Viewpoint

Unilateral Security? U.S. Arms Control Policy and Asian-Pacific Security

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As the world enters the 21st century, the euphoria over the possibilities for international arms control that many felt in the early and mid-1990s has dissipated. In its place, a mood of pessimism now dominates, motivated by recent setbacks in the area of international arms control, many of which can be attributed to U.S. unilateralism. Since George W. Bush took office, the United States has turned away from many international arms control agreements and instead chosen to pursue its interests through unilateral means.

The horrific terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 spurred some initial optimism about prospects for international cooperation in addressing urgent security threats. However, these hopes, too, have proven largely unfounded. Many aspects of the U.S. response to the terrorist attacks, including its military operations in Afghanistan, have cast a long shadow over nonproliferation efforts throughout the world, especially regarding the prospects for long-term peace and stability in Central and South Asia. And despite the need to build an international coalition to combat the threat of terrorism, the Bush administration has continued to hew to its unilateralist approach to nonproliferation and arms control issues, as exemplified by the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty that took effect in June 2002.

This viewpoint discusses U.S. unilateralism in the international arms control process and its influence on regional security in the Asian-Pacific region. It begins by tracing the development of the unilateralist approach that currently dominates U.S. foreign policy, and then analyzes the strategic logic underlying this approach. Next, it details the negative effects on Asian-Pacific security that are generated by current U.S. unilateral policies. It concludes by discussing the lessons that can be learned from the current international terrorist crisis.

UNILATERALISM IN CURRENT U.S. SECURITY POLICY

During the Cold War, successive U.S. governments viewed arms control as a pillar of U.S. national security strategy. This pillar consisted of two parts. The first was to realize strategic stability via negotiation with the Soviet Union. A typical example of this approach was "the balance of terror" and the process of limiting U.S. and Soviet nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles based on the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaties (SALT I and SALT II) and the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. The other component of the pillar was the restriction of horizontal proliferation of the weapons of mass destruction (WMD), ensuring the dominance of the United States and

the Soviet Union as nuclear superpowers. Despite many struggles at the negotiating table, U.S.-Soviet cooperation in arms control eventually produced a series of arms control treaties, agreements, and protocols.

It now appears, however, that in the new century, the role of arms control as a pillar of U.S. national security strategy is disappearing and, as a result, many existing treaties, agreements, and protocols are at risk. Since President George W. Bush took office in January 2001, the United States has adopted a negative attitude toward the international arms control agenda and embraced a unilateral approach to enhancing its national security. U.S. unilateralism in the international arms control process can be observed in a number of different areas.

First, the United States has changed its attitude on the issue of nonproliferation. In October 1999, the Clinton administration failed to secure U.S. Senate ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). The Bush administration has declared that it does not intend to try to persuade the U.S. Senate to reconsider its rejection of the CTBT. In July 2001, the Bush administration refused to sign the proposed verification protocol for the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). Both the CTBT and BWC were pushed forward by the United States for many years and were viewed as crucial elements of its nonproliferation agenda. The change of position by Washington on the CTBT and BWC has sent out a clear message that for the United States, the issue of nonproliferation is less important today than in the past. These changes also contribute to the perception that the United States is now more concerned about the restrictions imposed on the renovation and development of its own nuclear arsenal by existing arms control treaties and protocols.

Second, the Bush administration proposed that the United States and Russia take unilateral and parallel measures to reduce their arsenals of nuclear missiles. This proposal demonstrated that Washington had lost interest in continued bilateral Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) talks with Moscow and preferred to choose an alternative way to reduce obsolete strategic nuclear weapon systems. In this way, the administration achieved the goal of enhanced national security, yet maintained its unilateralist stance. Although the Bush administration did eventually sign a strategic arms reduction treaty with Russia in May 2002, the terms of the treaty are very general, and largely preserve U.S. freedom of action.

Third, the Bush administration insists on implementing its ballistic missile defense (BMD) plan and withdrawing from the 1972 ABM Treaty. On May 1, 2001, President Bush announced that the United States was committed to pursuing a missile defense system. In order to force Moscow to concede its strong opposition to the BMD plan, the U.S. government threatened to withdraw from the ABM treaty unilaterally. In December 2001, President Bush announced that the United States would withdraw from the ABM Treaty, and U.S. withdrawal became effective in June 2002. Over the past thirty years, the ABM Treaty has functioned as a cornerstone of international strategic stability. U.S. withdrawal from the ABM treaty demonstrates that the United States no longer plans to maintain security parity with Russia based on treaties and agreements signed in the Cold War years. The Treaty of Moscow, the U.S.-Russian strategic arms control agreement signed in May 2002, imposes almost no restrictions on U.S. nuclear forces, and does not alter this conclusion.

