

# START the Debate

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**K**eeping more nuclear weapons than we need is wasteful, which is why both the United States and Russia have been reducing their arsenals sharply for almost twenty years—since the Cold War ended. Some of the cuts have been taken to fulfill US-Russian treaty

obligations—and some were done unilaterally. The Obama administration has just negotiated a new strategic arms reductions treaty with Russia that will require further cuts.

The arms-control argument for reducing nuclear weapons goes beyond the desire to avoid waste. It says that the world necessarily becomes safer and more stable, with less danger of nuclear proliferation, when the numbers of American and Russian nuclear weapons diminish. But that argument doesn't hold water.

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This essay was adapted from remarks by Mr. Feith to the Center for Security Policy's National Security Group Lunch on 18 December, 2009. Mr. Feith, former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (2001-05), is a Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute and author of *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (Harper).

Regarding the United States and Russia, the key to peace and stability is the lack of hostility between them—it is not the fine balancing of their respective weapons, or the diminution of their arsenals. And regarding North Korea, Iran and other recent or aspiring nuclear powers, what drives their nuclear programs is unrelated to whether Russia and the United States have twenty or thirty percent fewer warheads or launchers. In fact, at some point, US nuclear weapons cuts might spur proliferation rather than curb it. Many other countries, after all, have foregone nuclear weapons of their own, relying instead on the American nuclear arsenal to protect them. If the United States were to cut its nuclear capabilities unwisely, American allies and friends might lose confidence in our nuclear assurances and feel compelled to develop their own nuclear weapons. And, potential proliferators might be more inclined to create nuclear arsenals for themselves if their own small arsenals put them close to the capabilities of a greatly diminished US arsenal.

Some US officials have been outspokenly eager for a new strategic arms treaty with Russia. They talk as if the world must under all circumstances improve whenever the United States and Russia agree on additional nuclear weapons reductions.

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They claim to be inspired by the hope, championed by President Barack Obama, that the United States can lead the world to eliminate nuclear weapons altogether. There are eminent people who have signed on to this idea. George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, along with other thoughtful people, have endorsed the idea of a nuclear-free world as a US strategic goal.

But nuclear weapons cannot be uninvented. It is not credible that the leadership of every country in the world can be counted on to act in the common interest of humanity by not developing nuclear weapons, especially if developing nuclear weapons could give one a decisive advantage over one's enemies. The notion is so at odds with common sense and with even a basic understanding of history and human nature that its advocacy appears fraudulent. The most charitable view of the nuclear-free world proposal is that its proponents want to tell us something about themselves—about how good and humane they are and about how intensely they would regret the awful consequences of a nuclear war. That's nice to know, of course, but it tells us nothing about the world as it is. It sheds no light on the dangers that good and humane people in the world face from self-aggrandizing brutes and from murderous ideological fanatics. It ignores the unpleasant (some

might say paradoxical) truth that good and humane people sometimes have to use deadly force if they want to maintain their freedom to live good and humane lives.

Some nuclear-free-world advocates admit that circumstances are far from ripe for US nuclear disarmament, and won't be ripe for as far as the eye can see. But they nevertheless champion the idea as a long-term aspiration. They think it has international appeal and will make countries friendlier to the United States. Some think it will discourage nuclear proliferation. But this last point has the same solipsistic flaw as the argument for US-Russian arms control treaties: Countries like North Korea, Iran, Pakistan, India and Israel have their own national security agendas and military concerns and don't organize their lives as responses to American acts of “moral leadership.”

Promoting disarmament pie-in-the-sky is not cost-free, even as a long-term aspiration. With realistic people, it damages the US government's credibility if our leaders' national security pronouncements sound fantastical. And with people willing to accept the goal of a nuclear-free world at face-value, it distorts their understanding of the security challenges US officials must handle. It undermines popular support for sober US policies.

The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) signed in

1991 limited the United States and Russia each to 6,000 nuclear warheads. When the Bush administration came into office in 2001, Defense Department officials did a nuclear posture review and decided we didn't need all of the weapons. President Bush then announced in November 2001 that over the next decade we would unilaterally cut our nuclear stockpile down to a range of 1700 and 2200 weapons.

That reduction was based on careful analysis of a complex of concerns. These included war-fighting considerations and the assurances the United States has for years provided to allies about the integrity of the US nuclear umbrella. It weighed heavily on us that, if our nuclear commitment to allies came into doubt, some of those allies might develop their own nuclear arsenals. The more countries with nuclear weapons, the greater the chances a nuclear war will occur—and the greater the risk the United States will be harmed either directly or indirectly. For over half a century, the number of nuclear weapons states has remained low and no weapons were detonated in combat. It is a supreme interest of the United States to preserve that restraint—and therefore to maintain a sound US nuclear umbrella.

