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Obama's Misguided Nuclear Triad

There are far better plans for arms control than the one Obama is pushing.

On September 24, President Obama will be campaigning again, not on Jay Leno's program or the Sunday talk shows, but at a UN Security Council summit on nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament. Unfortunately, his UN Security Council appearance — a first for a U.S. president — is focused on pushing an arms-control agenda and a five-page draft UN resolution that is not all that well thought out.

And what exactly might this agenda be? Roughly, the same one Mr. Obama is trying to sell to at least 67 members of the U.S. Senate. It would include cuts in nuclear-weapons systems agreed on with the Russians under a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, and an international treaty on cutting off the production of military fissile material.

These nuclear-control understandings — Obama's new nuclear-control triad — have a solid Cold War legacy. The Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and the Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty were first suggested in the 1950s; START came from arms-control talks begun in the 1960s.

The president's hope is that formalizing them will provide the "momentum" to move the world toward zero nuclear arms. And he has a timetable. A new START must be signed before the old one expires on December 5, 2009, and ratified sometime before the conclusion of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference in May of 2010. Then, Congress should vote on the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty no later than 2011, and the fissile-material cutoff treaty needs to be concluded before Obama's first term ends in January 2013.

The good news, senior Obama officials insist, is that meeting this schedule is feasible. The bad news, they say, is that failing to do so risks the scuttling of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (which requires "good faith" efforts at disarmament), followed, eventually, by a global slide toward nuclear chaos.

If this all seems a bit reminiscent of Obama's now-or-never health-care-reform campaign, there is a good reason why. It is. Time, we are told again, is running out, and we must vote up or down on a very specific set of agreements.

In this case, it's an incomplete package and one that congressional hawks pretty much hate

Obama's critics in the House were immediately put off by the December 5, 2009, deadline the president set for reaching a START agreement. This, they argue, hands too much leverage to Moscow. In a [letter](#) to President Obama, they cautioned him not to proceed with Russia's proposal for deep cuts to U.S. bomber and unmanned delivery systems that are also useful for conducting conventional strikes.

Furthermore, cutting U.S. nuclear delivery systems down to as few as 500, as the Russians suggested, "may well lead to the elimination of at least one leg of our nuclear triad" — i.e., bombers, land-based ballistic missiles, and submarine-based ballistic missiles. Finally, the congressional critics are disturbed that no provision had yet been made to get the Russians to reduce the number of their deployed shorter-range nuclear weapons (they have some 3,800; the U.S. has roughly only one-tenth as many). None of these Republicans, it should be noted, oppose extending the inspection provisions of START, which run out on December 5, 2009. These could be extended with an executive agreement.

As for a comprehensive test ban, opposition on the Hill is likely to be even more intense. Obama lacks the 67 Senate votes required to ratify. Expect continued demands that he approve a new warhead design and upgrade the existing nuclear mobilization base as a minimal quid pro quo. Most Republicans also will insist that the U.S. not assume any definition of what a nuclear test is that is stricter than what the Russians adhere to — a loophole that might well allow for renewed very-low-yield nuclear tests. All of this drama, keep in mind, is part and parcel of approving a treaty that will come into force only in the improbable case that North Korea, India, Egypt, and Pakistan deign to ratify it.

As for securing international agreement to cut off the production of fissile material to make nuclear weapons, this is even less likely. Furthermore, most hawks would point out, such an agreement would be even less verifiable than a comprehensive test ban. Not much effort will be spent fighting this one, though: It is unlikely ever to get negotiated in Geneva, much less ratified at home.

Don't count on Obama's supporters backing down, though. They will continue to campaign even if this means antagonizing their opponents even further. If they were right about the critical necessity of ratifying these three agreements, this might be warranted. But, at best, it's a stretch.

The Russians, after all, were planning on getting rid of roughly 300 of their aging nuclear-armed ballistic missiles (SS-18s and SS-19s) with or without START, and U.S. nuclear deployments would be likely to go down slightly as well. More important, making much deeper cuts too quickly could easily risk *increasing* the nuclear threat. How? Cut too quickly and too deep and you risk tempting China to build up to match us: Beijing currently has roughly 300 deployed nuclear weapons and could triple this number with the surplus nuclear fuel it has stockpiled. As China goes, so go India, Pakistan, and, if you are not lucky, Japan. With too many cuts of the wrong type, in ten years' time you may succeed only in creating a nuclear-armed crowd consisting of near equals and an international scene resembling the powder keg of 1914 — only this time with plutonium instead of powder.

This brings us back to the question of how critical ratifying a nuclear test ban is. The U.S. hasn't tested since 1992 and has no serious plans to resume. The only state that has made a career out of testing in the last decade is North Korea, and it is unlikely to ratify such a treaty. In 1998 it was Pakistan and India. The U.S. had not tested the first bomb it used against Japan, and testing would not be critical for any other state to perfect a workable first-generation weapon. At the other end of the spectrum, states that have mastered thermonuclear design seem quite capable of maintaining their weapons without further tests. A good example here is Israel, which has tested only once. Bottom line: Burning up political capital and time to persuade the U.S. Senate to ratify a test ban won't buy much in practice.

As for banning further production of fissile material — separated plutonium and enriched uranium — to make bombs, this sounds good until you realize that it allows (encourages?) civilian production of these materials. How much sense does that make? We still don't know how to inspect civilian nuclear-fuel-making plants in a fashion that can reliably detect military diversions (hence our anxiety about Iran's activities). Then there is the price of admission: The French are now arguing that the only way to get such a ban going is to bribe China (which has not signed) by selling it a nuclear fuel plant capable of making 1,000 crude bombs' worth of plutonium a year. With arms control like this, transferring spare bombs to other nations starts to look reasonable.

Of course, if Obama's arms-control triad were the best we could do against the nuclear threats we face, spending all of our time to optimize it so as to avoid its downsides might be worth it. But, in fact, there are many more practical, less controversial measures we could and should be taking, starting with the sensible recommendations of the bipartisan congressional commission on proliferation and terrorism, on which I serve. That Obama has chosen so far to ignore these and other sound, incremental suggestions speaks volumes on how credible his own arms-control triad and his campaign to secure it are likely to be.

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