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Global Zero

Fewer nukes, more security

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HAVING based much of his recent re-election campaign on strident anti-Western rhetoric, President Vladimir Putin has decided to boycott this weekend's G8 meeting at Camp David and is only sending a mid-ranking diplomat to the follow-on NATO summit in Chicago. It is a pity on a number of counts, but perhaps most of all because Barack Obama was keen to build on last year's ratification of

the New START treaty by beginning a conversation with his Russian opposite number about further deep cuts in both countries' still-bloated nuclear arsenals. Unlike his predecessor, Dmitry Medvedev, who Mr Obama found to be a constructive interlocutor, Mr Putin seems to see in nuclear weapons a symbol of Russia's former superpower status.

He also wants to show how cross he is about the so-called "phased adaptive" ballistic missile defence (BMD) system that America is installing to defend Europe from attack by a "rogue state" (aka Iran). Although NATO has bent over backwards to consult Russia, address its fears and gain its co-operation, so far it has got nowhere. The Kremlin insists that the fourth phase of the system, planned for 2020, will have the capability to blunt the effectiveness of its missiles and thus undermine deterrence. At a conference on BMD in Moscow a couple of weeks ago, Chief of the General Staff Nikolai Makarov even warned that Russia might pre-emptively attack American missile-interceptor sites in Poland and Romania if deployment goes ahead.

It is against this rather unpromising backdrop that Global Zero, an international movement supported or endorsed by a stellar list of both active and retired senior political, diplomatic and military figures (not least, Mr Obama himself) which advocates the step-by-step elimination of all nuclear weapons, has just brought out its latest report. It focuses on what a (relatively near-term) future American nuclear force structure and posture might look like, but is consistent with the group's former emphasis on a process that starts with bilateral negotiations between America and Russia to achieve deep cuts that are followed by multilateral talks eventually involving every other country with nuclear weapons.

Under the chairmanship of General James Cartwright, vice-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff until last year and a former head of US Strategic Command, Global Zero's commission (which includes several other senior national security figures) describes what an America nuclear force slimmed down to 900 warheads, with only half deployed, would look like. It also argues—persuasively—that such a force, which would be less than a third smaller than the START limit (to be reached within six years) of 1,550 deployed strategic warheads, would be more than adequate to preserve mutual deterrence with Russia and vastly more

than is needed to deter any other nuclear-armed countries. America's stockpile of nearly 3,000 warheads held in reserve, about 800 of them so-called tactical or non-strategic weapons, serves no useful purpose at all.

The aim of the Global Zero commissioners is three-fold: to reduce the risk of an accidental nuclear exchange or theft by non-state actors; to slim down American and Russian nuclear forces to a level that would put pressure on other nuclear weapons states to engage in multilateral talks to cap and cut their own arsenals; and to avoid the huge costs to nuclear weapons states of producing and maintaining their forces—estimated at over $1 trillion over the next decade.

The most eye-catching part of the report is the elimination of all tactical nukes and all fixed, land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), such as America's Minuteman system (pictured). Although very different weapons, similar logic for their removal applies to both. Deployed close to any potential battlefield, tactical nuclear weapons have always posed a risk because of the "use them or lose them" dilemma they confront commanders with. In the era of massively destructive precision-guided conventional ordnance their military utility has almost ceased to exist. They linger on as a relic of the cold war only because Russian generals (who still deploy around 4,000 of the things) cling to them as a way of offsetting the inferiority of their conventional forces and because some NATO members continue to believe that the 200 American gravity bombs deployed in five countries across Europe binds America's far more powerful strategic forces to the alliance.

The ICBMs are also a relic of history. In practice, they could only be used against Russia. That is because if they were to be sent anywhere else they would still have to overfly Russia, risking ambiguous attack indications and possible nuclear retaliation. Worse still, ICBMs in fixed silos depend on being launched on warning for their survival, which carries with it the danger of launch on false warning. Rapid reaction equals a risk of mistaken launch. A key objective of General Cartwright's report is to remove that unnecessary risk by "de-alerting" all nuclear forces to give political leaders days and weeks to consider their options rather than minutes for land-based ICBMs and hours for tactical weapons.

The flexible and survivable force envisioned by Global Zero would consist of 10 Trident ballistic missile submarines armed with 720 strategic missile warheads (360 deployed; 360 in reserve) and 18 B-2 aircraft armed with 180 gravity bombs (90 deployed; 90 in reserve). "The capacity to deliver 900 warheads would", the report says, "project a threat of draconian dimensions at any prospective aggressor country. A force of this size could support extensive counterforce against opposing nuclear forces, counter-value against war-supporting industries and operations against command centres of the opponent's top political and military leadership."

Global Zero does not advocate America moving to such a force structure unilaterally, but that the next president should propose to Mr Putin that America and Russia travel together in that direction. Realistically, Bruce Blair, one of Global Zero's founders and in a former life a Minuteman launch control officer, concedes that such an initiative may depend on Mr Obama winning this November's election and wanting to make a radical reduction in nuclear weapons an important part of his legacy. Mr Obama recently ordered the Pentagon to draw up nuclear force options for the future ranging from an arsenal that stayed at New START levels to one with 300 to 400 warheads, so it is not wholly fanciful. General Cartwright suggests that Global Zero's thinking is close to that of the current administration.

Two rather large obstacles would, however, remain in the path of Global Zero's attractive plan. The first is that grumpy Mr Putin. Arguably, only a Russian president with an impeccable security background would be able to make such a bold step. However, Mr Putin has never given the slightest hint that his instincts might lie in that direction. The second is closer to home—the furious opposition of Republicans. Although a survey of several hundred policy experts by the Council Foreign Relations last year failed to mention Russia among the top 20 contingencies threatening America or its strategic allies, Mitt Romney maintains that Russia is "our number one geopolitical foe". Most Republicans (though not Reagan and Bush Senior era grandees) were hostile to New START and these days see almost any arms control initiative as appeasement and betrayal. Congressmen whose constituencies are home to Minuteman missile bases could also be expected to kick up a storm over the abolition of one leg of the

traditional strategic “triad”. If Gobal Zero’s ideas are to gain real world traction, they will need a committed second-term Obama playing at the top of his game.