

President Reagan's Nuclear Legacy

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RONALD REAGAN'S LEGACY includes four lines of thought that were roundly criticized in his day, but that still challenge us to think afresh about our nuclear dilemmas. They are:

- an emphasis on the ultimate futility of dependence on nuclear weapons for national security;
- a paradigm shift from arms control, as practiced since the early 1960s, to nuclear disarmament;
- ballistic missile defense as a key to reductions in strategic offensive forces;
- the *de facto* termination of a nuclear war fighting doctrine known as “protracted nuclear war.”

Futility of Nuclear War

“Let Reagan be Reagan,” some of the president’s political supporters urged, when they thought his advisers were hemming him in too much. In Reykjavik, Reagan really was Reagan. President Reagan was appalled by the catastrophic damage that a nuclear war would inflict. He called mutual assured destruction (MAD) “uncivilized.” Even before he became president, as governor of California, he had visited Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and other national security

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facilities. His abhorrence of nuclear weapons was genuine and consistent for many years.

After Reykjavik, in a question-and-answer session with media representatives on December 11, 1987, he said, “For a number of years, before I ever got here, I have been concerned about the very presence of nuclear weapons. . . .” On the same occasion, alluding to his partner in nuclear negotiations, Mikhail Gorbachev, Reagan said, “To hear this man now, without any urging from me, express his wish that we could totally eliminate nuclear weapons because of the threat they represent—and he quoted back to me a line I used as long ago as 1982. . . . ‘A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.’ ”

Could this have been posturing for political advantage? Not at all. These were sentiments he voiced very often, and not only in public. In an Oval Office meeting with the president in 1985, he said to me: “You tell people that I’m willing to go as far as anyone else in getting rid of nuclear weapons.” I asked Paul Nitze once whether Reagan really meant what he said about nuclear weapons. His answer was that in his experience Reagan was more like Harry Truman than any other president: each man said exactly what he thought.

A Shift Away from Arms Control

The “summer study” conducted in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1960 led to the theory of “arms control” that eventually replaced the older idea of disarmament. The purpose of arms control as defined by Thomas Schelling and Morton Halperin was “. . . all the forms of military cooperation between potential enemies in the interest of reducing the likelihood of war, its scope and violence if it occurs, and the political and economic costs of being prepared for it.” Whether arms control

should involve reductions or increases in certain kinds of military force was treated as an open question.

Arms control was a success: nuclear weapons were not used in anger after 1945. Its guiding principles influenced defense planning during a succession of U.S. administrations. Its central tenets—for example, that a “firebreak” should be maintained between nuclear and conventional forces—are valid today. But arms control was relatively indifferent to the levels of forces, except in the context of preserving a secure retaliatory nuclear strike. To Reagan, this seemed to be a fatal defect. For a leader who thinks of MAD as “uncivilized,” arms negotiations should be about reductions, not about how best to control a nuclear buildup. He expressed this thought many times. His remarks on October 14, 1986, in which he recalled his thinking on the subject, capsulized the way he viewed the issue: “. . . our objective . . . must not be regulating the growth in nuclear weapons, which is what arms control, as it was known, had been all about. . . . our goal must be reducing the number of nuclear weapons . . . we had, to work to make the world safer, not just control the pace at which it became more dangerous.”

This is why Reykjavik was about nuclear reductions and about the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons and not about “arms control” as it had evolved since the 1960s. And this, of course, is why Reagan opted for the “zero option” in intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) and for deep reductions in strategic nuclear forces.

This departure from arms control bothered people who were steeped in the ideas of classical arms control theory. In the winter of 1985, even before Reykjavik, Schelling wrote that “nobody ever offers a convincing reason for preferring smaller numbers. . . . If people really believe that zero is the ultimate goal it is easy to see that downward is the direction they should go. But hardly anyone who takes arms control seriously be-

lieves that zero is the goal.” After Reykjavik, Senator Al Gore Jr. praised some of its achievements, but said of the ideas about eliminating offensive forces: “Here we depart from arms control for the less charted waters of disarmament.” Gore’s aim was strategic stability, and he said that this should be pursued “not through complete disarmament on short notice, but through arms control.”

Reagan’s ideas prevailed, partly because the end of the Cold War made such ideas more popular. Deep reductions were pursued by his successor, George H. W. Bush, who completed the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) I treaty and negotiated a START II treaty. President Bill Clinton sought a START III treaty with still deeper reductions. President George W. Bush concluded a U.S.-Russian treaty that ratified ceilings of 1,700 to 2,200 operationally deployed warheads on each side.

