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Report

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➤ Obama's Nuclear Weapons Policy in a Changing World

Andrew Futter

The role that nuclear weapons should play in US security policy has divided analysts and policymakers since “the bomb” was first used in 1945, and has been a particularly important question facing US presidents since the end of the Cold War. Essentially this is because in the post-Cold War world it has become clear that the US no longer needs the many thousands of nuclear warheads originally intended to deter the Soviet Union in order to deal with the new types of threats – from rogue states or even terrorists – that currently dominate US security thinking. In fact, many believe that retaining large stockpiles of nuclear weapons worldwide will increase the likelihood that nuclear weapons technology will proliferate to other actors hostile to the US around the globe, which may one day be used. However, this has not translated directly into coherent policy towards nuclear reductions, or indeed created unambiguous political support for nuclear elimination. George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush all made steps in this direction – with varying degrees of success, and with different political aims in mind – but Barack Obama is the first post-Cold War US president to truly embrace the issue of nuclear abolition, and to make reducing US reliance on such weapons a central priority.

Obama took office promising considerable change in US nuclear weapons thinking, the centrepiece of which would be his very public desire to reignite the quest for “global nuclear zero”. The new president hoped that progress could be made towards this goal by embarking on a three-pronged strategy during his first term in office. First, this would involve a concerted effort with Russia to make further cuts in both powers’ strategic nuclear arsenals – a prerequisite for any further multilateral nuclear reductions involving the other seven nuclear powers.¹ Second, and in order to allow for this, Obama intended to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US security policy by gradually increasing the role of advanced non-nuclear weaponry to perform functions previously covered by nuclear weapons. Third, Obama would work to prevent the spread and possible use of nuclear weapons by actors hostile to the United States through a renewed approach to nuclear non-proliferation and nuclear security internationally.

The Obama administration’s approach to nuclear policy has been framed by the changing nature of US power and threats to US security in the post-Cold War, post-9-11, and possibly post-unipolar world. This is because the past two decades have seen a gradual shift away from the centrality of great power politics and nuclear rivalry with Russia and China in US policy, towards a greater focus on rogue state and terrorist nuclear threats, and this is strongly reflected in Obama’s approach to US nuclear weapons thinking.

¹ In addition to the US and Russia; Britain, France, China, India, Pakistan, North Korea & Israel are nuclear weapons states (although Israel remains an “undeclared nuclear power”).

Specifically, it would appear that his determination to reduce and prevent the spread of nuclear weapons technology to these actors is a direct result of the belief that other counter-proliferation options are perhaps no longer open to him, and that reliance upon nuclear deterrence is no longer sufficient. In this sense, Obama's room for manoeuvre in nuclear policy has been limited both by the changing nature of threats to US security in the 21st century, and by perceptions of US power in a post-Bush, and particularly post-Iraq, international context.

REDUCING THE TOTAL NUMBER OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS HELD WORLDWIDE

Despite a considerable reduction in the number of nuclear weapons held worldwide since the end of the Cold War, as Barack Obama took office in January 2009, it was estimated that over 20,000 warheads were held by the nine "nuclear weapons states", of which the vast majority belonged to the United States and Russia. Even considering that a large number of these weapons are now held in reserve or are waiting to be decommissioned, such nuclear ordinance is still more than enough to destroy the world many times over. It was in this context that Barack Obama announced his intention to reignite the global nuclear disarmament agenda – which many had felt had stagnated – and to begin a new push for nuclear reductions.

Obama had made his views on nuclear weapons and nuclear abolition clear before becoming president, but it was during a speech in the Czech capital, Prague, in April 2009 that his quest for "global zero" became truly acknowledged. During the speech, the president announced his "intention to seek a world free from the threat of nuclear weapons", and argued that because the US was the "only power to have used a nuclear weapon", he and his fellow countrymen had a "moral responsibility to act" by leading the disarmament agenda. Although also noting that "this goal will not be reached quickly – perhaps not in my lifetime", the speech thrust the issue into the centre of the international political agenda, and ensured that nuclear disarmament would become a defining part of his presidency.

The first step towards this goal would be the negotiation of a New Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty with Russia to replace START I (due to expire in December 2009), which was also seen as a logical first step to launch the nuclear disarmament agenda globally. The new treaty would take almost a year to agree, with Russian officials keen to link nuclear reductions with limits to US missile defence plans, and US officials equally keen to ensure that the two issues remained separate. In the end a compromise was reached whereby no official limits on US missile defence plans were contained in the treaty, but through language in the preamble and unilateral Russian statements which accompanied it, missile defence and nuclear reductions remained loosely linked, at least rhetorically. After the treaty was signed in April 2010, it would be a further ten months before it was ratified by the US Senate and signed into law by Obama in February 2011. Again, the link between missile defence and nuclear reductions was central to the disagreement, as many US Senators strove to ensure that neither the preamble to the treaty, nor the Russian unilateral statement, in any way inhibited US missile defence plans. The New START Treaty limits US and Russian deployed strategic nuclear warheads to 1550, and deployed delivery vehicles (i.e. ICBMs, SLBMs and bombers) to 700, each.