Obviously, Washington is pursuing a unilateral and absolute national security strategy. According to the U.S. missile defense plan, various new types of missile interceptors, (land-, sea-, and space-based) would be developed and deployed in the coming years or decades. More sophisticated devices will be deployed in outer space. Such deployments would undoubtedly be viewed by many countries as a violation of the Outer Space Treaty and could cause them to consider the weaponization of outer space. A new arms races in outer space would likely follow.

Fourth, U.S. unilateralism in arms control also has also been characterized by strong bias and the use of double standards. Washington has been very sensitive to the possibility of nuclear weapons being acquired by a Muslim nation. Punitive measures such as sanctions and embargoes are often used against countries like Iran and Iraq when they are suspected of attempting to acquire WMD capabilities. Meanwhile, Washington turns a blind eye to the nuclear arsenal of Israel. With such an approach, it is difficult to stem the trend of WMD proliferation. In sum, American unilateralism has put the entire framework of the international arms control process in jeopardy.

Some might respond that it is unfair to accuse Washington of losing interest in the arms control process. The United States is indeed interested in some arms control topics, such as the talks on prohibition of the production

of fissile materials for nuclear weapons, which would seek to negotiate a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT). However, the U.S. stance on this issue is self-serving. The United States already has sufficient fissile materials stocks; a future FMCT would not significantly restrict U.S. plans to upgrade it nuclear arsenal by developing a new generation of nuclear warheads. The positive U.S. attitude toward a future FMCT contrasts sharply, for example, with its very negative attitude toward any talks aimed at the prevention of an arms race in outer space.

To explain and defend U.S. abandonment of the multilateral international arms control process in order to pursue a unilateral approach security, some U.S. strategic scholars have created a new concept of "nontraditional arms control," which refers to processes such as unilateral and reciprocal initiatives, cooperative threat reduction programs, and policy declarations.[2] However, these "nontraditional arms control" measures depend solely on one's will and self-limitation and would not be based on adherence to any bilateral or multilateral treaty or agreement. Therefore, their effectiveness and durability are very doubtful. The United States can make unilateral nuclear reductions today; but it is reasonable to assume that Washington may expand its nuclear arsenal some day in the future if it felt there was a need to do so. The terms of the Treaty of Moscow, which do not require any force reductions not already planned by the United States, will allow Washington to maintain almost complete flexibility in this regard.[3]

The essence of the "nontraditional arms control" is an effort to cast off any significant mutual and/or multilateral restrictions from earlier formal treaties and agreements. In this sense, so-called "nontraditional arms control" is a deviation from the spirit of international arms control and should be read as meaning "no arms control." Some U.S. analysts have openly expressed the opinion that "arms control is a passé concept."[4] Until now, the Bush administration has no arms control policy, or rather, its arms control policy has been to give up on international arms control, notwithstanding the signing of the Treaty of Moscow.[5]

THE STRATEGIC LOGIC OF U.S. UNILATERALISM

The phenomenon of U.S. unilateralism in international arms control has three driving forces. The first comes from the current tilt in the international strategic equilibrium and the huge U.S. advantage in most measures of power and influence. With the former Soviet Union gone, the United States has become the sole superpower in the world. Although Moscow still controls a large number of nuclear weapons, the United States and Russia "are no longer enemies and the nuclear arms race between the two countries is, for all intents and purposes, over."[6] In the eyes of Washington, the threat from the Russian nuclear arsenal is much smaller than it was in the Cold War years. As one U.S. analyst put it recently: "With or without arms control agreements with the United States, Russia will not command the necessary resources over the next 10-15 years to sustain the number of deployed warheads (1,500) it proposed for START III. Moreover, economic constraints, combined with growing obsolescence, will also lead to a steep decline in its nonstrategic nuclear weapons."[7] Under such favorable circumstances, the United States feels it is no longer necessary to abide by those treaties and agreements that conflict with its current national interests. It is not difficult to read the strong "who cares" attitude that underpins the Bush administration approach to arms control issues.

