



# The Obama Nuclear Agenda One Year After Prague

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## Summary

In his 2009 Prague speech President Obama presented an agenda of nuclear disarmament, nonproliferation, and counterterrorism steps that he hoped would result in “the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.” A year later, the new START treaty, the forthcoming Nuclear Posture Review, and the Nuclear Security Summit that Obama will host from April 12 to 13 in Washington demonstrate the president’s seriousness. However,

- Obama’s vision of how to get to a world without nuclear weapons has been misinterpreted by the right and the left.
- Progress toward the elimination of nuclear arsenals must proceed in a co-evolutionary process with improvements in political-security relations.
- Russia, China, France, Israel, Pakistan, India, and North Korea balk at many, and in some cases all, of the steps required even to approach the abolition of nuclear arsenals. Key non-nuclear-weapon states passively resist other necessary policies. The United States alone cannot change their calculations.
- Among NATO and Asian allies, there is uncertainty over how to deploy more realistic alternative strategies and capabilities to deter post-Cold War threats.
- Obama has not been able to mobilize his own Cabinet or leading congressional Democrats to care as much about this agenda as he does.

After the upcoming Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference in May, Obama should assess whether any other leaders of major countries—from the global North and South—are seriously prepared to lead with him. If some are, he should invite them to join him in detailing a ten-year action plan to minimize the dangers posed by fissile materials—in bombs or other forms—and maximize the potential of peaceful nuclear energy. To get from here to there—from today’s world to one without nuclear weapons—requires a collection of leaders willing to do the unglamorous, complicated work of strengthening cooperation and rules one year at a time.

In Prague one year ago, President Barack Obama declared “America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.” The speech elicited strong reactions around the world. Elites and media who favor nuclear disarmament applauded. Others booed, warning that a world without nuclear weapons would destabilize regional and global power balances and raise the risks of great power war.

A year later it appears that proponents and critics selectively interpreted or misinterpreted Obama’s vision. More importantly, the range of states whose cooperation would be necessary to implement the Prague agenda either oppose it or have done little to help achieve it. Public opinion has not mobilized to make nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation a highly salient issue in any single country, including the United States. The result is a talented president ready to lead a long-term campaign to remove the existential threats posed by nuclear weapons, but as yet lacking sufficient colleagues and followers to make it happen. The new START Treaty is welcome, but does not require new thinking or action by anyone.

## **Selective Interpretation**

Three propositions lay at the core of the Prague speech.

- First, that a world without nuclear weapons would enhance peace and security by removing the singular threats that nuclear weapons pose to the survival of nations.
- Second, achieving this outcome will be extremely difficult and take considerable time: “I’m not naïve,” the president said, “This goal will not be reached quickly, perhaps not in my lifetime. It will take patience and persistence.”
- Third, that “as long as these weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies.”

Each of these propositions has been distorted in the days and months since Obama gave the speech. Some imagine that the president seeks in his tenure to negotiate a multilateral treaty to ban nuclear weapons. Confusion arises here in part because the aspirational phrase “Global Zero” has become a sort of brand name encompassing what are in fact distinct ideas and projects. An organization called Global Zero was created in December 2008 to urge “the phased verified elimination of nuclear weapons, starting with deep reductions in the U.S. and Russian arsenals.” Its Action Plan calls for negotiations, between 2019–2023, of “a legally binding international agreement, signed by all nuclear capable countries, for the phased, verified, proportionate reduction of all nuclear arsenals to zero total warheads by 2030.”<sup>1</sup> The organization has

recruited former high-ranking officials from nearly two dozen countries as well as NGOs and celebrities to sign on to its agenda.

With able marketing, the Global Zero organization has made its name synonymous among many observers with other approaches to the challenge of eliminating nuclear arsenals. President Obama's is the most important of these differing approaches that have now been conflated with Global Zero. The president has not expressed any view on the feasibility or timeliness of multilateral negotiations to eliminate all nuclear arsenals, and certainly put no timeframe on the ultimate objective.

