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Unilaterally Cutting U.S. ICBMs Would Undermine Prospects for Arms Control

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Introduction

It is now fashionable among some in the defense community to question the need for the nuclear triad of submarines, bombers, and silo-based missiles. Critics have focused heavily on U.S. intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) most recently. Though by far the cheapest of the three legs to maintain,¹ former defense officials like Secretary of Defense William Perry and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. James Cartwright argue that U.S. ICBMs should be scrapped unilaterally – mostly due to their cost and “hair-trigger” alert status.² Others believe ICBMs are redundant and perhaps easily disabled.³

Setting aside for the moment the convincing cases made by analysts like professor Matthew Kroenig and Maj. Gen. (ret) Roger Burg for retaining the U.S. ICBM force,⁴ this article will examine the self-defeating nature of unilaterally cutting U.S. ICBMs in the arena of nuclear arms control. In short, I argue that doing so would likely make future arms control agreements improbable and the U.S. less secure.

The Goals of Arms Control

During the nuclear age, diplomats on both sides of the aisle broadly agreed that arms control is not a goal in and of itself, rather it is one of multiple means to an end – namely, advancing



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the security interests of the United States. “Success” in arms control is not measured by the number of warheads capped or cut, but by an improved security condition.

Too often in the debate about nuclear arms control, it is assumed that the fewer nuclear weapons there are between the United States and Russia, the less threatening each side will appear to be, thus reducing political tensions and threat perceptions. For being such a popular assumption, however, it is backed up by remarkably little evidence. The validity of “fewer nukes, lower threats” is certainly challenged by looking at just the past decade.

Since 2010, the size of U.S. nuclear stockpile has dropped by almost 25%⁵ - which means Russia should have perceived significantly less threat from the United States, according to popular logic. But that surely appears not to have happened. Since signing the New START Treaty in 2010, Russian leaders have made implicit and explicit nuclear targeting threats, modernized their non-strategic nuclear arsenal, built and deployed “multiple battalions” of INF Treaty-breaking missiles, and are building new nuclear weapon systems which likely will not be captured under any existing arms control agreement.⁶

Vladimir Putin and other Russian leaders made these choices during a substantial and transparent reduction in the size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Even though the level of U.S. nuclear weapons was lower, Putin did not seem to act like Russia had become more secure. That is because security is in the eye of the beholder and depends on multiple factors beyond a simple quantitative force calculation, including the leaders’ perceptions of the adversary’s intentions, international context, and domestic factors.

Would unilaterally eliminating U.S. ICBMs lower the Russian threat perception of the United States? The answer is “likely not.” In fact, unilaterally eliminating U.S. ICBMs may actually invite greater Russian aggression. As President Obama’s then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, stated, an aging and less capable U.S. nuclear force “only invites enemy misbehavior and miscalculation.”⁷ The Obama administration’s Nuclear Posture Review made the same point as well: “But large disparities in nuclear capabilities could raise concerns on both sides and among U.S. allies and partners, and may not be conducive to maintaining a stable, long-term strategic relationship, especially as nuclear forces are significantly reduced.”⁸

Nevertheless, some disarmament proponents claim that unilateral U.S. ICBM reductions, or elimination, might induce Russian reciprocity:

Even the unilateral elimination of the Minuteman/GBSD force could produce this effect [a comparable Russian reduction]. As a matter of targeting logic, the Russian targeting rationale for deploying more than 1,000 silo-busting warheads would evaporate. Scrapping 495 U.S. hard targets (450 silos plus 45 launch centers) would pull the rug out from under Russian targeters’ main



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justification for deploying new land-based rockets... If the U.S. targets of this destabilizing first-strike missile and other Russian rockets armed with multiple warheads disappeared, Russia would have excess weapons and good reason to curb its heavy-missile production and deployment. This curtailment would in turn shorten the U.S. list of Russian targets assigned to Minuteman/GBSD missiles. A positive feedback loop could take hold.⁹

This suggestion deserves greater scrutiny because, as the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* states, “Progress in arms control is not an end in and of itself, and depends on the security environment and the participation of willing partners.”¹⁰

With this in mind, it is useful to examine how “willing” of an arms control partner Russia is, and has been, when considering its possible reactions to the proposal of unilaterally eliminating U.S. ICBMs.

