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# Our Decaying Nuclear Deterrent

*The less credible the U.S. deterrent, the more likely other states are to seek weapons.*

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A bipartisan congressional commission, headed by some of our most experienced national security practitioners, recently concluded that a nuclear deterrent is essential to our defense for the foreseeable future. It also recommended that urgent measures be taken to keep that deterrent safe and effective.

Unfortunately, President Barack Obama has adopted an agenda that runs counter to the commission's recommendations.

Consider the president's declaration, in a major speech this spring in Prague, of "America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons." Will such a world be peaceful and secure? It is far from self-evident.

In the nuclear-free world that ended in 1945 there was neither peace nor security. Since then there have indeed been many wars but none has come close to the carnage that occurred regularly before the development of nuclear weapons, and none has pitted nuclear powers against each other.

Consider also that while the administration accepts the urgency of halting the spread of nuclear weapons, the policies it has embraced to reach that goal are likely to make matters worse.

Thus, in his Prague speech, Mr. Obama announced that the U.S.

would "immediately and aggressively" pursue ratification of the comprehensive ban on the testing of nuclear weapons. The administration believes, without evidence, that ratification of the test-ban treaty will discourage other countries from developing nuclear weapons.

Which countries does it have in mind? Iran? North Korea? Syria? Countries alarmed by the nuclear ambitions of their enemies? Allies who may one day lose confidence in our nuclear umbrella?

There are good reasons why the test-ban treaty has not been ratified. The attempt to do so in 1999 failed in the Senate, mostly out of concerns about verification -- it simply is not verifiable. It also failed because of an understandable reluctance on the part of the U.S. Senate to forgo forever a test program that could in the future be of critical importance for our defense and the defense of our allies.

Robert Gates, who is now Mr. Obama's own secretary of defense, warned in a speech last October that in the absence of a nuclear modernization program, even the most modest of which Congress has repeatedly declined to fund, "[a]t a certain point, it will become impossible to keep extending the life of our arsenal, especially in light of our testing moratorium." Suppose future problems in our nuclear arsenal emerge that cannot be solved without testing? Would our predicament discourage nuclear proliferation -- or stimulate it?

For the foreseeable future, the U.S. and many of our allies rely on our nuclear deterrent. And as long as the U.S. possesses nuclear weapons, they must be -- as Mr. Obama recognized in Prague -- "safe, secure and effective." Yet his proposed 2010 budget fails to take the necessary steps to do that.

Those steps have been studied extensively by the Perry-Schlesinger Commission (named for co-chairmen William Perry, secretary of defense under President Bill Clinton, and James R. Schlesinger,

secretary of defense under Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford). Its consensus report, released in May, makes numerous recommendations to increase the funding for, and improve the effectiveness of, the deteriorating nuclear weapons laboratory complex (e.g., the Los Alamos facility in New Mexico, the Pantex plant in Texas, and the dangerously neglected Y-12 plant in Tennessee) that has become the soft underbelly of our deterrent force.

The commission also assessed the nuclear weapons infrastructure that is essential to a safe, secure and effective deterrent and declared it "in serious need of transformation." It looked at our laboratory-based scientific and technical expertise and concluded that "the intellectual infrastructure" is in "serious trouble." A major cause is woefully inadequate funding. The commission rightly argued that we must "exercise the full range of laboratory skills, including nuclear weapon design skills . . . Skills that are not exercised will atrophy." The president and the Congress must heed these recommendations.

There are some who believe that failing to invest adequately in our nuclear deterrent will move us closer to a nuclear free world. In fact, blocking crucial modernization means unilateral disarmament by unilateral obsolescence. This unilateral disarmament will only encourage nuclear proliferation, since our allies will see the danger and our adversaries the opportunity.

By neglecting -- and in some cases even opposing -- essential modernization programs, arms-control proponents are actually undermining the prospect for further reductions of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. As our nuclear weapons stockpile ages and concern about its reliability increases, we will have to compensate by retaining more nuclear weapons than would otherwise be the case. This reality will necessarily influence future arms-control negotiations, beginning with the upcoming Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty follow-on.

For these negotiations, the Russians are insisting on a false linkage between nuclear weapons and missile defenses. They are demanding that we abandon defenses against North Korean or Iranian missiles as a condition for mutual reductions in American and Russian strategic forces. As the president cuts the budget for missile defense and cedes ground to the Russians on our planned defense sites in Poland and the Czech Republic, we may end up abandoning a needed defense of the U.S. and our European allies from the looming Iranian threat.

There is a fashionable notion that if only we and the Russians reduced our nuclear forces, other nations would reduce their existing arsenals or abandon plans to acquire nuclear weapons altogether. This idea, an article of faith of the "soft power" approach to halting nuclear proliferation, assumes that the nuclear ambitions of Kim Jong Il or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad would be curtailed or abandoned in response to reductions in the American and Russian deterrent forces -- or that India, Pakistan or China would respond with reductions of their own.

This is dangerous, wishful thinking. If we were to approach zero nuclear weapons today, others would almost certainly try even harder to catapult to superpower status by acquiring a bomb or two. A robust American nuclear force is an essential discouragement to nuclear proliferators; a weak or uncertain force just the opposite.

George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger and Sam Nunn have, on this page, endorsed the distant goal -- about which we remain skeptical -- of a nuclear-free world. But none of them argues for getting there by neglecting our present nuclear deterrent. The Perry-Schlesinger Commission has provided a path for protecting that deterrent. Congress and the president should follow it, without delay.

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