



Zero is the Wrong Number

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President Barack Obama has so far made only one strategic mistake, but it is a major one. It concerns the greatest security threat to the United States, other free nations, and world peace—nuclear arms in the hands of terrorists, as well as rogue and failing regimes. President Obama’s strategy calls for leading by example in dealing with these weapons of mass destruction (WMD). It assumes that after the United States and Russia re-commit themselves to nuclear disarmament, other nations will be inspired either to give up their nuclear arms or refrain from acquiring them. This goal, referred to in short as the “zero strategy” (for zero nuclear weapons), is dangerous if implemented, distracts the international community from more certain and pressing goals, and is extremely unlikely to move those who do need to be inspired, cajoled, or otherwise made to forgo nuclear arms.

How did this usually sure-footed president slip on such a vital issue? The strategy that calls for the United States and Russia to lead the parade to nuclear disarmament was formed and then run up the flagpole by four highly regarded statesmen: two Republicans, Henry Kissinger and George Shultz, and two Democrats, Sam Nunn and William Perry. In January 2007, they issued a collective proclamation, subsequently en-

dorsed by a number of leading American specialists in nuclear weapons policy, calling for a world free of nuclear arms. The Quad, as the four authors of the zero strategy are often called, are all senior veterans of the Cold War. But perhaps this anachronistic experience is a hindrance. (Indeed, one critic called them “dinosaurs.”)

To move their strategy forward, the Quad outlined their view in a position paper endorsed by 36 experts in the nuclear weapons field. The Quad focused largely on Russia and the United States, and mainly on their strategic nuclear weapons, calling for reductions in the number of warheads arming the two powers’ strategic bombers and missiles. Such a move would effectively extend the principal U.S.-Russian treaty that covers these weapons and that is about to expire. The Quad also favors an increase in the warning and decision time before either country could launch their nuclear warheads. Currently, American and Russian missiles remain on alert at levels equaling the Cold War. This means that large parts of their nuclear arsenals are armed and pre-targeted, and that either country could launch their nuclear weapons within minutes of detecting an attack.

The foundations of the Quad’s position date back to a much earlier period in the

nuclear age. On March 5, 1970, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) entered into force, effectively creating two groups of nations: those that already had nuclear weapons and agreed to give them up, and those that did not have them and promised not to seek them. Many countries comprising the second class ended their nascent military nuclear programs in the years that followed, including South Africa, Argentina, Brazil, and Egypt. But the members of the first class—the “nuclear club” of China, Russia, Britain, France, and the United States—did not live up to their obligations. Moreover, three nations—India, Pakistan, and Israel—refused to sign the NPT and developed nuclear arsenals, while North Korea, which signed on in 1985, quit the NPT in January 2003 after developing the means to produce nuclear bombs. These failures and inconsistencies in the non-proliferation regime are often cited by nations, such as Iran, when they express irritation with being cajoled or pressured by the United States and other nuclear states to be good citizens and not acquire nuclear weapons.

Given this background, it is not surprising that the Quad’s statement generated considerable excitement among advocates of nuclear disarmament, especially among those who have long hoped that the United States and Russia would lead other nations to a world free from The Bomb. Such voices had been barely heard in the years since the groundbreaking arms agreements of the Carter and Reagan years. The first of these agreements arose from the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT II), a treaty signed by Jimmy Carter and Leonid Brezhnev in June 1979. In 1987, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev struck a major deal that led to a considerable reduction in the levels of U.S. and Russian strategic arms. The agreement resulted in the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. A subsequent pact, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty

(START I) was signed in July 1991 and limited both nations to 6,000 warheads each, deployed on no more than 1,600 strategic delivery vehicles. These levels were to be reached by December 2001. A second arms reduction treaty, START II, was signed by George H. W. Bush and Boris Yeltsin in January 1993 and envisioned more extensive cuts in warheads and strategic delivery vehicles. However, it never officially entered into force, with the Russians officially declaring that they would no longer be bound by the agreement following the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002. Despite the problems with START II, Russia and the U.S. continued to make cuts as required under START I. They announced in December 2001 that they had completed those reductions long before the treaty’s planned expiration.

In 2002, George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin made their contribution to strategic arms control with the signing of the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT). The countries pledged to reduce their total number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads beyond START I levels to between 1,700 and 2,200 each by December 31, 2012. As of early 2009, the United States has already reached the 2,200 limit, while Russia reportedly has about 2,800 warheads and is on track to fulfill its obligations by the 2012 deadline. But, there is much less here than meets the eye. The figures deal only with the number of deployed warheads, many of which have not been destroyed and can be readily re-deployed. The number of these is not known because destroying the warheads was not part of the deal and not subject to verification measures. Also, while there are fewer missiles, many have been modified to be able to carry more warheads.

