Unilateral Arms Control? Post-September 11 Trends in US Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Approaches

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Introduction

The September 11 attacks have had ramifications for a wide range of US strategic interests, and arms control is no exception. Prior to the attacks, the US administration had made it quite clear that it had every intention of going forward with its plans for National Missile Defense (NMD), even at the cost of withdrawing from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. While it did not disregard the concerns raised by Russia and China regarding ballistic missile defenses, the US implied that it would take whatever steps necessary to deal with its perceived defense needs, in apparent disregard for existing global norms of arms control. While the administration still hoped to persuade Russia to accept its view on this issue, it was also clear that Russian opposition would not restrain US policy. A previous article that dealt with NMD (*Strategic Assessment*, 4:1, May 2001), noted that this US stance on NMD would likely strengthen the norm of self-help regarding international security, at the expense of cooperative security notions, which are embedded in the concept of arms control.

Following the September 11 attacks, the US was suddenly faced with an acute need to promote the idea of cooperative security for the purpose of carrying out its War on Terror. The dramatic and horrific attack on the US was viewed as demanding immediate international cooperation for forging a response. The US's underlying approach to foreign policy, however, has continued to advocate a unilateral or self-reliant stance. Attempts to reconcile and/or bridge these divergent tendencies have been reflected in US foreign policy decisions, and are apparent in some of the initial US attempts to deal with issues related to arms control and non-proliferation in the post-September 11 period.

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The brief analysis below focuses primarily on US policy toward Russia in the context of their bilateral arms control relations. It is suggested that whereas the short term effect of US policy in this regard may facilitate the attainment of its interests on missile defense without jeopardizing its close relations with Russia, there are additional implications for arms control that go beyond the US-Russian dyad. In this sense, the attention devoted to bilateral relations should not obscure the fact that there may be serious long term effects emanating from American unilateralism for the arms control regime as a whole.

Following this, some attention will be given to the statements made by Bush with regard to Iraq in late November. These reflect an additional attempt to adapt US policy on the threat of weapons of mass destruction to the post-September 11 reality. However, in this case, the implications of the unilateral US approach are notably less problematic for the arms control regime.

"Unilateral Mutual Reductions:" A New Approach to Arms Control

A most striking example of the US attempt to bridge divergent unilateral/cooperative tendencies since September 11 has found expression in a new concept that

President Bush has introduced into the US-Russian strategic arms control discourse: *unilateral mutual reductions*. While not unprecedented in the annals of US arms control, unilateral initiatives have been the exception rather than the rule; traditionally, reductions of, or controls on arms have been bilaterally or multilaterally negotiated. More importantly, when unilateral steps have been considered, they were normally used as a means of "breaking the ice" with an initial gesture of good will, in the hope of leading to future cooperation on arms control through negotiation. Such was the case with Eisenhower's decision to declare a moratorium on nuclear testing in 1958 when negotiations on the suspension of nuclear-weapons testing began, and again with George Herbert Walker Bush's unilateral proposals for reductions in the US nuclear arsenal announced on September 27, 1991. George W. Bush's idea of unilateralism in arms control, however, has been different: here, unilateral arms reductions have been offered as an *alternative* to negotiations, rather than as a prelude to them.

Prior to the Bush-Putin meeting that took place in the US in mid-November, the two leaders had agreed (in July 2001) to link discussions of US missile defense plans to talks on deep cuts in nuclear stockpiles. However, while Bush had earlier suggested his willingness to go forward with such reductions regardless of Russia's decision, Putin wanted this to be the topic of mutual talks and negotiation between the two sides. Putin also remained basically opposed to US plans on missile defense. At the November meeting in Crawford, Bush announced his decision. After making it clear that the challenge of terrorism had made close global cooperation between the US and Russia even more urgent, and that it was of the highest priority to keep terrorists from acquiring weapons of mass destruction, Bush proceeded to inform Putin that he would reduce US operationally deployed strategic nuclear warheads to between 1,700 and 2,200 over the next decade.

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This announcement signified a truly significant reduction of strategic weapons that was indeed highly compatible with the goals of the arms control treaties that had been negotiated between the two states (especially START I and II). However, as noted, it was purposely presented as a *unilateral* measure, rather than as a bilaterally negotiated one. Bush signaled his willingness to make the cuts (which he clarified would not compromise US security interests), and made clear that he would appreciate a Russian step in kind. However, he was not interested in either negotiating or committing the US to binding agreements which might curtail future freedom of action. Thus, Bush continued to steer his unilateral arms control course, while placing it squarely within the context of the need to uphold US-Russian relations in the War on Terror. His emphasis on the friendly nature of US-Russian relations could not have been stronger.

In terms of his short term interest in pushing forward missile defense, Bush's move made a great deal of sense. His unilateral disarmament initiative undermined the main argument that Russia had put forward over the past year in response to the prospect of the US taking action on NMD that might lead to its withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. Russian claims that the treaty was essential for preventing a renewal of the arms race (the original rationale upon which the treaty was based) clearly lost their full effect in the face of the proposed far-reaching unilateral reductions in nuclear armaments. Moreover, how could Putin continue to advocate negotiation of such reductions when Bush said he would carry them out unilaterally? Finally, Bush's case regarding the restraining effect of the ABM treaty, in terms of US security, seemingly gained a measure of validity in the post-September 11 reality. Bush had previously based his case for refuting the ABM Treaty on the grounds that it

was constraining the ability of the US to devise adequate responses for threats that *might* emanate from states such as Iran, Iraq and North Korea. While the actual threat that the US faced seemed somewhat remote prior to September 11, following the terrorist attacks, Bush maintained that the US could very well become the target of an attack that made use of weapons of mass destruction (although the attacks themselves also underscored the vast degree of damage that could be achieved by conventional means alone). Bush argued that complying with the terms of the ABM treaty would leave the US unable to defend against terrorists using ballistic missiles to deliver weapons of mass destruction, rendering the treaty actually "dangerous" to US interests. Independent confirmation of US plans to go forward with NMD was provided by the third successful test (out of five attempts) of a missile defense system prototype carried out in early December. The mid-December notification of US intent to withdraw from the ABM Treaty removed any remaining doubts in this regard.