Both the Prague speech and New START are important steps on the nuclear disarmament agenda, but progress should not be overstated. The Prague speech was essentially about placing the issue of nuclear disarmament back into the mainstream public domain, and the New START treaty was the first tentative step on what looks set to be a very long road towards achieving this goal. Significant further US and Russian nuclear reductions will probably be needed before the other nuclear powers – with their far smaller nuclear arsenals – can credibly be brought into disarmament talks. Moreover, as was shown by the negotiations over New START, whether Russia would be interested in future reductions without a link to US missile defence plans, and whether Obama – or any US president – would either want to do this, or be able to get such a deal ratified by the Senate, casts considerable doubt on the future of this endeavour.

DECREASING THE IMPORTANCE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS FOR US SECURITY

As well as reigniting the quest for global zero internationally, and in order to bolster this agenda, Obama has been equally keen to revamp thinking about the role and utility of nuclear weapons in US national security. In fact, building on several policies begun during the Bush administration, the president has demonstrated a strong tendency to utilise advanced conventional weaponry – such as missile defence and Prompt Global Strike (PGS) programmes – for roles previously performed by nuclear weapons. In doing this, it appears that Obama both hopes to reduce US reliance upon nuclear weapons in order to aid the international push for disarmament, and at the same time, reconfigure US national security and nuclear weapons thinking to the changing requirements of the post-Cold War world. Specifically, this involves a more nuanced conception of nuclear deterrence – once based solely on mutually assured destruction with the Soviet Union – towards a posture able to address the different nuclear concerns now facing the US. In this sense, Obama has striven to find a balance between nuclear and conventional weapons that better reflects current US security requirements.

Obama has made it clear that as long as other states possess nuclear weapons the US will not give up its own nuclear capability, but this does not mean that he has not sought to modify the role and importance of nuclear weapons in US security thinking. Perhaps one of the most notable developments in this regard was the declaration in the April 2010 Nuclear Posture Review that the US would not use nuclear weapons against any non-nuclear weapons state in compliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). While this does not rule out the use of such weapons against North Korea, Iran, or some other future nuclear pariah, and perhaps does not go as far as many might have hoped, it does represent an important change of thinking. In fact, many hope that this may be the precursor to a declaration of no first nuclear use by the United States against any state at some point in the near future. In doing this, Obama has attempted to decrease the perceived centrality of nuclear weapons to US security, and therefore by implication, as a component in other states' security planning.

To an extent, the plan to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US security – while underpinned by the goal of global zero – has only been made possible because new technologies and the changing requirements of US security have allowed non-nuclear weaponry to perform functions previously considered the preserve of nuclear weapons. The most notable development in this regard has been the increased role and importance of ballistic missile defence – a programme that Obama appeared to have little enthusiasm for before 2009. In fact, Obama initially appeared destined to reduce the role of missile defence to ensure that it did not become a spoiler in US-Russian arms control negotiations. The reality is that Obama has been striving for a balance whereby missile defence can be used to bolster deterrence against rogue nuclear threats where nuclear retaliation may not be seen to be sufficient, while at the same time ensure that these missile defence plans do not undermine nuclear reductions with Russia – upon which the entire disarmament agenda must initially be based. As a result, although the missile defence programme has been recalibrated, it remains almost as important to Obama as it was to Bush (although for different reasons). The decision to replace the “Third Site” with the “Phased Adaptive Approach” in September 2009, rather than cancel missile defence in Europe entirely, as well as the comprehensive February 2010 Ballistic Missile Defense Review are examples of the president's commitment to the programme. When combined with advances in systems such as Prompt Global Strike, it is clear that the Obama administration wishes to place increasing emphasis on non-nuclear weapons to perform roles previously undertaken by nuclear weapons, and that this should make it easier to reduce US nuclear weapons further.

Obama has made progress in reducing the utility of nuclear weapons to US security thinking, and this should theoretically make it easier to decrease the number of weapons in the US nuclear stockpile. However, a growing US reliance on advanced conventional weaponry at the expense of nuclear weapons may paradoxically make the global disarmament agenda more difficult. Essentially, the vast comparative advantage that the US enjoys both qualitatively and quantitatively in conventional weaponry may simply

serve to make nuclear weapons more desirable to other nations. Moreover, a combination of a non-nuclear strike capability, combined with a missile defence and advanced monitoring technologies, may cause other nations to fear the development of a US non-nuclear first strike capability, which in turn may lead others to develop more, and more sophisticated, nuclear weapons. Striking a balance between domestic and international nuclear disarmament strategies therefore seems likely to be another key issue for the future of Obama's nuclear agenda.

PREVENTING THE SPREAD AND POSSIBLE USE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS BY THOSE HOSTILE TO THE US

Obama's strong desire to reduce both the number and utility of nuclear weapons is essentially a reflection of strategic realities. Put simply, large numbers of nuclear weapons arguably appear to represent a graver threat to US security in the post-9-11 world than perhaps they did during much of the Cold War. The reason for this is twofold: first is the emergence of rogue states such as North Korea, Iran, and potentially others, intent on acquiring a nuclear weapons capability; the second is that fact that as nuclear technology and weaponry continue to proliferate and spread, the chance of them falling into the hands of terrorist groups, and the possibility of their use, increases exponentially. Obama has therefore fought to re-establish the norm of nuclear non-proliferation internationally, in part through the Prague speech and the New START Treaty, but also through a revamped approach to the issue of nuclear security.