Russia as an Arms Control Partner

If we are to take seriously the prospect of Russian reciprocity following the U.S. unilateral elimination of its ICBMs, we must also seriously take into account past Russian (and Soviet) arms control misbehavior.

As the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* notes:

... Russia continues to violate a series of arms control treaties and commitments, the most significant being the INF Treaty. In a broader context, Russia is either rejecting or avoiding its obligations and commitments under numerous agreements, including the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty, the Budapest Memorandum, the Helsinki Accords, and the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives. In addition, Russia has violated the Open Skies Treaty and is selectively implementing the politically binding Vienna Document to avoid transparency of its major military exercises. Russia has also rebuffed U.S. efforts to follow New START with another round of negotiated reductions, and to pursue reductions in non-strategic nuclear forces.¹¹

According to this record, at the very least, Russia does not place the same value on arms control compliance that the West does. Instead, Russian leaders appear to consider arms control compliance as *subservient* to the national interest. In the West, however, arms control compliance is generally considered *as* a national interest.

The lack of Russian reciprocity in this regard goes beyond violating legally-binding treaties – it also manifests itself as a lack of equal responses historically to unilateral U.S. restraint. The number of times the United States restrained its procurement and policy activities without a



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discernable equal Russian response is overwhelming. Prominent examples include the U.S. decision to cancel the B-1 bomber initially, the termination of its strategic ballistic missile defense system in the 1970s, the minimization of the U.S. non-strategic nuclear arsenal, the Obama administration's pledge to not build new nuclear weapons, U.S. termination of nuclear sea-launched cruise missile programs, and U.S. decisions not to build mobile ICBMs.

This is not to mention the lack of parallel U.S. programs that could have induced Russia's apparent contemporary pursuit of a "heavy" ICBM, a nuclear-powered missile, and an undersea, nuclear-powered, nuclear-armed autonomous torpedo.¹²

In summary, Russian leaders have witnessed U.S. restraint time and time again, and yet have not reciprocated; instead they have moved forward with capabilities without any apparent U.S. inspiration. Why should we now expect that the U.S. unilateral elimination of ICBMs would lead to reciprocal Russian reductions? Why should we now believe that this time will be different, and that Russia would not take advantage of U.S. restraint... again?

The Likely Response to Unilateral U.S. Reductions

If the United States were to unilaterally eliminate its ICBMs, while asking Russia to reciprocate, the effects on Russia's nuclear arsenal are unlikely to be benign. Russia could choose from a host of options. One option is that Vladimir Putin and the rest of the Russian leadership embrace the U.S. gesture and respond in kind by also eliminating all of their ICBMs.

This option seems least likely for a variety of reasons. Most prominently, while the *raison d'être* for Russian ICBMs would supposedly disappear (doubtfully assuming Russian leaders believe their ICBMs have only one mission), a much larger portion of its nuclear arsenal would actually be cut compared to the U.S. arsenal. U.S. ICBMs are currently loaded with a single warhead, so eliminating the 400 U.S. ICBMs would necessarily eliminate 400 warheads from the arsenal (assuming they are not redeployed).¹³ Russia, however, reportedly places multiple warheads on its ICBMs: eliminating its approximately 318 ICBMs apparently would result in about 800 warheads being removed from the arsenal.¹⁴ With such an asymmetric outcome, it seems unlikely that Russia would engage in the reciprocal elimination of ICBMs.

Another more likely option Russia could take in response to the United States unilaterally eliminating its ICBMs would be pocketing the concession and then claiming to begin discussions with China to bilaterally eliminate their ICBMs – which would necessarily involve bringing in India to the discussion as well. One does not have to be a hardened cynic to think Russia would relish the opportunity to be viewed as promoting world peace and security by leading the negotiations (with the United States on the sideline – having already done its part). Of course, any such negotiations would likely go nowhere as both Russia and China would likely want to secure the advantage of retaining their ICBMs when the United States would have none.