While there have been deals aplenty, recent action toward these goals has been wanting, and over the past decade the dreams of disarmament advocates have



been tinged with cynicism. The hope that nuclear abolition would follow the original Reagan-Gorbachev arrangement lost much of its appeal after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Though reductions in arsenals continued on both sides, including during the George W. Bush administration, dealing with American and Russian weapons lost any sense of urgency. Challenges to the non-proliferation regime, such as the rise of India, Pakistan, and North Korea as nuclear states, dimmed the possibility of global disarmament even further. Pakistan is expanding its nuclear bomb-making facilities and India is responding in kind. North Korea is adding to its stockpile of nuclear bombs, leading Japan and South Korea to consider developing their own nuclear arms. In short, the nuclear contagion, far from contained, is spreading like the swine flu.

Moreover, the 2002 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review suggested that nuclear weapons

have a role to play in America's security for the foreseeable future. In effect, in the decades following the first Reagan-Gorbachev pact, much of the interest in nuclear abolition was replaced in favor of arms control and non-proliferation. Thus, when the Quad unveiled its zero strategy, it was warmly received by those advocates of nuclear disarmament who have spent decades frustrated, waiting for a new beginning.

The Zero Mirage

Earlier this year, as the Obama administration was looking to develop its position on nuclear arms, it seems to have found it convenient to buy into this attractive vision of zero. During his first major speech about nuclear arms, in Prague on April 5, the new president promised that "the United States will take concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons...we will reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, and urge others to do the

same.” It is important to note that President Obama was careful to acknowledge that “this goal will not be reached quickly—perhaps not in my lifetime.”

So far, these are just words. There have been no new cuts in either the Russian or American nuclear arsenals. But is this the direction the Obama administration is headed—toward full and complete nuclear disarmament, however gradually? And should we trust that this heart-warming goal will actually inspire others to do the right thing? In a word, no.

Zero is the wrong number. Indeed, if zero is really the goal, it is an extremely hazardous one. Though the Obama administration basked in international goodwill in the aftermath of the Prague speech, this public diplomacy victory is unlikely to last long. Indeed, there were few signs of its after-glow during Obama’s July visit to Russia. Obama’s major speech at Moscow’s New Economic School was not broadcast live on any major Russian television channel. During Obama’s meeting with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, the latter spent most of the time griping about U.S. foreign policy. By the end of the trip, the Obama administration had little to show for its efforts at diplomacy. An agreement to seek further reductions in strategic nuclear arms favors Russia, which finds it difficult for financial reasons to keep up with the United States. Finally, Washington gained no ground in convincing Moscow to pressure Iran to give up its nuclear program—a major U.S. priority.

Unfortunately, so far the dream has produced just a series of potentially catastrophic distractions—particularly in relations with Russia. But even more problematically, we must not allow day-dreaming about zero to divert our attention from rogue states, such as North Korea and Iran, and failing states such as Pakistan. Virtually every expert who has examined the matter agrees

that the two greatest dangers to our security emanate from the threat of terrorists getting their hands on nuclear weapons and from those devices that rogue states have or may acquire. It is critical to note, however, that neither of these threats involves the strategic nuclear arms of the United States and Russia, the relatively well-guarded and secured high-yield weapons, which terrorists would find extremely difficult to operate even if they somehow got their hands on them.

Currently, the United States and Russia are discussing a reduction of their strategic nuclear arsenals beyond the level negotiated in SORT in 2002. The new target—discussed in Moscow this July in preparation for an agreement not yet worked out—is between 1,500 and 1,675 deployed warheads, a reduction that will take place over seven years. However, as yet it is unclear if the warheads removed through such an agreement will be merely stored away or disabled. Indeed, this has been a problem with the two earlier treaties as well. Washington has always wanted to count only deployed warheads. Reports suggest it will continue this stance even though Moscow would prefer the reverse. (The United States has dismantled some of the warheads it no longer deploys despite a lack of provisions in the arms control treaties requiring it to do so. It is thought that Russia has done the same, though there is no way of telling.)