A month after President Bush announced the planned unilateral US nuclear arms reductions, President Vladimir Putin of Russia de-

clared that his country likewise would unilaterally cut its nuclear arsenal. Russian officials were eager to conclude a new nuclear weapons treaty with us. In general, Bush administration officials were not as eager for a new treaty as were the Russians, for the Cold War was over and we no longer believed that peace with Russia hinged on a nuclear balance of terror. But the Russians clearly wanted to preserve their status as America's nuclear arms control partner. President Bush was willing to conciliate the Russians here, so he agreed to turn his unilateral promise and Putin's into a new agreement that was a formal exchange of promises. This became the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) that was signed in Moscow in 2002. It obliged the parties to make drastic cuts — approximately 66% — in their strategic offensive weapons. It did no harm because the cuts were sensible in any event, even in the absence of a new treaty. It is not entirely clear that the same can be said for the Obama administration's START follow-on treaty.

The Russians have pushed for the US to destroy weapons rather than disable them and put them in storage. This would provide Russia an asymmetric benefit because Russia maintains a nuclear warhead production capability, while the United States doesn't. For almost two decades the United States has been out of the new war-

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head production business. If Russia wants to make new nuclear weapons, it can do so almost instantly. The United States, in contrast, would require years to build the production line necessary to create new weapons.

Furthermore, the time it would take for the US to take a set of warheads off the storage shelf and deploy them on missiles would be greater than the time it would take the Russians to produce new weapons. This asymmetry was at the heart of the controversy between the American and Russian negotiators over storing versus destroying weapons.

President Obama has suggested that an arms race would result if there were no START follow-on agreement. Yet post-Cold War history does not support that fear. Both the United States and Russia have unilaterally reduced their arsenals. As noted, nuclear weapons are expensive to maintain. Some weapons age and need to be retired. The START follow-on cannot be justified as the price we have to pay to avert an arms race. We don’t have to make concessions to the Russians to pay for reductions they will make anyway for their own reasons.

Is it good or bad for the US and Russia to make another nuclear-arms treaty? There is not necessarily harm in agreeing to some reductions below the levels the Bush administration set with Rus-

sia in 2002. The numbers aren't particularly consequential at the margins. An important numbers-related issue is whether the new treaty will allow the United States to maintain the so-called "nuclear triad." As the bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission, led by former Secretaries of Defense William Perry and James Schlesinger, pointed out, preserving a mix of land-based, air-based, and sea-based weapons is valuable for the survivability, flexibility and effectiveness of our nuclear deterrent force.

Other important issues are whether the new treaty will preserve US freedom to add capability to strike targets at long distances with non-nuclear weapons, and whether any of the treaty language will allow Russia to interfere with US plans to build and deploy defenses against missiles of all ranges.

The main argument President Obama has advanced for a new treaty is that it will help us achieve our non-proliferation goals. He is wise to stress the importance of non-proliferation. He evidently does not appreciate, however, how his declarations and policies undermine confidence in US nuclear guarantees and therefore risk bringing about the opposite of his stated intention. His rhetoric about a nuclear-free world, his support for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, his opposition to a new reliable replacement warhead—all cast doubt on the future of the US

policy of "extended deterrence." President Obama is thus calling into question the integrity of the US nuclear umbrella, which (as noted) is a critical element of the international nonproliferation regime.

These issues will be central when the administration presents the new START follow-on treaty to the Senate for approval. Republicans have 41 seats in the Senate, but it only takes 34 votes to block a treaty. And conservative Senators during the Clinton years rejected the CTBT, which boldly announced to the country that the US Senate was no longer an arms-control rubber stamp and was back in the treaty quality-control business. President Obama will have to pay heed to the views of Republicans on this matter.

Led by Senator Jon Kyl, the Senate's Republican caucus has informed President Obama by letter that they will support the new treaty only if it advances US non-proliferation interests, preserves the US nuclear deterrent and the policy of extended deterrence for our friends abroad and protects US rights to build missile defenses – and only if the administration presents a serious plan for modernization of US nuclear weapons infrastructure to make sure that our weapons remain safe and reliable for many years to come.

Now that President Obama has published the new treaty, the debate will begin in earnest. ■