



Chuck Hagel's Troubling 'Global Zero' Nuclear Arms Stance

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During the tenure of the Bush administration, the United States entered into numerous agreements with many countries, including our Cold War adversary Russia, to deal with the growing danger of nuclear terrorism.

Of particular concern was the development of nuclear weapons in countries such as Pakistan, North Korea, and Iran, for example, and the potential that such states would use terror groups as proxies to deliver such weapons surreptitiously to an American city.

The focus spawned numerous efforts, among them the Proliferation Security Initiative, the development of nuclear detection technology and nuclear forensics, and sanctions on North Korea and Iran, all aimed at stopping the danger of nuclear terrorism. The Moscow Treaty with Russia further eliminated nuclear weapons, dropping our stockpile and deployed strategic nuclear forces nearly 70 percent from their levels in the 1990s.

Thus, for at least a decade, the United States has been grappling seriously with the new challenges of the post-9/11 nuclear age. But will it continue to do so? Or will it pursue a different, and more dangerous, path of disarmament? Those are appropriate questions for the White House's newly announced nominee for Secretary of defense: former Nebraska senator Chuck Hagel.

In an interview with *Al Jazeera* in 2009, Hagel rightly highlighted the growing proliferation dangers now confronting the United States, especially the growing access to nuclear weapons technology being exhibited by rogue states and nonstate actors. But the senator did not mention any of the Bush-era policies adopted to deal with the very problems he highlighted. Instead, he effectively embraced what has colloquially come to be known as "Global Zero"—the idea of sweeping reductions to national nuclear arsenals, with the ultimate goal of eliminating such capabilities outright. And America, Hagel believes, must lead by example.

According to the senator, the United States currently isn't in a position to tell other states they must not develop nuclear weapons, because it itself still has them and uses them in its defense policy. Moreover, since America is the only country to have used nuclear weapons, we have a special obligation to lead the effort to eliminate them. That, in turn, will require first eliminating nuclear weapons as a tool of U.S. deterrence.

But this tactic is fraught with danger. First, experts like Gen. Larry Welch, the former Air Force chief of staff and Strategic Air Command chief, point out that such an effort would be largely unverifiable, and would lead to a "rush to re-arm" among numerous nations in the event of a crisis.

Second, and even more worrisome, are the detrimental effects that Global Zero would have on America's strategic capabilities. If the United States eliminates any nuclear role from our 450 missile-strong land-based ballistic missile deterrent and strategic bombers, as has been suggested by proponents of Global Zero, it would mean that, for the first time in the nuclear age, the United States would be, perhaps inadvertently, moving toward higher instability in the global nuclear balance.

Most problematic of all, however, is that the idea of Global Zero has little grounding in reality. The current political landscape makes it obvious that an agreement with Iran or North Korea, let alone China, to cap or even curtail their nuclear weapons or associated programs is highly unlikely. Yet proponents of Global Zero still say that international disarmament can be achieved by 2030—a date that lies closer in our future than the end of the Cold War does in our past.

For these reasons, and many others, Global Zero has steadily declined in popularity since its heyday several years ago. Just as clearly, however, the idea still has its proponents in Washington. Indeed, America's new defense secretary might just be one of them.

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