More critically, the reductions desired do not include tactical nuclear weapons. Russia has several thousand such arms (estimates vary between 5,000 and 14,000, though it has never disclosed a precise count) while the United States has about 1,000. Such weapons are numerous, less well-protected, and much more user-friendly for terrorists than strategic weapons. They lack safeguards such as “permissive action links”—complex electronic locks that prevent the use of strategic warheads without high-level authorization from at least two

sources. Moreover, it is worth remembering that the yield of an average tactical nuclear weapon is still roughly 200 kilotons, approximately 10 times the destructive force of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

The Ultimate Risk

If zero is indeed the goal of the Obama administration, even if it is only over the very long term, it is a dangerous notion—unless it is preceded by radical changes in the ways the world is governed.

(The same holds for reducing nuclear weapons stockpiles substantially, en route to zero.) The reason is quite clear: if either Russia or the United States conceals ten such weapons, above the levels permitted by some current or future treaty, so long as each country has hundreds of them, it matters little. However, if one of the superpowers gives up its entire nuclear arsenal and the other stashes away ten warheads, it would pose a major threat to international stability. The whole concept of Mutually Assured Destruction, which secured the stability and ensured the restive peace of the Cold War and continues to this day, albeit in a modified fashion, would go out the window.

Moreover, this concern extends far beyond the two major nuclear powers. Even were both Russia and the United States to move to a true and verified zero, any other nation that failed to do so would have a significant strategic advantage. Imagine if North Korea were to somehow remain the only nuclear player, blackmailing the superpowers and menacing East Asia, merely by threatening to use its stockpile of nuclear weapons. True, this is an extremely unlikely development. Still, it serves to highlight that a U.S.-Russia zero is unthinkable—unless all other nations also give up their

nuclear arms. However, it is not only rogue states that are reluctant to line up. There are precious few signs that France, Britain, and China are interested in joining the zero nukes club. Even the most ardent supporters of zero recognize that, at best, the process will be long and difficult, and that moving to a world without The Bomb requires a very extensive system of verification and a global implementation of policies dedicated to the end of nuclear weapons—quite ap-

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pealing but, at the same time, very elusive ideals.

One may suggest (a bit cynically, perhaps, but international relations can lead one to cynical thoughts) that nuclear disarmament is simply an inspiring but harmless vision. However, the Quad strategy explicitly makes this a goal—that American and Russian disarmament will lead, indeed inspire, the rest of the world to relinquish their nuclear arsenals as well. Last year, the Quad noted: “The U.S. and Russia...have a special responsibility, obligation and experience to demonstrate leadership.” Likewise, during his July trip to Moscow, Obama stressed that the United States and Russia should “lead by example.” Certainly, non-proliferation and disarmament advocates see the Quad’s pronouncements through rose-tinted glasses, but where in the Obama administration are the realists? Do they really believe that one can inspire Iran and North Korea to jettison their nuclear programs?

To better understand how these nations will view the disarmament pronouncements,

we must try to put ourselves in their shoes. For years, nations such as India, Iran, and North Korea have faulted the members of the nuclear club for not living up to their obligations under the NPT, while pressuring others to abide by the same agreement. Indeed, the treaty mandates that the declared nuclear powers must “pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament.”

The Carrot Myth

“Disarmament,” in this context, is understood to mean zero bombs, not fewer bombs. But the realists in Pyongyang and Tehran know full well that zero is not coming anytime soon. Rather, the proposed negotiations between the United States and Russia are akin to informing someone who is to be executed by firing squad that the number of riflemen will be reduced to 15 from 20. It matters not. Even a handful of strategic nuclear weapons would suffice to obliterate the major population centers of North Korea and Iran, killing millions of people and rendering those lands unsuitable for human habitation for centuries. Faced with the reality of this existential threat, it is obvious to see why these nations so desperately seek the deterrent of having their own weapons. The inducement for Pyongyang or Tehran to give up nuclear weapons in lock step with Russia and Washington is nil. Indeed, as Stephen Rademaker, a former assistant secretary of state, notes, North Korea’s “Kim [Jong Il] would be even more interested in having nuclear weapons if he thought he could be the only leader on Earth to possess them.”

Beyond the threats posed to lesser nations by the two major nuclear states, there are regional factors that compel nations to keep a nuclear arsenal. Pakistan, for example, maintains its arms due to the persistent

fear of going to war with its much larger neighbor, India. A nuclear capability thus serves, from the viewpoint of Islamabad, as the main deterrent against being overrun. Moreover, New Delhi has nuclear weapons of its own as a counterbalance to both Pakistan and China. Beijing (which virtually ignored the Quad’s call for zero) maintains a nuclear arsenal to impress India and as the definitive marker of being a major strategic power. And so, on and on are threats—real and imagined—woven in a delicate and tangled nuclear web.

