

## The hawkish case for nuclear disarmament

The weapons have done little to guarantee our security and have blunted the power of our conventional forces.

By J. Peter Scoblic

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Last week, peace activists around the world commemorated the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, arguing that nuclear weapons should be abolished so that such destruction will never be repeated. Their call for peace through disarmament has traditionally been a rallying cry of the left. In fact, the peace sign, that ultimate icon of 1960s war protests, is actually a rendering of the semaphoric symbols for the letters "N" and "D": "Nuclear Disarmament."

Conservatives, by contrast, have put their faith in "peace through strength," an ancient notion made fresh during the Cold War by Ronald Reagan. Which is why, in April, when President Obama outlined his vision of a world without nuclear weapons, the right reacted with incredulity, as if he had suggested pacifying the Taliban with a group hug. Newt Gingrich, for one, called the president's disarmament speech a "fantasy."

As the president moves to reduce the U.S. nuclear arsenal in concert with Russia's and implement new arms control measures, the allegedly foolish goal of disarmament has become an obvious target for hawks hoping to undermine the president's agenda. But if the abolition of nuclear weapons is a fantasy, it's one that ought to excite the country's hawks as much as its doves.

Traditionally, military power was measured in relative, not absolute, terms, meaning that your security was a function not of how many weapons you had, but of how many more you had than your enemy. The advent of nuclear weapons skewed that calculation. Because it would take only a few nuclear weapons to destroy a civilization, the atomic bomb became an equalizer for Davids confronting Goliath-sized enemies.

During the Cold War, one could argue that that dynamic helped the U.S. because Warsaw Pact forces outnumbered NATO's. But today, with the specter of rogue-state nuclear programs, it's more likely that we are the ones who would be deterred. For example, would we have waged Operation Desert Storm (let alone Operation Iraqi Freedom) if Saddam Hussein had been able to strike New York or Washington with a nuclear weapon? Probably not. Our half-trillion-dollar-a-year military can, in essence, be defanged by any dictator with a handful of A-bombs.

That is a remarkable waste of America's incredible conventional superiority. Our fleet of stealth fighters and bombers can establish air dominance in virtually any scenario, allowing us to obliterate an adversary's military infrastructure at will. At sea, our fleet is larger than the next 17 navies combined and includes 11 carrier battle groups that can project power around the globe. (By contrast, few of our potential adversaries field even a single carrier.) All in all, the U.S. accounts for just shy of half the world's defense spending, more than the next 45 nations combined. That's six times more than China, 10 times more than Russia and nearly 100 times more than Iran.

Yet despite potential flash points with nations such as Russia (over Georgia) or China (over Taiwan), it would be lunacy to engage in combat with either because of the risk of escalation to a nuclear conflict. Abolishing nuclear weapons would obviously not make conflict with those states a good idea, but it would dramatically increase American freedom of action in a crisis. That should make hawks, with their strong faith in the efficacy of American military power, very happy. Indeed, if anyone opposes disarmament, it should be our rivals.

American conservatives cling to our arsenal as though it gives us great sway over foreign countries. Yet when our conventional power has proved insufficient, nukes have done little to augment our influence abroad.

In the early years of the Cold War, when we had a nuclear monopoly, the Soviet Union reneged on promises made at Yalta and solidified its control over Eastern Europe. In 1949, despite our assistance to the Kuomintang, the Chinese Communists took over the mainland and formed the People's Republic, and the following year they stormed across the Yalu River and into the Korean War even though our atomic arsenal could have wiped out their cities as easily as Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Years later, the bomb did nothing to prevent, shorten or decide the Vietnam War. And, of course, nukes have provided no assistance in stabilizing Iraq or Afghanistan. Today, they threaten us far more than they protect us: Nuclear terrorism is the greatest threat we face, but our own nuclear arsenal cannot protect us from an attack.

Nuclear weapons do deter states from attacking us with nuclear weapons -- and few would suggest that we unilaterally give up our arsenal while others retain theirs. But, oddly, it is here that conservatives seem to doubt the utility of nuclear weapons more than their counterparts on the left. Whereas many liberals and realists believe that Iran could be deterred if it built the bomb, conservatives are far less sanguine, insisting that a nuclear Tehran is an unacceptable threat. They too understand that the U.S. arsenal is no guarantor of security, and that even a handful of nuclear weapons in enemy hands threatens to neuter our conventional advantage.

Of course, we're a long way from disarmament. But, today, beyond the small number of weapons each nuclear state can justify as a credible deterrent, every additional weapon represents only a greater risk -- of theft, accident or unauthorized use. Which is why the president's efforts to reduce the U.S. and Russian arsenals, ban nuclear testing and prevent the further production of fissile material are so valuable. Each of these measures will help protect the U.S., and if they bring us closer to disarmament, then that is a cause for celebration by hawks and doves alike.

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