A second misinterpretation by nuclear disarmament advocates is that the United States was or is the determinative obstacle to progress. (Nuclear-armed competitors of the United States say this, too.) Many who hold this view felt that President George W. Bush and his administration were the impediment to all progressive changes in the world, and that the ascent of an enlightened post-Cold War leader like Barack Obama would open the way. If the leader of the United States was willing to put its vast nuclear arsenal on the negotiating table, the major impediment would be removed and good things would naturally follow.

If this was the view of the optimists (or naives), the pessimists (or cynics) drew the opposite inferences from Obama's speech. Senator John Kyl, former secretary of defense James Schlesinger, and others from the Cold War establishment reacted as if Obama were calling for unilateral American nuclear disarmament. "The notion that we can abolish nuclear weapons reflects a combination of American utopianism and parochialism," Schlesinger told the *Wall Street Journal*.<sup>2</sup> "If we were to approach zero nuclear weapons today," Kyl and Richard Perle wrote in the same newspaper, "others would almost certainly try even harder to catapult to superpower status by acquiring a bomb or two."<sup>3</sup>

These Cold War veterans recognize that it is difficult to make the case that the United States would be militarily disadvantaged in a world without nuclear weapons, so they charge that Obama's interest in nuclear disarmament would leave American allies vulnerable to Russia, China, North Korea, or Iran. America can handle these threatening actors, but its allies will always need the nuclear deterrent the United States extends to them. "If we were only protecting the North American continent," Schlesinger said, "we could do so with far fewer weapons than we have at present in the stockpile." But the U.S. nuclear deterrent is meant "to provide the necessary reassurance to our allies, both in Asia and in Europe."<sup>4</sup>

In reality, Obama had in mind neither the caricature of the left nor that of the right. The other two main propositions of the Prague speech make this clear: that nuclear weapons probably could not be eliminated in the three or more decades that the then-47-year-old president could reasonably expect to live, and that the United States would maintain a nuclear deterrent as long as other

states possess or threaten to acquire these weapons. Obama's actual words—as opposed to the selective interpretations of them—clearly negate the idea of U.S. unilateral nuclear disarmament. So does his administration's increased budget to refurbish the aging infrastructure of nuclear weapons laboratories and material handling facilities. Rather, Obama posits the need for all states that now possess nuclear weapons or rely on extended nuclear deterrence to take the steps necessary to obviate their perceived need for these weapons. This is an inherently multilateral and regional challenge to reduce threats, redress insecurities, and build political confidence. As Obama said, “all nations must come together to build a stronger, global regime.”

## **A Global Political-Security Challenge**

The list of nuclear-armed states indicates the various regional and global competitions that must be cooperatively managed: the United States, Russia, China, France, the UK, India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea. These states individually and collectively affect the regional security dynamics of Europe, the Middle East, and Northeast and South Asia. Given the web of relationships involved, it is extremely unlikely that any one of these states would agree to relinquish its nuclear arsenal if the others would not do so at the same time. For example, the United States and China will retain nuclear weapons as long as the other does, and as long as Russia does. India will retain them as long as China does, and Pakistan will not abandon its nuclear deterrent until India agrees to do the same and also to reassure Pakistan against conventional threats.

Unilateral disarmament by the United States or any other one of these states would not cause all of them to follow suit. As a thought experiment, if the United States magically eliminated all of its nuclear weapons tomorrow, would Russia do the same? Would China? Pakistan? Israel? North Korea? And if Russia, China, and North Korea did not join the United States, would former Warsaw Pact members of NATO, and Japan and South Korea be more or instead less likely to seek dual-use nuclear capabilities to hedge their security bets? Answering these questions suggests the connections between nuclear arsenals and unsettled security competitions and non-nuclear military balances.

Progress toward the elimination of nuclear arsenals must proceed in a co-evolutionary process with improvements in political-security relations. The end of the Cold War offers clues as to how this can work. The emergence of Mikhail Gorbachev and perestroika beginning in 1985 led Moscow to seek relief from international competition and pursue “mutual security.” This in turn led to the 1987 treaty eliminating all U.S. and Soviet intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF). INF, among other factors, helped encourage further political change in the Soviet Union, which ultimately led to the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union. These developments opened the way for the 1991 START Treaty and created a disarming environment for the

denuclearization of Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, as well as South Africa's 1989 decision to dismantle its secret nuclear arsenal.