The nuclear club is also a ticket to the front row, a “look-at-me-now” demand for international prestige, if not necessarily respect. While Iran certainly seeks to counterbalance Israel’s significant (though undeclared) nuclear arms, the ayatollahs know well that nuclear weapons and delivery capability could make them the leading regional power in the Middle East. And though Pyongyang claims it needs nuclear weapons to deter an imminent attack from the United States or its East Asian enemies, in the near-term it has used its nuclear arsenal as a bargaining chip, shuttering then restarting its processing plants again and again to bully the West and to gain international aid. Israel committed itself to join a Middle Eastern zone free of weapons of mass destruction, but only if a stable regional peace and an effective verification system is established. Meanwhile, the tiny nation continues to box far above its weight due, in part, to its nuclear arsenal.

Given these compelling reasons, it is hard to imagine that any further U.S.-Russian arms reduction deal would sway governments in Pyongyang, Tehran, or Tel Aviv. Indeed, following Obama’s Prague speech and the announcement of planned reductions in nuclear arms during the president’s July visit to Moscow, North Korea continued to test its missiles, which potentially could be used one day to deliver nu-

clear bombs. Meanwhile, there has been not even a hint that Iran plans to yield an inch in its nuclear ambitions.

The Fissile Material Folly

There is certainly a healthy dose of idealism in the zero strategy, but beyond the day-dreaming lies danger. Zero distracts attention and uses up political capital needed for major, urgent problems concerning nuclear arms. Paramount among these issues is the lack of oversight of tactical nuclear weapons.

Currently, the negotiations between Washington and Moscow have neglected this major worry. An existing treaty that deals only with Cold War-era issues such as a reduction in the number of strategic nuclear warheads and missiles is all but useless given the real threats we face today.

Regarding fissile material, especially highly enriched uranium, from which terrorists could fashion nuclear devices, the United States has been a major player in securing the stockpiles and controlling the illegal sale of such material. Considerable progress has been made in safeguarding these materials and blending them down so that they are no longer useful for making nuclear bombs. This has occurred largely as part of the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, also known as Nunn-Lugar (named for the two American senators who initiated the program), through which the United States has contributed hundreds of millions of dollars a year over the last decade to help secure these fissile materials. Some of its greatest early successes came in Kazakhstan, which was left with large stockpiles of dangerous materials following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Washington paid the Kazakh government for the

materials, which were then sent to the United States and blended down into nuclear fuel to be sold for use in nuclear reactors used to generate electricity. Beyond these successful actions, there is still much work to be done. Accelerating the implementation of these safeguards deserves much higher priority than it is now granted.

On several recent occasions, some of this material found its way onto the transnational black market. For example, in 2007,

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officials from Georgia noted that they had twice in the past four years arrested men attempting to cross their borders, each with over four ounces of weapons-grade uranium. An official in the body that manages Russia's nuclear-powered icebreakers was arrested in 2003 when he tried to sell two pounds of yellowcake, a raw form of uranium. And, in 2001, Russian authorities stopped the sale of over two pounds of highly enriched uranium to a criminal gang from a group that included a man later found to be an agent of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB). The uranium's ultimate destination was not known.

To be fair, the Quad has mentioned the matter of loose fissile materials. Their plan is to create an international “nuclear fuel bank” that would provide enriched uranium to non-nuclear nations for fueling nuclear reactors to generate electricity. The idea is to discourage nations from developing their own facilities for enriching uranium, instead securing access to ready-made fuel from the

international bank. Hand in hand with greater monitoring, it would also supposedly ensure that client nations not siphon off material for making weapons. The United States agreed to provide nuclear know-how and material to the United Arab Emirates, although they do not currently have nuclear facilities. It does the same for other nations—such as Japan and India—whose governments the United States considers “safe.” However, there is no sign that Iran, North Korea, India, and Pakistan would agree to such a plan. They seem to feel, not without reason, that if they gave up their own uranium processing facilities, they would be at the mercy of the nations that own and run the international fissile fuel bank.

Zero as a Distraction

To be fair, the real hot issue—nuclear arsenals, real or anticipated, of rogue states and failing states—is not being ignored by President Obama. His new administration seems first to be building bridges of diplomacy and engagement before threatening sanctions. But it is far from clear that Iran and North Korea will prove remotely amenable to negotiations. Even convincing Pakistan and India to give up their nuclear arms is a very long shot.