Reagan may not have foreseen the utility of deep reductions in nuclear weapons as a nonproliferation tool in an age of terrorism. But it is a fact that classical arms control offered few incentives to nonnuclear weapons states to remain that way. And nuclear deterrence, which arms control sought to stabilize, has little or no effect on terrorists. Now, it is clear that Reagan’s ideas about nuclear weapons are directly responsive to the political needs of governments that might be inclined to forgo nuclear weapons. Reagan’s philosophy was at the core of the nonproliferation bargain between the nuclear “haves” and “have nots.”

Ballistic Missile Defense As a Key to Elimination of Nuclear Weapons

Reagan was not the first president to support the elimination of nuclear weapons. That idea emerged in the Acheson-Lillienthal proposals, which became the Baruch Plan. Harry

Truman backed it. Nor was Reagan the first president to support ballistic missile defense. Lyndon Johnson reluctantly made the decision to deploy ballistic missiles and actually did so. But Reagan was the first president to think and to argue that ballistic missile defense would permit deep reductions in offensive nuclear forces and ultimately make possible the elimination of nuclear weapons. "SDI [Strategic Defense Initiative] is the key to a world without nuclear weapons," he said in his report on Reykjavik on October 13, 1986. He explained this by saying that "having the defense would protect against cheating or the possibility of a madman sometime deciding to create nuclear missiles."

Nitze elaborated on the idea and wrote about "defense dominance," the idea that defensive capabilities could ultimately be more powerful as a deterrent than offensive forces. In a speech he gave on February 20, 1985, he said that

during the next ten years, the U.S. objective is a radical reduction in the power of existing and planned offensive nuclear arms, as well as the stabilization of the relationship between offensive and defensive nuclear arms, whether on earth or in space. We are even now looking forward to a period of transition to a more stable world, with greatly reduced levels of nuclear arms and an enhanced ability to deter war based upon an increasing contribution of nonnuclear defenses against offensive nuclear arms. This period of transition could lead to the eventual elimination of all nuclear arms, both offensive and defensive. A world free of nuclear arms is an ultimate objective to which we, the Soviet Union, and all other nations can agree.

Reagan, of course, realized that his vision could not be achieved through U.S. efforts alone. For this reason he sought

a treaty with the Soviet Union that would bring down the numbers of offensive weapons on each side. Equally important, he proposed technological cooperation with Moscow so that both sides could deploy defensive systems. This was the only formula, he realized, that would enable “defense dominance” to be achieved.

The Attack on the Theory of “Protracted Nuclear War”

As the Soviet Union and the United States entered a condition that amounted to parity in strategic nuclear forces, each side intensified its search for methods to eke out advantages. In the United States, this led first to limited nuclear options and eventually to the idea that a nuclear war might be fought incrementally through a series of strikes against the enemy’s military and industrial assets. Nitze, ever in the vanguard of deterrent theory, was one of the leading proponents of this doctrine. He wrote that the United States needed “something on the order of 3,000 deliverable megatons remaining in reserve after a counter-force exchange” to deter the Soviet Union.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter’s national security adviser, was instrumental in making protracted nuclear war an official part of U.S. strategic doctrine. This was recorded in Presidential Directive-59 of July 25, 1980. This is what Ronald Reagan inherited when he took office, and he reportedly endorsed it early in his administration.

Reagan believed that the Soviet Union had taken a dangerous lead in strategic nuclear forces. Indeed, indicators such as number of warheads and throw-weight suggested that. His first move was to correct what he saw as an imbalance in the U.S.-Soviet nuclear relation in favor of Moscow. Had his presidency ended in 1985, his time in office would have been seen as a time of rapid buildup in U.S. nuclear forces. Protracted

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nuclear war requires high numbers of warheads, and Reagan's buildup would have been consistent with that doctrine. But in his second term, as dramatized at Reykjavik, Reagan pushed hard for lower levels of nuclear forces. This policy made it more difficult to implement the doctrine of protracted nuclear war and meant, for practical purposes, a turn away from the doctrine he had inherited.

When I began my service as vice chairman of the U.S. START I delegation, I found from my talks with my Soviet counterparts that they were thinking about and planning for an agreement that would permit several thousand nuclear warheads. This, indeed, was the trend that both sides had come to accept as a normal part of maintaining deterrence in an era of protracted nuclear war. Reagan did not see this as a state of affairs that should be continued.

In time, the end of the Cold War made the doctrine of a U.S.-Soviet protracted nuclear war obsolete. But Reagan had already started down that road when he decided that arms control was not enough and that U.S. policy should go in the direction of eliminating nuclear weapons.