

What's *Still* Wrong with Zero?

I appreciate ENS Michael Izbicki's reply to my commentary ("What's Wrong with Zero," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Summer 2010) and I am grateful to the journal's editors for an opportunity to respond. In his opening paragraph Ensign Izbicki labels as "hawks" anyone who questions the wisdom of reducing to zero the US nuclear arsenal and as "flamboyant" and "scaremongering" dissenting voices of President Obama's decision to pursue this goal. If he had read my commentary carefully and made a modest effort to understand my argument, I believe he could not have concluded it was hawkish, flamboyant, or scaremongering. Rather, my purpose was to raise legitimate concerns about the president's proposal.

Ensign Izbicki notes that the five nuclear-weapon signatories to the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) are obliged to negotiate measures to achieve complete nuclear disarmament. He adds that the "debate for the past 40 years has centered on finding the practical steps necessary to achieve this vision." Therein Mr. Izbicki identifies both a question and the problem. The NPT entered into force as an international treaty with its attendant obligations in March 1970, yet if one excludes from nuclear disarmament consideration the subsequent intense 20-year Cold War period (1970–90), nearly 20 more years passed (1990–2009) without serious US or Soviet/Russian proposals for complete nuclear disarmament. Why? Although the United States and Russia did negotiate significant nuclear force cuts as the Cold War ended and could reduce further their nuclear arsenals if the New START agreement is ratified by both countries—a prospect that seems to be growing dimmer—no country other than the United States has tabled a proposal to eliminate nuclear weapons altogether. As I stated in my commentary, "no major nuclear-armed state, except the United States, currently accepts a nuclear-free world as a realistic goal. In fact, by devoting resources to nuclear modernization programs, [several] countries have made a clear, long-term commitment to procure and deploy qualitatively improved nuclear weapons and advanced delivery systems." I provided numerous examples to support this argument. Leaders in these countries made these commitments because they recognize that in the absence of dramatic changes in the international security environment, nuclear disarmament in the near-term is both dangerous and unrealistic.

Ensign Izbicki assailed my position on the evidence of ongoing nuclear modernization programs and plans in Russia, China, France, and Great Britain by

averring that I failed to provide a clear definition of modernization. More to the point, he asserts that I “falsely conclude that the United States is not modernizing its stockpile when other NWSs are. The facts show these countries’ modernization plans are *really very similar to the United States’ plans . . .*” [italics mine]. Check the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) released last April. The Obama NPR does not refer to the modernization of nuclear weapons. In fact, the only references in the NPR to modernization pertain to infrastructure improvements for warhead dismantlement and the stockpile stewardship and management program for existing weapons. Additionally, the NPR states (p. 39) that “the United States will give strong preference to options for refurbishment or reuse [of nuclear components]. Replacement of nuclear components would be undertaken *only* if critical Stockpile Management Program goals could not otherwise be met, *and* if specifically authorized by the President *and* approved by Congress” [italics mine]. Thus, it is readily apparent the current US administration has taken steps through the NPR to ensure that even replacing nuclear components requires both presidential authorization and congressional approval. In other words, the evidence does not show nuclear modernization programs and plans in Russia, China, France, or Great Britain are similar to the United States. In fact, programs and plans in these other countries are intended to modernize their arsenals.

Moreover, he criticizes my evaluation of Russian, Chinese, French, and planned British modernization programs (i.e., weapons and delivery systems, not infrastructure improvements) by comparison with US systems. Izbicki’s assessment is shallow, because it is not relevant to argue that modernization programs in other major nuclear-weapon states are unimportant because their land-based missiles carry fewer warheads than US missiles or their submarines carry fewer missiles than US ballistic-missile submarines. What is relevant is that these nuclear-armed states have ongoing nuclear modernization programs and the United States has no equivalent. To be clear, I am not arguing the merits of nuclear modernization per se, but I do argue modernization programs in other nuclear-armed states demonstrate a long-term commitment to retain nuclear arsenals that does not reflect interest in complete nuclear disarmament. These countries will continue to possess and modernize their weapons because they believe their national security is served by continued retention. This point was emphasized recently by Great Britain’s minister of state for security, Pauline Neville-Jones, who offered, “We have to allot that the world is not free of state threats now, look at Iran.”¹

Insofar as submarine-launched ballistic missiles are concerned, Izbicki observed that the Russian “Bulava missile is widely considered a failure” because seven of 12 flight tests failed. While the statistic is accurate the perception is imprecise. Russia persisted and the Bulava was successfully launched from a Russian ballistic-missile submarine in early October 2010. Importantly, the first *Borei*-class submarine to be fitted with this missile is undergoing sea trials, two more boats are under construction, and a fleet of eight submarines in this class is planned over the next decade. In contrast, as Ensign Izbicki confirms, US ballistic missile submarines replacing the *Ohio*-class boats will not be procured until between 2028 and 2040. As a hedge against continued problems with the Bulava missile, Russia has successfully tested three (all multiwarhead-capable) *Sineva* missiles since March 2010. On balance, it appears Russia’s submarine ballistic missile program is moving forward, along with France’s deployment of all four *Le Triomphant*-class submarines; the last boat is equipped with a longer-range M51 missile and a new warhead.

Ensign Izbicki concludes his article by noting, “We must take a sober look not at other countries’ nuclear policies, but our own.” I disagree. The United States must examine the capabilities and doctrines of other nuclear-armed states as well, lest we reach erroneous conclusions that jeopardize US national security. I posed several questions at the end of my summer 2010 commentary that could be a baseline for this examination. One cannot wish away reality, and the reality is: we live in a nuclear-armed world. Unilateral proclamations of “nuclear zero” are fundamentally unsound while other major nuclear-armed states move forward with programs to qualitatively improve their arsenals. These improvements prove other countries grasp an undeniable reality: nuclear weapons remain a prominent feature of the international strategic landscape for the foreseeable future. This is not about “expanding US nuclear hegemony,” as Ensign Izbicki asserts; it is about preserving American security in a dangerous nuclear-armed world.

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Notes

1. Martin Matishak, “UK Dedicated to Nuclear Deterrent, Minister Says,” *Global Security Newswire*, 29 October 2010, http://gsn.nti.org/gsn/nw_20101029_4710.php.