Although various suggestions have been made in previous years to encourage India and Pakistan to join the NPT and dial down their nuclear arms programs, the opposite has been happening. Obama so far has focused on inspiring all nations with his rhetoric about zero, but has not moved to deal with this particular hot spot. On the contrary, his administration continued the steps taken by the Bush administration to expand the materials and know-how available to India’s nuclear industry. And in dealing with Pakistan, other issues—such as fighting the Taliban—have absorbed whatever leverage the United States has over this unstable regime.

There is room for considerable differences of opinion about what can be done with these nuclear states. But there is no sign, no hint, and no reason to believe that these nations will be moved to give up their status as nuclear powers because Russia and the United States are cutting their arsenals by, at most, 25 percent over seven years, under the plan agreed to in principle by Obama and Medvedev in July 2009, or that the non-core members of or aspirants to the nuclear club envision a day the whole world will move to zero.

Yet dealing with these hot spots is urgent because of the danger that they may lead to nuclear confrontations, thereby undermining the whole non-proliferation regime. Of immediate concern is the instability of the government in Pakistan—where there is real fear that terrorists might usurp nuclear arms. There seems to be no way directly to tackle this issue. In the longer run, one might hope to deal with it only if the conflict between India and Pakistan, especially their disagreement about Kashmir, is resolved. But there is no reason to believe that talking about zero will affect the Kashmir issue—in any shape or form.

If North Korea continues to develop its delivery systems and add more nuclear bombs to its arsenal, Japan and South Korea are likely to seek nuclear arms. They are unlikely to trust vague American talk about a nuclear umbrella, especially if the United States claims that it seeks to abolish its nuclear arms.

Most experts agree that if (Shiite) Iran develops nuclear arms, other Middle Eastern nations—especially the Sunni ones, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt—will seek their own. Meanwhile, there exists the very real possibility that Israel may attack Iran in order to slow down Tehran’s development of nuclear bombs. Iran is sure to retaliate.

One may say that it makes no sense trying to keep nations such as Japan and Saudi Arabia from acquiring nuclear weapons while simultaneously arguing that zero for the United States is both a dangerous and distracting specter—at least until we have an effective global verification system. However, this is like saying that because two people have lung cancer, and there is no way of curing it given the current state of medicine, we should not urge other people to stop smoking. Russia and the United States have shown that they can deter each other, but it is far from obvious that if more and more nations become nuclear states, all their leaders will stay rational all the time. This should, in no sense, be construed as denying that a world without nuclear bombs might be a safer one, but only to suggest that if the United States and Russia do not disarm, it does not follow that there are no strong reasons to stop other nations from going down the same road.

What Can Be Done Now

Moscow and Beijing have important roles to play in dealing with two of the three hottest hot spots—Iran and North Korea (but not Pakistan). Still, talking about zero, the record shows, is not moving Moscow and Beijing in the needed direction. To get Russia to use its leverage over Iran—without which the United States and its allies may not be able to compel the mullahs to reconsider their course—it is essential to determine what Moscow most wants.

High on the Kremlin's list is stopping the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and ditching plans for an American missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic. Indeed, President Obama indicated that if Iran abandons its pursuit of a nuclear military program, there would be no need for the United States to set up a missile-

defense system in Central Europe. But, Moscow's immediate concerns and the imminent threat of a nuclear Iran will not quickly be solved if the goal is a long and slow march to zero. So far, however, those exploring the reduction of strategic arms have not been authorized to offer deals on other fronts—such as supporting Russia's membership in the World Trade Organization, granting greater access to American markets, and promising at least to delay pushing NATO eastward. It is less clear what Beijing wants in exchange for using its leverage with North Korea to move it off its nuclear course, but zero nuclear weapons is surely not what China is planning for its arsenal.

Now that the dream of a world free of nuclear arms has been invoked by the president of the United States, it seems heartless to call it a risky business and a distracting dream—but that is exactly what it is. Rather, this idealistic vision should be seen as a shining city on the far horizon, which merely retreats as one seeks to rush toward it. Instead, the nuclear powers and concerned nations would do best to keep their sights on the hot spots and what might be done to douse these flames—lest major conflagrations are to follow.

Washington should entice, cajole, and if all else fails, compel North Korea and Iran to give up their nuclear ambitions. The United States and Russia should agree to accelerate the Cooperative Threat Reduction Initiative, which entails ensuring that tactical nuclear arms are well guarded and fissile materials secured. And the international community should make arrangements to stabilize the regime in Pakistan, meanwhile preparing for what can be done if it collapses. We are better served in addressing these burning issues with the attention they deserve than trying to grasp the mirage of zero. ●