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Unilateral Versus Bilateral Nuclear Reductions

By Hans M. Kristensen

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My task tonight is to argue that the United States could make more unilateral nuclear arms reductions in the future, as it has safely done in the past, in addition to pursuing arms control agreements. So just to be clear up front, I am not arguing *against* bilateral agreements or suggesting that the United States should *only* make unilateral reductions.

Over the past four years we have seen several pushbacks against the Obama administration's plans and efforts to reduce the number and role of nuclear weapons. Hearings in Congress have questioned further reductions, often with a reference to Russian and Chinese nuclear weapons modernizations. Some – recently including a prestigious group of former military and diplomatic officials – have even accused the President of planning to unilaterally disarm the United States.

“Unilateral” has been getting a bad name lately and the political climate appears to have changed. While the 2002 Congress encouraged the President to continue and accelerate reductions beyond the Moscow Treaty, current Congress has sought to constrain the President. One example is the requirement in the Senate's Advice and Consent Resolution for the New START Treaty that, “further arms reduction agreements obligating the United States to reduce or limit the Armed Forces or armaments of the United States in any militarily significant manner may be made *only pursuant to the treaty-making power of the President...*” (Emphasis added)

Limiting the President to only treaty-based reductions is, in my view, actually un-American because they contradict how actual reductions have been made for

decades. Reductions have always been based on a mix of bilateral treaty or declaratory agreements and unilateral initiatives or adjustments to the nuclear force posture.

I see unilateral reductions as a traditional and beneficial element of U.S. arms control efforts and nuclear force planning. Unilateral reductions can take on several forms, depending on intension, and can serve to kick start more formalized bilateral arms control agreements, or even motivate force reductions on “the other side.”

One type is what one might call unilateral reciprocal reductions, where the United States makes cuts that it anticipates Russia will match or at least follow. This could also be called motivational unilateral reductions because it is intended to trigger similar steps on “the other side.” Examples of this include the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) of the early 1990s where the first Bush administration announced sweeping unilateral reductions in U.S. strategic and non-strategic nuclear forces and urged Russia to follow. President Gorbachev and later Yeltsin did so matching, more or less, the U.S. initiative.

The appeal of unilateral reciprocal reduction initiatives like the PNIs is that they can jump-start an arms reduction process without having to go through prolonged and tedious negotiations. It can also be a way for visionary leaders to bypass, to some extent, their own domestic bureaucracies where opposition sometimes can seem a bigger obstacle to reductions than the adversary.

Unilateral reciprocal reduction initiatives can be more or less formalized. One can imagine a surprise initiative where one side plays the initiative up in public to put pressure on the other side to do the right thing and follow. That can work both ways and cause the other side to play hardball, but also break the ice on issues that cautious negotiations might have a hard time to address.

Another type involves what one might call unilateral nonreciprocal reductions, where the United States makes cuts without requiring that they be matched or even responded to by Russia. The purpose of such an initiative can be simple internal adjustments to the nuclear forces posture, or it can be intended to shape an adversary’s force planning. There is, of course, some overlap because unilateral nonreciprocal reductions likely will be “observed” by the other side and influence its medium- and long-term military planning.

Examples of unilateral nonreciprocal reductions include the Clinton administration eliminating nuclear capability from the surface fleet in 1994, the Bush administration reducing the nuclear weapons stockpile “by nearly half” between 2004 and 2007, the Bush administration cutting the number of non-strategic nuclear weapons deployed in Europe by more than half including the complete withdrawal of such weapons from Britain, and most recently the Obama administration retiring the nuclear Tomahawk land-attack cruise missile.

And just yesterday, I posted a blog on the FAS web site showing that the United States has unilaterally reduced its nuclear weapons stockpile by nearly 500 weapons since 2009.

This record demonstrates that unilateral nonreciprocal reductions are a long-held bipartisan American tradition.

Much depends, of course, on how unilateral reductions are being pursued and presented. In the case of the reductions mentioned before, the PNIs were played out as highly public instigators of Russian reciprocity. The 1994 denuclearization of the surface fleet was announced, but without any attempt to get Russia to reduce its nuclear fleet. And all of the other reductions were quietly implemented without any initiative whatsoever. In the case of non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe, where some NATO officials recently have reinvented disparity as a problem, the reductions were even kept secret – and still are.

In the near future, I believe it is necessary that the United States not only pursue a bilateral follow-on START treaty with Russia, but also continues the tradition of making unilateral reductions to speed things up and reduce some of the factors that motivate Russian nuclear planners to maintain an unnecessarily high force level.

The most obvious of these is, in my view, is the need to reduce the large number of U.S. launchers. Russia has already moved far below the New START Treaty limit and is currently counted at 300 launches below the United States. Because the larger U.S. force has a significant upload capability of extra warheads, this asymmetry causes Russia to maximize warhead loadings on its missiles, plan to produce new “heavy” ICBMs, increase the readiness of its forces, and be skeptical about further reductions.

In addition to taking those forces off line now that are scheduled for reductions by 2018 under the New START Treaty, the United States could unilaterally trim its strategic launchers by

transitioning now to an SSBN fleet of 12 boats each with 16 missiles – the force that is already planned for the next-generation SSBN fleet. Moreover, the U.S. force of 450 ICBMs could be trimmed to a force level more comparable to that of the Russian force of 350 ICBMs, a force that is likely to decline further over the next decade.

This could also form the basis of a follow-on START treaty of 1,000 deployed strategic warheads on 500 launchers that would force Russia to reduce its warhead loadings and the United States to reduce its force structure. But since Russia is already around that launcher level now, I think it would be in the U.S. interest to demonstrate an intention to moving toward such a force level now with a number of unilateral reductions. This would not take away the incentive for further treaty-based reductions but instead underscore the determination to move in that direction.

Another idea is to move forward with initiatives to reduce the alert level of nuclear forces. Russia and the United States each have about 800 warheads on alert, a force level wildly out of balance with the political realities of the world. Unilateral initiatives to jumpstart talks could involve removing ballistic missile submarines from alert and to reduce the number of ICBMs that are on alert at any given time.

In conclusion, I believe that unilateral reductions are consistent with long-held American policy and the Obama administration should continue that tradition in addition to pursuing a follow-on START Treaty with Russia. But in the current political climate – both in the Kremlin and on Capitol Hill – it is perhaps more important that the administration considers some unilateral reductions to complement its efforts to get negotiations started on a treaty. Doing so could help alleviate some of Russia's concern about nuclear inferiority, U.S. break-out capacity, and first-strike capability that help drive current modernization plans. If a follow-on treaty slips, ongoing nuclear modernization plans on both sides could lock the United States and Russia into unnecessarily large and expensive nuclear postures that will be counterproductive and take longer to reduce. Neither country can afford to wait for a treaty.