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Dutch want nuclear disarmament on the table

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Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende

Commentary

When President Obama meets today with Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende, the urgent issue of nuclear disarmament should be on the agenda. While President Obama is taking the lead on non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament, our country is falling behind and needs some encouragement in finally sending obsolete U.S. nuclear weapons home.

These weapons have become a growing impediment to productive U.S. international relations, and a hefty financial burden when more strategic options are available for protecting nations and securing peace around the world.

While some critics view President Obama's call for a nuclear free world as illusionary, analysts, proliferation experts and former statesmen all see the elimination of nuclear weapons as a practical requirement.

The president's goal also recognizes that Cold War ideology is insufficient for a time when wars are no longer simply the domain of nations, but are more likely waged by nontraditional, highly-mobile extremists groups. In this context, nuclear weapons pose a severe risk.

More nations are also eying nuclear energy as an option to fuel their energy needs and address future energy shortages. Fissile materials are rapidly spreading over the world, and an increasing number of countries will soon be able to produce a nuclear weapon. We only have to look at India, Pakistan, Israel, North Korea and recent developments in Iran to see how power politics fuels nuclear proliferation. In this toxic climate, there is also the growing danger that fissile material will be stolen by a terrorist group for the making of a nuclear bomb.

Nuclear proliferation can only be prevented by the so called "zero-option," the elimination of nuclear weapons secured by a robust international regime and appropriate safeguards.

A small nation, the Dutch nevertheless have an important role to play in nuclear disarmament since U.S. nuclear weapons are based in the Netherlands as well as other NATO-member states. President Obama and President Dmitry Medvedev of Russia met last week to negotiate the follow-up of Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or START, scheduled to end in December.

While this is commendable, the follow up to START deals only with strategic weapon reductions. Dutch, Begian, German, Italian and Turkish nuclear weapons fall outside the scope of the treaty. Until now, the Dutch

have consistently refused to discuss withdrawal of these nuclear weapons in a bilateral context with the United States. The U.S and the Dutch show no signals to start discussions. Each country is waiting for the other to make a move. How can we break this stalemate?

The U.S. Congress already flagged these obsolete nuclear weapons. On May 6, 2009, the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States released a report examining the long-term strategic posture of the United States. The Congressional Commission pointed out that NATO allies are responsible for the U.S to maintain ?numbers and types of nuclear weapons that it might not otherwise deem essential to its own defense.? In previous statements, Dutch Minister Verhagen has welcomed international momentum for nuclear disarmament, but has limited this to sending home U.S. nuclear weapons stationed in Holland only if it was decided within NATO.

While the U.S. steps forward with concrete steps for nuclear disarmament, the Dutch are still seeking protection within international NATO negotiations. This is understandable on some level, but there is much to be gained from a process that would link an international solution to a bilateral U.S.-Dutch nuclear disarmament solution. This would have great symbolic value in supporting Presedent Obama's START follow-up initiative. It would also signal to U.S. NATO allies that the time has come to reorient NATO away from U.S. dependence, as well as shine a spotlight on critical nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation initiatives.

During their meeting today, President Obama could go a long way toward starting this process by demonstrating his willingness to begin bilateral negotiations for withdrawing U.S. nuclear weapons from Volkel in the Netherlands. This could set the stage for the U.S and the Netherlands to propose withdrawing all 200 U.S. nuclear weapons stationed in NATO member states when the international body next meets.

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