goal? Proponents argue that embracing nuclear zero will increase cooperation from other countries against proliferators like North Korea and Iran. But what is this hope based on? America's embracing nuclear zero may take away a debating point from countries unwilling to cooperate with us, but it does nothing to change their interests. The deal Brazil and Turkey cut with Iran this week shows that Mr. Obama's embrace of nuclear zero does not translate into international cooperation where it really matters.

Endorsing nuclear zero makes it even harder for the U.S. government to maintain the nuclear infrastructure that the president says is essential for our security. Why should a bright young scientist or engineer enter a dying field -- especially when innovation is discouraged by support for a permanent ban on weapons testing, and by the renunciation of new weapons development? The NPR states that the administration aims to "enhance recruitment and retention" of technical personnel, but its policies seem sure to drive them away.

The NPR stresses that the world's nonproliferation regime requires a strong U.S. nuclear umbrella. Yet the proposal can hardly increase confidence in America's determination to maintain its longstanding global role. U.S. friends overseas worry about their security in a world where America seems determined to shed its burdens as a nuclear power. This will likely spur nuclear proliferation -- not discourage it.

President Obama has constructed U.S. nuclear-weapons policy on the assumption that it is helpful to set our goal as the complete abolition of such weapons. But the NPR makes clear that not even the Obama administration can really imagine a world without nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, the president's visionary notions appear likelier to undermine rather than further his own goals of nuclear nonproliferation and stability.

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