The second driving force for U.S. unilateralism comes from the technological revolution. With the rapid development of science and technology in the past two decades, the U.S. government now believes that it is possible to realize, at least partially, the idea of a missile shield (i.e., "Star Wars") proposed by the Reagan administration in the 1980s.[8] From "Brilliant Pebbles" to "Boost-Phase Intercept," new technologies have played a key role in shaping U.S. policy. In U.S. strategic thinking, it would be immoral and a dereliction of duty for the U.S. government not to use its technological advantage to advance U.S. security interests. The Bush administration is impatient to transform U.S. technological advantages into strategic ones.

Last, but not least, the pursuit of an enduring Pax Americana is the third driving force of U.S. unilateralism. According to many U.S. strategic scholars, the coming 10 to 15 years will be a period of strategic opportunity; no country will emerge during that time as a strategic adversary on the scale of the former Soviet Union. As a result, the U.S. government is determined to take a unilateral approach to strengthening its superpower position and its domination of the world. Such a policy, its advocates in Washington argue, will ensure that the temporary unipolar situation that emerged after the collapse of the bipolar Cold War system will be prolonged and emerging trends toward multipolarity will be stemmed.

A NEGATIVE INFLUENCE ON ASIAN-PACIFIC SECURITY

The current dominance of unilateralism in U.S. national security policies has had a negative effect on security and arms control issues in the Asian-Pacific region.

On the Korean peninsula, following a review of Clinton administration policy toward Korean issues, the Bush administration resumed a hard-line posture toward the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), and talks on missile proliferation issues between Washington and Pyongyang have stalled. This development has amplified difficulties in the peace process between North and South Korea, which had gained new momentum from the summit meeting between the South and the North held in June 2000. It seems that Washington preferred to lock the DPRK into a position as a "rogue state," maintaining the alleged North Korean missile threat as a convenient justification for the U.S. BMD program in East Asia. The Bush administration's hard line toward the DPRK upset policymakers in Seoul and was criticized as unsupportive of the South Korean "sunshine policy," which seeks to improve ties between the two Koreas. On June 6, 2001, President Bush announced the completion of his administration's Korea policy review and renewed the U.S. commitment to support the "sunshine policy" and the U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework. Bush also indicated a willingness to engage in serious discussions with Pyongyang on a broad agenda, including a resumption of missile talks. But as of June 2002, it remains unclear if these commitments will be realized.

U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty will not only destabilize U.S.-Russian relations but may also produce long-term, negative effects on Sino-U.S. relations. The deployment of BMD, whether globally or in its theater form, may lead to the status of China as a nuclear power being degraded. China will not sit idly by and accept the prospect that its small nuclear arsenal will be neutralized by U.S. missile defenses. If the situation continues in a direction unfavorable to Chinese strategic interests, China may have to take some corresponding action to offset the trend.

The most troubling development has been U.S. efforts to integrate Taiwan into its BMD plans in East Asia, which seriously threaten Chinese national security and have added additional strain on Sino-U.S. relations. With Patriot-2 missiles already being sold to Taiwan and the future sale of Patriot-3s under consideration, it appears that Washington wants to establish its TMD system on the island piece by piece. To implement plans for boost-phase intercept BMD, U.S. military forces (probably ship-based) may be deployed very close to Chinese territorial waters. It should also be stressed that a U.S. missile defense umbrella extended over Taiwan means a de facto revitalization of the U.S.-Taiwan military alliance of the Cold War years prior to 1979. That would inevitably damage the strategic foundation of Sino-U.S. relations. Considering President Bush's declaration on April 25, 2001 that he would do "whatever it took" to help Taiwan defend itself from an attack by the mainland, the Chinese people can't help but take the U.S. intention to include Taiwan into its TMD program as a hostile roadblock on the path of national reunification.[9]

UNILATERALISM VERSUS TERRORISM?

The horrific terrorist attacks on America on September 11, 2001, had a strong impact on American unilateralism in its pursuit of national security. But it will take time for the United States to learn some important underlying lessons from the tragic event.

The first lesson, in my view, is that, in an increasingly interdependent world, no nation—not even the United States, the strongest nation in the world—can establish absolute national security unilaterally. Certainly, every nation has a legitimate right to develop and improve its national defense. However, in a world without a global government, a nation can only enjoy a relative security. A nation that attempts to achieve absolute national security will eventually provoke reactions from other states that increase its own insecurity. This pattern has been repeated many times throughout history. Indeed, the U.S. government has adjusted its foreign policy in some aspects after the events of September 11, and called for the establishment of an international anti-terrorism alliance. But in the field of arms control, there is little possibility that Washington will substantially change its policy of unilateralism. Despite the need to build an anti-terrorist coalition, the Bush administration has continued to insist on continuing its BMD plan, renovating the U.S. nuclear weapon stockpile, and retaining the option of first use of nuclear weapons. To many in China, these continued policies demonstrate that the United States is still reluctant to learn the true lessons from September 11.