It is only realistic to think that the eventual elimination of all nuclear arsenals would proceed in a similar co-evolutionary process with improvements in U.S.–NATO–Russian relations, U.S.–Sino–Russian relations, Sino–Indian relations, Indo–Pak relations, and so on. In the Middle East, Israel's willingness to move toward nuclear disarmament would depend on achieving durable peace with its neighbors and verifiable guarantees that Iran and other regional states would not acquire nuclear weapons.

The elimination of nuclear arsenals would require dramatic advancement of verification and enforcement arrangements. Nuclear weapons cannot be disinvented. Obama's critics pretend that disarmament would require disinvention, which enables them to chortle that the project is absurd on its face. Yet the president surely understands that no human invention can be erased from memory or computer files. Nevertheless, societies have chosen to do without artifacts that they deem excessively harmful or abhorrent. Gas chambers, for example, can still be made, but civilization chose to dismantle them and prevent their reconstitution and employment. Ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) have not been disinvented, but the world has implemented a prohibition on their production and use. The challenge is to agree on prohibition and then devise arrangements to verify it and take decisive action to enforce it.

## **International Reactions to Date**

The foregoing analysis is relatively complicated and arcane. It is what experts in and out of government do with varying degrees of rigor and intellectual honesty. But what about less specialized political leaders and publics? How have they responded to Obama's Prague agenda?

### **Russia**

Russian authorities evince deep suspicion. Given controls on the media and limitations on political organizing, the views of the Kremlin and General Staff predominate. In February 2010, Russia published a new Military Doctrine that declares that nuclear weapons are "an important factor in the prevention of nuclear conflicts that use conventional assets (large-scale and regional wars)." According to a veteran Russian analyst Nikolai Sokov, "the most significant change in the language pertaining to nuclear policy is the new criterion for the employment of nuclear weapons. It has become tighter. Whereas the previous, 2000 Doctrine foresaw the resorting to nuclear weapons 'in situations critical for [the] national security' of Russia, the 2010 version allows for their use in situations when 'the very existence of [Russia] is under threat.'" While Russia retains a first-use doctrine, the new document follows the United States in placing greater emphasis on high-precision conventional weapons for strategic deterrence. The February document was surprising, given earlier statements

by Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, that Moscow would assign nuclear weapons to “local conflicts,” including for preventive and preemptive strikes. The more restrained language in the February doctrine may reflect a partial “reset” in Russian nuclear doctrine to parallel changes Obama seeks in the U.S. nuclear posture.

Still, while the new START treaty represents real progress, Russian leaders will not embrace deep reductions of all nuclear weapons—including so-called “tactical” systems—as long as Russia’s overall military capability is seen to be dramatically weaker than that of the United States if nuclear weapons are taken out of the equation. Russia will remain deeply concerned about conventional military imbalances between it and NATO, as well as U.S. ballistic missile defense technologies and space-supported conventional strike capabilities. Russia also is increasingly wary of China’s rising economic, political, and military power. Russia is comparatively less able to populate and defend its Far East bordering China, so Russian leaders will cling to nuclear weapons as potential balancers, whether this is realistic or not. More generally, nuclear weapons made Russia a major power and will be attractive symbols of this power as long as Russia lacks other means to make itself feel prominent in international affairs.

## **China**

In China, too, the government retains a monopoly of influence on nuclear policy. The Chinese government has demonstrated singular restraint in the way it regards and has deployed nuclear weapons. Even as it bolsters its nuclear arsenal qualitatively and quantitatively, China has found sufficiency in a much smaller and more relaxed nuclear posture than the United States and Russia would have if they were in China’s situation. There is no evidence that China seeks nuclear parity with the United States now or in the future. Chinese authorities have long placed no-first-use at the center of their nuclear strategy. In many ways, China’s approach to nuclear weapons is a model of what the United States and Russia would need to do in a transition toward nuclear abolition.

