
The Need for Global Zero

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THERE IS NOTHING LIKE NUCLEAR WEAPONS TO ADD DRAMA TO CONVENTIONAL CRISES. On the anniversary of Russia’s annexation of Crimea, President Putin’s claim that he considered placing Russia’s nuclear weapons on alert to deter retaliatory action caused more than a few strategic analysts to sit up and take notice. In light of the ongoing modernization of Russia’s nuclear forces, it’s fair to ask: Are nuclear weapons back in vogue? And does this mean that “global zero” is over?¹

For the last 10 years, the strategic nuclear policy community has had to take nuclear disarmament seriously. First came the conclusion in 2007 by the four U.S. statesmen (former secretaries of state George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, former secretary of defense Bill Perry, and former senator Sam Nunn) that the risks of nuclear weapons outweighed their benefits. Other former leaders joined the debate, publishing similar opinions around the world.

Next came President Obama’s Prague speech in 2009 supporting “the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons,” followed by the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review that reduced U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons in its national security strategy.

¹ The phrase “global zero” here refers broadly to the various strands of the nuclear disarmament movement, including a very prominent effort within the nuclear disarmament community that is known as Global Zero, initiated in 2006 by Bruce Blair and Matt Brown. Please see www.globalzero.org for more information about their specific efforts.





In the meanwhile, the Global Zero movement launched its ambitious Action Plan (2008) advocating a mix of deep bilateral, then multilateral, cuts and de-alerting. In the last three years a fledgling, government-led Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons initiative jumped into the fray. The initiative, which the United States does not support, seeks a legal ban on nuclear weapons and now has 117 signatories. More recently, the U.S. State Department launched a project with the Nuclear Threat Initiative called the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification.

These efforts amount to more than a fringe movement to ban the bomb. Russian recidivism may

tempt some strategic analysts to fall back into Cold War habits, dismissing nuclear disarmament as an old-fashioned dream (like nuclear electricity too cheap to meter). But there are a few reasons why nuclear disarmament won't go away, and why it will be important to pay attention to the array of efforts to reduce nuclear risks:

1. *Nuclear disarmament is not just a movement but an obligation.* The 1970 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty has long served U.S. national security interests by limiting the number of states that acquire nuclear weapons. Under the treaty, the five nuclear weapon states (the United States, the UK, France, China, and Russia) are obliged "to pursue negotiations in good

faith on effective measures relating to the cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date, and to nuclear disarmament, and to general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.” It is far better to direct a process to develop effective measures than only react to what could be unreasonable or impractical demands from outside.

2. *The nuclear disarmament “movement” is in the game for the long run.* The first nuclear disarmament campaigns began after World War II and they have ebbed and flowed with politics and crises. At a global stockpile of over 15,000 nuclear weapons today, we are closer to zero than we were at the height of the Cold War (70,000 nuclear weapons in 1986), but still very far away. Although some advocates of disarmament have called for “timebound” frameworks or conventions to ban nuclear weapons with a pen-stroke, few believe disarmament is quick or easy. Part of the challenge will be to acclimatize keepers of arsenals to lower and lower numbers. This has already happened over the last 30 years in the United States and Russia, as the comfort zone for levels of deployed weapons slowly has dropped from 10,000 to 3,000 to 1,000 nuclear weapons.

3. *The long-term trend is “less is more.”* Russian and U.S. nuclear forces are magnitudes larger than those of any other country (both have between 7,000 and 8,000 total deployed, nondeployed, and retired warheads). Although Russia is modernizing its forces, numbers are unlikely to go up. The end of the Obama presidency does not necessarily mean the end of nu-

clear weapons reductions, and a Republican president might be able to secure real reductions in treaties more easily than a Democrat. Every U.S. president since Nixon has made unilateral reductions to the nuclear weapons stockpile, with the largest of those made by Republican presidents.²

4. *The world has changed, but nuclear weapons haven’t.* Seventy years after their invention, nuclear weapons are still regarded as indispensable and prestigious by some, and atavistic and dangerous by others. They are still the currency of power, despite the fact that influence can be wielded across borders in so many other ways today. Their imperviousness to change stands in marked contrast to, for example, information technology and nanotechnology. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and connected, the isolation these weapons require (for safety, security, and surety reasons) will become an increasingly difficult burden.

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Fundamentally, the wider support for deep nuclear cuts and for measurable progress toward disarmament is rooted in the recognition that the world has changed. No longer can we compartmentalize nuclear risks—where there are weapons, fissile material, or facilities, there will be threats and risks. When President Obama called in 2009 in Prague for durable institutions to counter this “lasting threat,” he wasn’t referring to the nuclear disarmament movement, but they readily responded to the call. As nuclear risks rise, their nuclear messaging may become more, rather than less, attractive. ▣

² Hans Kristensen, “How Presidents Arm and Disarm,” October 15, 2014, <http://fas.org/blogs/security/2014/10/stockpilereductions/>.