The second lesson from the events of September 11 is that concerted international efforts are needed to dig out

the roots of international terrorism. U.S. unilateralism needs to be replaced by international cooperation. Terrorism is not, in its essence, a military problem, but usually a reaction to long-standing and complicated political, economic, ethnic, and religious conflicts. Therefore, one cannot expect international terrorist forces to be defeated solely by military means without complementary political, economic, and social-cultural efforts. The campaign against terrorism should be a comprehensive one. The U.S. government has noted this point to some extent, demonstrated by its targeted dropping of humanitarian relief during its military operation against Osama bin Laden and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. But it is very doubtful that such modest measures in Afghanistan will reduce the current anti-American sentiment in the Muslim world. Even after the defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the U.S. campaign against international terrorism continues to overemphasize the use of military force, which may generate further anti-American backlash. To resolve this problem, U.S. foreign policy should focus on international cooperation rather than unilateralism. The key issue here is whether Washington can treat other people equally, especially Muslims.

The third lesson of September 11 is the need for Washington to develop a long-term perspective in its foreign relations. In U.S. strategic culture, bilateral ties with other states have been highly dependent on short-term calculations of U.S. interests. Once a nation loses importance in the eyes of the United States, U.S. friendship often quickly erodes. Among U.S. decisionmakers, this pattern is regarded as natural and correct. The evolution of U.S.-Pakistani relations in the past two decades provides a good example. In the 1980s, as a front-line country helping to resist the expansion of the Soviet sphere of influence, the United States regarded Pakistan as a good friend. However, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Islamabad was immediately marginalized in U.S. foreign policy. Subsequently, the planned sale of F-16 fighter aircraft to Pakistan was blocked by the U.S. government, deeply injuring the Pakistanis. U.S.-Pakistani relations also suffered as a result of disputes over the Pakistani nuclear program and support from Islamabad for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

It seems that the terrorist attacks of September 11 have reminded Washington of the need to have Pakistan as a friend again. However, Pakistani leader General Pervez Musharraf is under mounting domestic pressure and is being asked by critics, "how many times are enough for you to be abandoned by the U.S.?"[10] In Chinese political culture, a friend in need is a friend indeed. Those who pull down the bridge after crossing the river usually find themselves in difficulty sometime later. Maybe it is the right time for the United States to rethink its unilateralist approach to foreign policy.

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[1] The views expressed in this viewpoint are solely those of the author, and do not represent the position of the People's Liberation Army nor the Institute for Strategic Studies.

[2] Richard D. Sokolsky, *Renovating U.S. Strategic Arms Control Policy*, Strategic Forum No.178 (Washington, DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, February 2001), <http://www.ndu.edu/inss/strforum/sf178.html>.

[3] Joeseph Cirincione, "Flash! Treaty Will Not Reduce Weapons or Eliminate Arsenals," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, May 20, 2002, <http://www.ceip.org/files/nonprolif/templates/article.asp?NewsID=2889>.

[4] Evan S. Medeiros, Rapporteur, *Ballistic Missile Defense and Northeast Asian Security: Views from Washington, Beijing, and Tokyo* (Monterey, CA: Monterey Institute of International Studies and Stanley Foundation, 2001), p. 8, <http://cns.miis.edu/cns/projects/eanp/pubs/bmdrep/bmd_web.pdf>.

[5] Cirincione, "Flash! Treaty Will Not Reduce Weapons."

[6] Sokolsky, *Renovating U.S. Strategic Arms Control Policy.*

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] For an overview of U.S. missile defense plans, see U.S. Department of Defense, Missile Defense Agency, "The Ballistic Missile Defense System," <http://www.acq.osd.mil/bmdo/bmdolink/html/system.html>.

[9] David E. Sanger, "Bush Tells Beijing U.S. Is Ready to Defend Taiwan," *New York Times*, April 26, 2001, p. 1; Philip P. Pan, "China 'Concerned' by Bush Remark," *Washington Post*, April 27, 2001, p. 19

[10] Dexter Filkins, "As Pakistani's Popularity Slides, 'Busharraf' is a Figure of Ridicule," *New York Times*, July 5, 2002, p. 1.