Yet privately, Chinese nuclear experts suspect that President Obama’s call for a world without nuclear weapons is meant to augment the United States’ overall power relative to China and any other state. China continues to argue that it is premature for it to enter into nuclear arms control or reduction processes as long as the U.S. and Russian arsenals remain significantly larger than its own. Ongoing imbalances between U.S. and Chinese conventional capabilities, and unconstrained U.S. ballistic missile defense programs also factor into Beijing’s view of U.S. intentions and capabilities. This affects China’s position in possible negotiations to end the production of fissile materials for nuclear weapons (FMCT). Were China to join the United States, Russia, France, and the UK in declaring a moratorium on production of fissile materials for weapons, it would indicate China’s willingness to engage in President Obama’s agenda.

## **France**

France has consistently expressed to U.S. and UK officials its doubts about the desirability and feasibility of raising expectations regarding nuclear disarmament. Though France has dismantled its nuclear test site and bomb material production plants, there has never been a significant nuclear disarmament constituency in France that could lead the government to lessen its abiding attachment to nuclear weapons.

## **Israel**

Israel does not acknowledge possession of nuclear weapons, but has endorsed the goal of achieving a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East if its neighbors demonstrate by word, treaty, and action their willingness to live permanently at peace with it. Conditions today are far from this desired reality, due in part to Israel's own occupation policies. Israel will remain aloof from whatever nuclear disarmament processes could be undertaken by others.

## **Pakistan**

Pakistan's reaction to the Obama agenda—let alone to the more idealistic plans of the Global Zero organization—can be read in its February statement blocking Conference on Disarmament negotiations of a treaty to end further production of fissile materials. Pakistan's representative to the Conference declared that the "optimism" Pakistan entertained in the days after Obama's election "was short lived," and insufficient to overcome Pakistan's displeasure over the agreement by the United States and others in the Nuclear Suppliers Group to exempt India from nonproliferation rules and open nuclear cooperation with it.<sup>5</sup> Reacting to worst-case estimates of India's potential build-up of fissile materials for weapons, Pakistan is determined to increase its own stockpile and to block negotiations of a treaty that would foreclose this.

## **India**

Indian commentators welcomed President Obama's Prague speech, as India has long championed nuclear disarmament. But "upon closer examination," in the words of one pundit, Obama's "soaring rhetoric hides somewhat baser—and narrow—national interests."<sup>6</sup> In any case, the Indian government is concentrating more time and resources on expanding the number and quality of its nuclear weapons and delivery platforms than on pursuing nuclear arms control and disarmament. If bringing a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) into force and negotiating a FMCT are two of the early steps in the Obama agenda, India has not contributed proactively to either. India may ultimately agree to sign the CTBT after the United States, China, and other states take the steps necessary for the treaty to enter into force, but India's interest in reducing or eliminating its nuclear arsenal will hinge on its relations with China and Pakistan, which remain far from conducive at this point.

## **North Korea**

The Democratic People's Republic of North Korea must agree to dismantle its small nuclear arsenal and related production capabilities if China, Russia, the United States and its allies are to take the additional steps necessary to verge on a world free of nuclear weapons. The difficulties of achieving Pyongyang's cooperation speak for themselves, as President Obama clearly understands.

## **United Kingdom**

Of all the nuclear-armed states, the United Kingdom has most fully embraced the project of nuclear disarmament. The UK is also the only nuclear-armed state with a longstanding, politically salient public constituency for nuclear disarmament. However, this constituency has been associated with the Labour Party. If the upcoming elections in the UK result in a government led by the Conservative Party, the UK may step back from the nuclear disarmament vanguard, though the political salience of disarmament will affect Tories too.

