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 expressly 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 embother 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-

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 incompetently 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 mellowing 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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