

Arms Reduction: Don't Talk, Just Do It

By JOHN MUELLER

There are notable problems with arms-control agreements: They take forever to work out, rarely accomplish much, and sometimes make things worse. And they can be particularly problematic if their goal is arms reduction.

If tensions between East and West really are subsiding, arms reduction may well be in the cards. But it is more likely to happen if both sides simply engage in a negative arms race rather than try to work out an exquisitely nuanced agreement on every abandoned nut and bolt.

Nothing illustrates the agonies of the arms-control process better than current events. The Senate worried itself sick over every philosophic implication (one big issue: What Is a Weapon?) and prepositional clause of a treaty that would eliminate a very minor part of the world's nuclear arsenal. And the president is at another summit meeting where there won't be much to sign because little of the hoped-for progress on arms control has taken place.

Formal arms control is essentially a form of centralized regulation and it carries with it the usual defects of that approach. Participants will volunteer for such regulation only with extreme caution, and once under regulation they are often unable to adjust to unexpected changes and may be encouraged, perversely, to follow developments that are unwise. For example, the strategic arms agreement of 1972 limited the number of missiles each side could have, but it allowed them to embroider their missiles with multiple warheads and to improve missile accuracies, thereby encouraging them to develop a potentially dangerous first-strike capability.

The record is particularly bleak in the area of arms reduction. Historically, efforts to reduce arms expenditures through explicit mutual agreement have met with little success: Generally, money saved in one area of weaponry is spent in another. Moreover, the existence of arms-control talks often hampers arms reduction. In 1973, for example, a proposal for a unilateral reduction of U.S. troops in West Eu-

rope failed in Congress because it was felt the measure would undercut coming arms-control negotiations—which have been running on unproductively ever since.

Similarly, opponents of the MX missile and of President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative have failed in Congress in part because some of those who consider the weapons system dangerous or valueless nevertheless support them since the weapons seem to have value as bargaining chips in arms-control talks. Whether those arms-reduction proposals were wise or not, they failed in considerable part because arms-control talks existed.

There is an alternative: Just do it. The arms buildup, after all, was not accomplished through written agreement. Instead, there was a sort of free market in which each side, with a wary eye on the other, sought security by purchasing varying amounts of weapons and troops. As requirements and perspectives changed, so did the force structure of each side.

If arms can be built up that way, they can be reduced in the same manner. It would be a sort of negatives arms race, and there are historical precedents. Following the war between the U.S. and British Canada that ended in 1814, an arms-control agreement was worked out that placed limits on warships on the Great Lakes. However, both sides evaded the spirit of the agreement by keeping stocks of warships in nearby dockyards and by building ships that could easily be converted to military use. And they continued to invest in unrestricted armaments: Each constructed forts along the border (at one point the overeager Americans accidentally built one in Canadian territory and had to abandon it), and the British created an extensive and expensive canal system in Canada as a military supply line.

During a half-century of cold war there were border skirmishes, boundary disagreements, sporadic raids by Irish-Americans into British Canada, popular agitation in the U.S. that a takeover of Canada was America's "manifest destiny," and, in 1864, a raid from Canada on a Vermont town by a band of Confederate soldiers.

By the early 1870s, however, most of the claims and controversies had been settled. Canada was granted independent status in part because British taxpayers were tired of paying to defend their large, distant colony, and the Americans were preoccupied with settling the West and recovering from their calamitous Civil War. Without formal agreement, disarmament gradually took place between the two countries, and forts became museums where rusting cannon still point accusingly but impotently in the direction of the nearby former enemy. "Disarmament became a reality," observes a Canadian historian, "not by international agreement, but simply because there was no longer any serious international disagreement."

The Cold War between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. is showing distinct signs of melting as the Soviets become more preoccupied with internal problems and less willing to be distracted by foreign adventures. There is no guarantee this trend will prove to be genuine and lasting, but if it does, tensions will continue to subside and both sides will feel inclined gradually to give in to the substantial economic pressures on their defense spending. Peace will have brought about arms reduction, not the reverse. (If tensions surge again, legal arms documents won't make much difference one way or the other because both sides will find ways to evade their spirit.)

However, arms reduction will proceed most expeditiously if each side feels free to reverse any reduction it later comes to regret. Each is likely to reduce cautiously, particularly at first, in sensible if perhaps overly sensitive concern that a severe arms imbalance could inspire the other to contemplate blackmail. But a negative arms race could be set in motion. Formal arms agreements are likely simply to slow and pedantify the process.

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