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Allies living under the U.S. extended deterrent have become central to the debate over Obama's nuclear agenda. Whereas the United States would gain more than any other state in a world without nuclear weapons, allies living next to more conventionally powerful competitors could feel less secure. Japan vis-à-vis China and North Korea; Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic states vis-à-vis Russia are the most obvious candidates for alarm. Officials and pundits in Japan, South Korea, Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic states have expressed more mixed reactions to Obama's objective of a world without nuclear weapons than NATO allies that were never Warsaw Pact members. Foreign ministry officials tend to be more positive about the Obama agenda than do defense ministry officials.

However, something else is going on in the extended deterrence discussion. Japan is deeply confused and worried over China's growing economic, political, and military power and does not know what to do about it. Tokyo also worries over North Korea's intentions and capabilities, but perhaps as much over the possibility that Korea will eventually unify with nuclear weapons and lingering rancor towards Japan. South Korea wants to even the balance of power and status with Japan and seeks U.S. permission to reprocess spent nuclear fuel as Japan does. In Europe, former Warsaw Pact states—most vocally Poland—doubt that the twenty-eight-member NATO alliance truly would act to deter or defeat Russian bullying, energy blackmail, cyber-attacks, or other interference in their internal affairs. Article V of the NATO treaty declares that “an armed attack against one or more [allies] in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all” and that “if such an armed attack occurs, each of them . . . will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.” The new NATO members want to know what the real, updated meaning of Article V is—in

light of potential cyber attacks, energy coercion, and other post-Cold War threats—and whether NATO will collectively produce and mobilize the capabilities that would be needed to implement it.

The foreign ministers of Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Norway recently released a letter to NATO Secretary General Rasmussen urging NATO to “discuss what we can do to move closer to” President Obama’s objective of “peace and security in a world without nuclear weapons.” They recognize that NATO’s “future policy requires the full support of all Allies,” including members of NATO living near Russia. That said, they want the new strategic concept now being developed by NATO to reinforce “arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation” while innovating “credible deterrence.” They seem to understand that nuclear weapons are not a realistic effective solution to anything but deterring other nuclear threats to Europe.

Throughout 2010, and perhaps longer, NATO will wrestle with these issues as it updates its Strategic Concept. The Obama administration will reassure NATO and its Asian allies that U.S. strategic nuclear weapons will remain more than sufficient to deter any threats for which nuclear weapons are appropriate, while leaving it to NATO states to decide whether to continue basing air-delivered nuclear bombs on their territories. These weapons already exist and are by-and-large paid for. Thus, they are easily grasped pacifiers to calm allies’ nerves. It is hard to mobilize collective will and budgets to deter or defeat cyber attacks, diversify energy supply infrastructure, and enhance the speed and potency with which conventional defense forces could be deployed to deter quick, limited-objective conventional attacks. It is easier to pretend that nuclear weapons would somehow save the day.

Non-nuclear-weapon states were in many ways the primary audience Obama sought to influence with the Prague speech. To some extent he succeeded. Newspapers around the world reflected widespread support. The Nobel Prize Committee was moved to award Obama its peace prize. (This produced a backlash among American conservatives and may have prompted Russian leaders to bargain harder in arms reduction negotiations, believing that Obama would now have to make concessions in order to complete a treaty that would justify the prize. Obama disabused Moscow of this thought, as the final treaty reflects.)

More than applause, the president was seeking to enlist non-nuclear-weapon states in a shared enterprise to eliminate all nuclear dangers—posed by extant arsenals, proliferation, and terrorism. Like Secretaries Shultz, Kissinger, Perry, and Senator Nunn before him, Obama believes that the gravest large-scale threat to the United States and its allies is posed by proliferation of nuclear weapons or fissile material to terrorists or anti-status-quo states. It is untenable to actively seek to maintain the double standard between nuclear “haves” and “have nots” and at the same time believe that proliferation can be prevented and the use of nuclear weapons avoided. As long as a few insist

they will retain nuclear arms, their competitors in security or political status will want them too. The larger non-nuclear-weapon majority of states will not heed calls to enforce the double standard, feeling that nonproliferation should be the problem of the privileged few. Stating America's commitment to abolish nuclear weapons, Obama sought to prove his good faith and rally non-nuclear-weapon states to cooperate with the United States in strengthening the nonproliferation regime.