Targeting Iraq

Bush further expanded the threat of future acts of terror that might involve the use of weapons of mass destruction in late November, this time to envelop non-conventional capabilities that have been attributed to Iraq. Once again, the unilateral/cooperative security tension surfaced in US policy, though in this case it was with regard to an imposed inspection regime, rather than for an arms control agreement. Moreover, once again the cooperative security imperative seems to have emerged in the short term as an *enabling*, rather than constraining factor in terms of the proposed US course of action.

Bush signaled that there would be harsh consequences if Iraq refused to allow UN inspectors back into the country, after having expelled them in December 1998 – with a strong hint that such consequences would involve military action. The issue of Iraq's suspected non-conventional weapons activity had been placed high on the agenda of the Bush administration since entering office. However, the US had been facing difficulties in maintaining international support for its campaign to pressure Iraq into accepting the UN inspectors (now under the auspices of UNMOVIC) back into their state. There was a growing tendency (among some European states in particular) to press for an easing of the sanctions that had been imposed on Iraq, in light of the suffering of the Iraqi people. US-British proposals for replacing the existing sanctions framework with a new one ("smart sanctions"), that would specifically target Iraqi military capabilities while lifting restrictions on the import of civilian goods, had long met with Russian opposition.

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In his determination to deal with Iraq's suspected capabilities in weapons of mass destruction, Bush seized on the apparent opportunity for gaining wider international support in late November. This was done by presenting possible action against Iraq in this regard as part of the overall campaign against terror. Whereas initially, the US had maintained that it would target Iraq only if a clear line could be traced from the September 11 terrorist attacks (or the subsequent use of anthrax) to Iraq, now the policy line had changed. Bush now said that "if [someone] develops weapons of mass destruction that will be used to terrorize nations, they will be held accountable." In so doing, Bush was providing the justification and pretext for an (as yet) undefined unilateral military reaction against Iraq if it were to refuse to allow UN inspections to be resumed.

Ultimately, such a move could prove detrimental to US cooperative security efforts in its campaign against terror, as an attack on Iraq would likely be opposed by many Arab states and by a number of European ones as well. On the other hand, the US might disregard this consideration if it believed that it had no choice but to act alone. Moreover, if it were to succeed, this would reduce the need

for wider support in the future. In any case, the unanimous decision of the UN Security Council, taken in late November, to consider the "smart sanctions" plan in six months (June 2002), and indications that Russia had finally accepted this idea, may have lowered the motivation for immediate military action.

Implications for the Arms Control Regime over the Long Term

In the case of Iraq, the pursuit of US interests does not come at the expense of the global norm of arms control. This is due to the fact that Iraq is suspected of being in severe violation of this very norm; thus, although the US is somewhat broadening the definition of the War on Terror in order to cover the case of Iraq, this is done for the purpose of ultimately upholding the well-established goal of non-proliferation. The prospect of promoting cooperation with Iraq on arms control is not considered to be anywhere near a realistic option, at least as long as Saddam Hussein is in power.

The NMD/ABM issue, however, is quite different. Here the US is favoring a short-term, ad-hoc bilateral coordination of interests regarding arms reductions, over a long-term negotiated arms control agreement imbued with normative value. Bush's success in securing Russian acceptance of his unilateral interest in enhanced ballistic missile defenses could very well prove detrimental to the stability of the arms control regime over the long term. This regime is grounded in the logic of common adherence to agreements which are negotiated in the interests of all participating states.

One could argue that Bush's proposed reductions in the US strategic arsenal further the ultimate goal of arms control negotiations, and are thus actually conducive to the regime. Moreover, these reductions appear to be consistent not only with the aims of other bilateral arms control agreements (START I and II), but with the NPT itself, in which the nuclear-armed states party to the agreement committed themselves to making reductions to their arsenals.

Arms control involves an important cooperative element: negotiated reciprocity.

Such a claim, however, takes an overly narrow view of the arms control process. In fact, arms control involves an important cooperative element which is embedded in negotiated reciprocity to ensure overall stability in the non-conventional realm. As far as the NPT is concerned, while the proposed reductions are in line with US commitments according to Article VI, the article also stipulates that disarmament should be pursued "under strict and effective international control" – which implies an element of cooperation.

Moreover, additional issues need to be considered. US plans for NMD could push China to increase its nuclear arsenal – clearly, not an outcome in the spirit of the NPT. US behavior regarding the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) is also not conducive to upholding this agreement. Finally, reports of US-Pakistani nuclear security talks following the September 11 attacks (denied by Bush administration officials), if true, would constitute a violation of NPT restrictions.

The US is also displaying a unilateral approach in other arms control-related areas as well. Regarding the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), the US rejected the draft protocol for enhancing verification of the treaty in July. In early December, the US went a step further, abruptly proposing to terminate the mandate of the Ad Hoc Group that drafted this protocol. Charting a unilateral course that is concerned mainly with keeping US options open, even if these options coincide with arms control goals in the short term, may very well prove counterproductive to the goal of maintaining the long term effect of arms control agreements in general, for *all* relevant parties.