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If Russia were to fail to reciprocate, however, there could be public pressure on Russia from around the world to quickly reciprocate by eliminating its ICBMs in a verifiable manner. And yet, Vladimir Putin does not appear to be the type of leader who is easily swayed by foreign public pressure. If that were the case, one would think Russia would have refrained from invading Ukraine, cheating on the INF Treaty, and possibly ordering the assassination of political opponents with chemical and radiological weapons – all illegal acts to which world opinion has had arguably little effect. It is highly questionable how effective foreign public pressure could be with regard to the perfectly *legal* act of not reciprocating the U.S. elimination of ICBMs.

The economic incentive for Russian elimination of ICBMs in response to U.S. elimination may appear to be strong. Yet even this observation likely misreads how Vladimir Putin views the defense industry in Russia. As he wrote in *Foreign Policy* in 2012:

In other words, we should not tempt anyone by allowing ourselves to be weak. We will, under no circumstances, surrender our strategic deterrent capability. Indeed, we will strengthen it... The huge resources invested in modernizing our military-industrial complex and re-equipping the army must serve as fuel to feed the engines of modernization in our economy, creating real growth and a situation where government expenditure funds new jobs, supports market demand, and facilitates scientific research.¹⁵

Essentially, Putin appears to believe that increased defense spending, especially on nuclear forces, will drive economic prosperity – so cutting defense would be equal to cutting the prospects for growth. As the noted Russian military analyst Alexei Nikolsky recently concluded after reviewing the state of Russia's military-industrial base: "That is why, despite all the financial and non-financial constraints, the capability of the Russian strategic nuclear deterrent remains a top priority for which Russia will spare no effort or resources. A reliable nuclear deterrent will minimize the detrimental impact of setbacks in the development and procurement of some conventional weapons systems, and continue to serve as the lynchpin of Russian military security."¹⁶ Russian leaders would likely consider eliminating their ICBMs to be strategically and fiscally unwise.

Poisoning the Arms Control Well

Beyond these hypothetical scenarios, however, lies the concern that unilaterally eliminating U.S. ICBMs would actually eliminate the leverage the United States would need to secure further Russian reductions. A recent discussion by a former senior Obama administration official shows that Russia is very cognizant of the existence, or lack, of U.S. negotiating leverage. Dr. Jim Miller, former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, stated after leaving the government:



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One of the interesting points, to come back to our earlier conversation in a sense, is that when the Obama administration asked the Russians, “Ok, we want to talk about tactical nuclear weapons. We are open to talking about them as an entity by themselves or to roll them together with strategic for conversation.” The answer that we got was “*nyet*.” And it was “Well you guys don’t have... you Americans don’t have anything going on in this arena. Why should we negotiate?”¹⁷

In addition, then-Presidential Chief of Staff for Putin, Sergei Ivanov, stated in 2013, “When I hear our American partners say: ‘Let’s reduce something else,’ I would like to say to them: ‘Excuse me, but what we have is relatively new.’ They [the U.S.] have not conducted any upgrades for a long time. They still use Trident [missiles].”¹⁸ In short, leverage matters when negotiating with Russia.

Conclusion

A common argument against the United States retaining its ICBMs is that their elimination could benefit arms control by leading to a reciprocal Russian move. However, it seems more likely that Russia would pocket the concession and demand more. If Russian intransigence worked to eliminate one leg of the U.S. triad, why not hold out for more concessions? Why work seriously on arms control if the United States will keep reducing itself?

Long-time U.S. arms control negotiator Ambassador Edward Rowny was fond of quoting his Soviet counterparts as saying, “We Soviets are neither pacifists nor philanthropists.”¹⁹ This insight generally seemed to hold true through the Cold War, and seems just as likely to be true today in post-Cold War Russia, especially under the rule of Vladimir Putin. Recognition of this Russian mindset is a much-needed advancement of the arms control debate.

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