

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Arms Reduction: Just Do It

John Mueller March 29, 2012

In his lively and engaging [speech](#) to South Korean students earlier this week, President Barack Obama disclosed that a “comprehensive study of our nuclear forces” was underway and that he could “already say with confidence that we have more nuclear weapons than we need.” Accordingly, he was planning to meet with the Russians in the hope that “working together, we can continue to make progress and reduce our nuclear stockpiles.”

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, with no apparent sense of irony, [quickly assured the press and Congress](#) that we would never reduce the number of our unnecessary nuclear trinkets—which cost several billion dollars a year to maintain—unless we do so under the auspices of bilateral negotiations with the Russians.

Thus, the need to have agreement in order to reduce unneeded weapons is the only reason for keeping them around. It is a bizarre situation.

Arms control is essentially a form of centralized regulation and carries with it the usual defects of that approach. Participants will volunteer for such regulation only with great caution, because once under its control they are often unable to adjust subtly to unanticipated changes.

Arms deals can also generate perverse incentives: 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 accuracy, thereby encouraging them to develop a potentially dangerous first-strike capability.

And, as in the present case, talks can actually hamper arms limitations: in 1973 a proposal for a unilateral reduction of U.S. troops in West Europe failed in the Senate

because many felt that it would undercut upcoming arms control negotiations—which then ran on unproductively for years.

The Cold War arms buildup, after all, was not accomplished through written agreement;

instead, there was a sort of market process in which each side, keeping 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.

The same process can work in reverse: as tensions decline, so can the arms that are their consequence. It would likely be chaotic, halting, ambiguous, self-interested, and potentially reversible, but arms can be significantly reduced.

There is a notable precedent. After decades of cold war, tensions between the US and British Canada relaxed in the 1870s, and the ships, forts, and installations they had built to confront each other were gradually removed or allowed to rot away over time without any talks or formal agreements. In present times, France has retired most of its nuclear arsenal unilaterally and without discussing it with pretty much anybody.

Under relaxed tensions, reductions will happen best if arms negotiators keep out of the way, and they will proceed most expeditiously if each side feels free to reverse any reduction it later comes to regret. Formal disarmament agreements are likely simply to slow and clutter the process.