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# The Nuclear Disarmament Bandwagon: Time for New Thinking?

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*Global interest in complete nuclear disarmament is unprecedented. Yet the time may have come for a fundamental rethinking about the functions of nuclear weapons and deterrence. Without a "new thinking" about nuclear fundamentals, significant progress is unlikely.*

TWO DECADES after the Cold War began to wind down, the push to marginalise nuclear weapons has been taken up again with considerable vigour. In January 2007, four senior American statesmen – George Schultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger and Sam Nunn – called for drastic cuts in the American arsenal with a view to moving toward universal disarmament. The plea, repeated in January 2008, has found echoes elsewhere.

A mega-conference in Oslo in February and projects by major think tanks, including a meeting of experts from around the world in Singapore in March, have set in motion what looks like a global disarmament bandwagon. The effort is laudable. It seeks to implement a neglected part of the bargain that is the foundation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT): that disarmament is the obverse face of the nonproliferation coin.

## Dismantling nuclear deterrence thinking

Nonproliferation objectives cannot be isolated from the continued existence of thousands of nuclear weapons in the American and Russian armouries. But the moves to "build down" the forces of the Big Two are unlikely to go very far unless the basics of nuclear deterrence thinking are dismantled. Unfortunately, there is not much sign of this happening.

The current discourse on drastic reduction seems to be crystallizing around an initial ceiling of 1,000 warheads. The United States, it is widely argued, can afford to go down to this number unilaterally and then encourage Russia and later others to get on board. This is an acceptable number as an initial step, but will quickly run into the conceptual quicksand of persistent Cold War thinking.

Opponents of sharp cuts in the US arsenal are already falling back on old arguments about the need to

retain sufficient numbers of weapons to ensure survivability under attack and to hedge against erosion of capability owing to the ageing of warheads. Ironically, proponents of deep cuts employ the same language and concepts as those resisting cuts. A typical argument urging unilateral cutbacks by the US runs as follows: For effective deterrence, the US needs the assurance of striking no more than 500 targets. Because some weapons may not be reliable, and because there is a need for redundancy against a surprise attack, 1,000 warheads would be adequate. This is a standard Cold War calculus at work. Nobody is really asking the critical questions: Who is to be deterred, and for what? And how does deterrence actually work?

When pressed on the first question, American advocates of the 1,000-warhead arsenal necessarily point to Russia, which is the only state with comparable numbers. Clausewitz's dictum that war is essentially a political act is generally ignored. Why does Russia have to be deterred? There is no comparison between the late and unlamented Soviet Union and the Russia of today. The latter is merely a weak version of the US: a multicultural capitalist society organised on democratic political lines.

If it is inclined to flag its nuclear prowess inordinately by building new missiles or buzzing NATO forces with nuclear-capable aircraft, this reflects no more than a symbolic effort to recover its lost superpower image. The same Russia is becoming increasingly embedded in the global trade and investment markets; and the same Russia is denuclearizing with American funds and technical assistance. To believe it has to be deterred by threatening 500 targets in its territory requires remarkable elasticity of imagination. As for the other nuclear-armed states, their numbers are so much lower that they do not even count.

How does deterrence actually work? Between nuclear powers, numbers do not matter when there is a crisis and the threat of war is in the air. During the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, the American arsenal outnumbered the Soviet one by 10:1. More to the point, the number of Soviet weapons in Cuba was just a handful, yet President Kennedy ruled out an air strike to eliminate them. As he told his National Security Council on October 22, despite its overwhelming striking power, the US could not be certain of destroying all the existing missiles in Cuba and of preventing a retaliatory attack.

**New thinking, not numbers, matter**

At this point, what deterred the US was the *small possibility* of being struck by a *small number* of enemy weapons. Similarly, an unnamed American official told a *New York Times* reporter why the US chose not to try and wipe out North Korea's tiny and possibly defective stock of nuclear weapons. As the official put it: "It sounds good…until you ask yourself the question, what good is a strike if it leaves their capability untouched?" Again, the enormous American advantage in terms of numbers and quality meant nothing at the moment of decision. The pattern is similar for the Sino-Soviet confrontation of 1969, when Soviet leaders contemplated a "surgical strike" against the rudimentary Chinese arsenal, but refrained.

As a first step toward serious disarmament, it is imperative to shift to a "new thinking" on nuclear weapons. Nuclear deterrence rests on the unacceptability of a small risk of large-scale damage – a risk that can be posed without possessing large stocks of nuclear weapons. No nuclear power requires more than a handful of warheads and missiles in order to deter an adversary. A sharp drop in nuclear armaments will reduce the general nuclear threat arising not so much from the possibility of deliberate war, but from three sources: misperception and loss of control in a crisis, say, between China and the US; accidental launch of a nuclear weapons; and terrorist access to nuclear weapons or materials.

In every respect, the fewer the number, the lower the risk. Some argue that a much smaller arsenal will erode the credibility of US extended deterrence and thus encourage Japan and South Korea to go nuclear. But we have seen that very small forces can deter, so there is no basis for the notion that it

takes thousands of weapons for a deterrent force to be “credible”.

Only after weapons stocks are reduced to double digits can the stronger objections to full disarmament relating to verification problems and the fear of cheating be dealt with. At present, we do not have the conceptual wheels to travel anywhere close to that point.

Unless our understanding of nuclear weapons is reworked, the old concepts which bred armouries with tens of thousands of nuclear weapons will continue to be the source of resistance to serious cutbacks. The zero option will remain distant indefinitely.

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