## **Upcoming Indicators of Progress**

Three upcoming events will indicate whether Obama has made progress with non-nuclear-weapon states. In the first week of April his administration will announce the results of its Nuclear Posture Review. On April 12–13 he will host a summit of leaders from 40-plus states to enhance international cooperation to prevent nuclear terrorism. In May the parties to the NPT will gather in New York for the quinquennial conference to review the treaty.

The Nuclear Posture Review serves multiple purposes. It describes for potential adversaries the lines they must not cross if they want to avoid being destroyed by U.S. nuclear weapons. Since states such as Russia and China already understand the nuclear deterrent relationship with the United States, and erratic adversaries such as Iran and North Korea do not take the public declarations of U.S. nuclear doctrine at face value, the Nuclear Posture Review serves other purposes as well. It seeks to reassure allies and non-nuclear-weapon states that the United States is a sober, responsible provider of security, and at the same time is doing its best to make possible a world without nuclear weapons. The Posture Review also signals the U.S. nuclear-weapon complex and its beneficiaries and congressional patrons that the administration is a robust defender of America, and that a strong America requires a well-funded and appreciated nuclear complex. Within these parameters, the new review should convey an “Obama difference” by reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. policy, by clarifying that the U.S. would not threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states under the NPT, and by expressing the United States' willingness to live without nuclear weapons if everyone else were prepared to do the same. Will leading non-nuclear-weapon states focus on the positive changes in the Obama review's formulations or on what's been left unchanged?

The nuclear security summit has a narrow agenda and a selective participation. Thus it is analogous to the G20 that met to deal with the global financial crisis. If key non-nuclear-armed states at the security summit shy away from demonstrable commitments to effective measures to secure nuclear material and prevent nuclear smuggling and terrorism, the hopes of Prague will be severely dashed.

The NPT Review Conference is inherently less promising. The NPT process involves 190 states and operates by consensus, making it analogous to the UN

General Assembly. One or more nuclear-weapon states can block agreement that the vast majority might prefer, say, to negotiate a global convention to eliminate nuclear weapons.<sup>7</sup> However, insofar as the NPT is first and foremost a nonproliferation treaty, and failure to stop proliferation makes disarmament impossible, it is particularly problematic that a state such as Iran can block the conference from adopting any measure designed to bring it into compliance with IAEA and UN Security Council resolutions. Any state can block measures to make it more costly for a state to withdraw from the NPT after having been found in noncompliance with its terms, and so on.

Given these procedural limitations, the practical value of the NPT Review Conference is to measure how its members perceive the international nuclear order. Are they prepared in word *and deed* to make nonproliferation a collaborative undertaking in which nuclear-weapon and non-nuclear-weapon states alike will continue to do more over time? Will non-nuclear-weapon states feel they have done enough by agreeing not to acquire these weapons, and refuse to do more to strengthen the regime until the others have disarmed? Obama's Prague speech sought to mobilize collective political will by all states to do more. Yet influential non-nuclear-weapon states such as South Africa, Brazil, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Mexico recently have tended to see the NPT process as a morality play rather than an undertaking to strengthen and enforce rules to minimize risks of non-peaceful uses of atomic energy. These states have no significant public movements focusing on nuclear issues. Their governments' policies basically reflect the preferences of a few officials. Many non-nuclear-weapon state leaders applauded Obama's speech, but have not joined the majority of states that, for example, support strengthening IAEA safeguards by making the Additional Protocol mandatory.