In the current international climate, the greatest nuclear threat to the US comes from either a rogue state or a terrorist organisation attacking, or threatening to attack the US with a nuclear weapon. The proliferation of nuclear and missile technology after the Cold War has forced Obama (and other presidents before him) to elevate these concerns to the top of the US national security agenda. Conventional wisdom holds that because these new post-Cold War threats may not be manageable solely through nuclear deterrence, or addressed through either US

conventional weaponry or diplomacy, then the only other option open to Obama is to prevent the spread of nuclear material and weaponry to these actors in the first place. Again, the president has made this a top priority for his administration, most notably by convening the Nuclear Security Summit in April 2010, and through his public commitment to the NPT. In both of these endeavours, Obama has sought to strengthen international nuclear non-proliferation norms, and make it harder for states to acquire nuclear technology. A second Obama term may see progress on other policies towards this end, including a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) and an attempt to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

However, at the same time, the administration's progress on dealing with rogue state nuclear threats has been negligible. Renewed diplomatic approaches to both North Korea and Iran have born little fruit; Pyongyang conducted a second underground nuclear test in 2009 and has not rejoined the six-party talks, while international pressure has seemed to make little impact on Iran's quest to acquire a nuclear capability. Failure to deal with these threats opens up further concerns about the potential for nuclear technology to proliferate, and perhaps end up in the hands of terrorists. In this sense, and although Obama has tried to distance himself from some of the counter-proliferation policies of the previous administration, whether diplomacy alone can continue as the main response to the threats posed by nuclear proliferation remains to be seen.

FUTURE TRENDS AND TRAJECTORIES IN US NUCLEAR WEAPONS POLICY

While the total number of nuclear weapons in the world has decreased considerably from the very high levels that dominated the Cold War, the possibility that these weapons might one day be used remains ever-present, and according to some, even more likely in the post-9-11 world. The horizontal proliferation of nuclear technology to more international actors – although perhaps not as extensive as previously feared – has nevertheless created an entirely new set of circumstances for US nuclear planners,

whereby principles of rationality and mutually assured destruction are no longer held as inviolable. The growing risk that a rogue state or a terrorist organisation may acquire and use these weapons has created an entirely new set of dynamics for the US to consider, and has essentially changed the rules of the nuclear game. It is for this reason that nuclear policy, reducing nuclear weapons, and preventing their proliferation, remains central to both US foreign policy and to international security.

Barack Obama has certainly recognised this, and his policy triumvirate of nuclear reductions, nuclear substitution, and proliferation prevention, represents a coherent and logical attempt to address the changing nature of nuclear threats to US security. In a sense, he has tried to deal with the nuclear threat diplomatically from either end of the spectrum; top down by pursuing nuclear arms reductions with Russia and agreeing on the New START Treaty, and bottom up by addressing the proliferation of the technology needed to acquire a nuclear weapons capability through initiatives such as the Nuclear Security Summit. He has also sought to reignite the nuclear non-proliferation norm by reducing US reliance on nuclear weapons, altering US declaratory nuclear policy, and by throwing his wholehearted support behind the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. These efforts would appear to be a prudent attempt to get to grips with the changing realities of US power and the types of security challenges US policymakers face in the current international climate.

However, the future trajectory of Obama's nuclear thinking appears less assured, and it seems he will be faced with three key problems if he is to continue upon the path set out so far. First is the question of how the president can convince Russia to agree to

reduce their nuclear stockpile down to levels that will allow the nuclear disarmament agenda to become multilateralised. This will not only involve somehow reassuring Moscow about US missile defence plans, but also winning over domestic opinion in the US to the idea of further (possibly unilateral) American nuclear reductions. Second, and linked to this, will be how far Obama goes in substituting advanced conventional weaponry for nuclear weapons in US security policy. This policy may well make nuclear reductions more acceptable in the US, but it seems likely to become a diplomatic and strategic stumbling block for the disarmament agenda internationally. This is because greater US conventional superiority will make nuclear weapons more, not less, important to strategic competitors and other potential challengers. Finally, Obama will need to come to a decision soon about whether a nuclear Iran and North Korea are acceptable dangers to US security, or whether something must be done to remove these threats. Linked to this will be how far the President decides to go in pushing for a full range of international non-proliferation measures, and to whether he can achieve a nuclear materials "lockdown" through the FMCT and CTBT in a possible second term. Should he win the next election, Obama's future nuclear policy seems likely to have to reflect a political and strategic balance between the top-down policies required for nuclear reductions (initially with Russia) and the bottom-up policies required for nuclear security and non-proliferation (caused by the changing nature of nuclear threats to US security). As long as "global zero" and nuclear disarmament remain at the forefront of the US political debate – which the changing requirements of US security suggest that they will – addressing these dynamics will be an enduring question for US nuclear policy regardless of who wins the next election. ■