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Nukes For New Years?

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With hasty tweets about nuclear weapons, cryptic support for arms racing, and overwrought spokesmen struggling to explain, president-elect Trump horrified the national security commentariat anew last week. Complaints centered on his willingness to embrace the expense and danger of heightened nuclear competition, abandon “decades of bipartisan policy aimed at stopping the spread of nuclear weapons around the world,” and jettison the commitment in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to “work toward the cessation of the nuclear arms race” and eventual “nuclear disarmament.”

It’s sensible to be concerned by a president rash enough to undertake nuclear diplomacy through tweets he doesn’t even bother to proofread. But the furor is partly misdirected. However we interpret his incoherent statements, Trump is likely to preserve the current U.S. nuclear policy, which funds the modernization of nuclear triad at excessive expense.

Prediction is tough, of course, especially when it comes to a novice politician who avoids policy specifics and unfettered contact with media. So, like Sovietologists dissecting shifts in Pravda propaganda, analysts today guess at the Trump administration’s direction by monitoring @realDonaldTrump’s tweets. So it went last week when the next president tweeted: “The United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes” [sic].

Jason Miller, Trump’s spokesperson, muddied the waters by claiming that: “President-elect Trump was referring to the threat of nuclear proliferation and the critical need to prevent it — particularly to and among terrorist organizations and unstable and rogue regimes.” Miller didn’t say why improving the U.S. arsenal would discourage proliferation rather than encourage it, as standard logic suggests.

One of those missing his point was his boss, who reportedly told MSNBC the next day: “Let it be an arms race ... we will outmatch them at every pass and outlast them all,” apparently in reference to the Russians. Another Trump spokesperson (Miller having resigned in the interim) then tried to square the circle by arguing on the Today Show that Trump’s tweet aimed to deter nuclear weapons states from building more. Trump followed with a tweet castigating NBC for

leaving out the part of his “nuclear quote [sic]” about the world coming to its senses to prevent whatever he was suggesting.

Speculation quickly swirled. Was Trump one-upping Vladimir Putin’s speech earlier in the day calling for Russia to “strengthen” its nuclear forces? Was he calling for the deployment of more warheads? Does that mean eliminating limits set by the 2010 New START treaty? Did Trump mean to contradict his Secretary of Defense nominee, who suggested last year that it might be sensible to go from a triad to a dyad? Overall, the nuclear kerfuffle was vintage Trump communication: a cavalier, contradictory, muddle, only now applied to the nation’s coercive threats of mass destruction.

A sudden buildup and 1950s style arms racing would certainly be a big departure. But, besides the verb “expand,” there’s little reason to expect the Trump administration to push the arsenal beyond what’s already planned, which means thorough improvement and continued arms racing of sort.

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The Obama administration set plans to modernize all three legs of the nuclear triad—four if you count new air-launched nuclear-armed cruise missiles along with the bombs carried by aircraft, ballistic missiles on submarines, plus the land-based kind—at a cost of over three hundred billion dollars over a decade. Republicans basically support that plan. A boost in modernization funding was part of the price that the administration paid to win a few Republican votes needed to pass the New START treaty.

U.S. support for the disarmament provisions of the NPT is broad because the provisions are shallow. The treaty doesn’t set benchmarks on the road to disarmament or punish failure to disarm. The United States has nonetheless slashed its nuclear arsenal by more than 80 percent since its Cold War heights, through deals with the Soviet Union and Russia. Still, the number and mix of U.S. nuclear forces is quite similar to what the 1994 Nuclear Posture Review proposed. If the United States is now moving toward disarmament, it’s doing so asymptotically.

Arms racing is vastly diminished from Cold War heights, at least in the sense of competitive accumulation of missiles and warheads. Qualitatively, however, it’s another story. As my Cato colleagues and I noted in a 2013 report, the goal of destroying enemy nuclear forces still governs U.S. nuclear doctrine and weapons design. The public rationale for the U.S. nuclear arsenal is assured second strike—to survive an enemy’s attempted first strike and thus ensure deterrence. That story has always obscured a preemptive, first-strike logic, which says that suicidal threats on behalf of allies are not credible, so the U.S. arsenal must be capable of threatening enemy nuclear arsenals to prevent their territorial aggression.

Today, thanks to precision targeting, conventional weapons can now aid the hunt for enemy nuclear forces. In arms-race theory, that threat should cause capable rivals like Russia and China to expand and diversify their arsenals to ensure their survival against a U.S. first strike. That

occurs to an extent, with each nation doing things like deploying mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear-armed submarines. But neither country has raced to develop these capabilities in large numbers. One reason is probably that they, sensibly, don't buy the first-strike logic of deterrence, believing instead that a smaller, vulnerable force is enough. Another likely restraint on their arms racing is their limited desire to threaten U.S. allies and test the credibility of U.S. deterrent threats.

The result is that U.S. deterrent threats are in good shape; the balance of terror is robust, not delicate. Indeed, a far smaller U.S. arsenal deployed on bomber aircraft and submarines or even a submarine-based monad would suffice to serve the threats backing U.S. alliances. Nor would a dyad or monad face a real threat of preemption by an enemy strike, as hawks claim.

The president-elect has a lot on his plate. He should cease the nuclear weapons talk, at least until he can discuss deterrence strategy with his Secretary of Defense and consider whether we still need a triad. If you're into upsetting the establishment and improving nuclear policy, that's a place to start.

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