For this dynamic to change, the heads of these key non-nuclear-weapon states would have to decide to embrace Obama's logic that step-by-step progress on nuclear disarmament needs to be reciprocated by step-by-step progress in strengthening the nonproliferation regime. It is reasonable for non-nuclear-weapon states to insist that the United States and other nuclear-armed states must deliver more disarmament. Yet they could encourage this by communicating their intent to reciprocate with concrete measures to update and strengthen nonproliferation rules and their enforcement in light of flaws exposed by the A. Q. Khan network and the actions of Iran and North Korea. After all, the obligations to facilitate and undertake disarmament under Article VI of the NPT apply to all parties to the treaty, not only the nuclear-weapon states.<sup>8</sup>

## **The Challenge At Home**

What about the United States itself? In the year since the Prague speech the United States has completed negotiations with Russia to agree on further reductions in strategic nuclear arsenals, and has undertaken to review the nuclear posture. It has sought to engage Iran and North Korea in negotiations to bring them into conformity with requirements of the IAEA, the UN

Security Council, and, in the case of North Korea, prior bilateral and six-party understandings. Each of these initiatives has moved haltingly. In each, the Obama administration has felt constrained by the need to temper the resistance of domestic opponents, particularly in the Senate, led by Senator John Kyl. Indeed, this resistance is so determined that the administration has deferred plans to introduce the CTBT for Senate ratification, notwithstanding the priority the president has placed on this measure. This reflects the reality of the U.S. Constitution's requirement that treaties be ratified by two-thirds of the Senate. Given that each state has two senators regardless of population, it is possible for 34 senators representing only 11 percent of the population to block a treaty. This formidable constraint has already delayed, if not stymied, progress on the most rudimentary elements of the Obama agenda. It is not difficult to imagine the constitutionally-enabled political obstacles to ratifying the succession of bilateral and multilateral treaties that would be required ultimately to eliminate all nuclear arsenals.

In Prague and subsequent words and deeds, President Obama has indicated he would like to push harder. Here he lacks sufficient help from his own administration and party. The nuclear disarmament and security agenda has not captured the imaginations and drives of the Cabinet, most pertinently the secretaries of defense and state or the national security adviser. In the Senate, no Democrat has emerged to champion this agenda and counter the daily, often specious, attacks led by Senator Kyl on the Republican side. The president and Vice President Biden often seem to be the only leaders in the U.S. government—executive or legislative branches—personally animated by the vision of a world without nuclear weapons. Given everything else on the White House's agenda, and given the weight of bureaucratic inertia and constitutional restraints, it is not realistic to expect the president to have the time, energy, or power to move this mountain.

It is tempting to believe the situation would be different if large segments of the American public understood how nuclear arms control and disarmament are related to the widely recognized interest in preventing nuclear proliferation and terrorism. But leaving aside whether and how the public could be mobilized to demand progress on this web of issues, it is possible that more public debate would be counterproductive. History suggests that the most far-reaching decisions to reduce or eliminate nuclear weapons were taken by leaders in private without extensive public debate. This was the case in the 1991 decision by President George H. W. Bush<sup>9</sup> to eliminate the United States' worldwide inventory of ground-launched short-range nuclear weapons, nuclear artillery shells, and short-range ballistic missile warheads, as well as the 1989 decision by South Africa to eliminate its secret nuclear arsenal,<sup>10</sup> and the decisions by Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine to denuclearize. Leaders and their advisers may understand the complex factors that can make nuclear disarmament desirable better than uninformed publics can, especially when these issues are subject to partisan, sloganeering debate. In such debates, the side that wants to retain powerful weapons and highlight the duplicity and perfidy of distant countries has a psychological advantage over those who

argue that states will adhere to mutual agreements to reduce forces because a new balance of interests has been struck and verification and enforcement mechanisms can work. With effort this political dynamic can be overcome on marginal agreements that reduce and constrain nuclear arsenals like the new START treaty with Russia, or the CTBT. But the challenge will be much greater when more far-reaching steps are contemplated and additional states are brought into the process.

## **A Way Forward**

Where does all of this leave President Obama and others who share his view on the desirability of a world without nuclear weapons and the process by which this goal can be pursued? The foregoing analysis suggests an image of a leader who has broken through lines of resistance but looks back to find that few other leaders of the most powerful states have joined him and relatively few citizen soldiers have enlisted in this campaign. Without follow-on forces determined to widen the offensive he has opened, he risks being cut off and isolated. Critics will say that this reflects poor judgment on the president's part for getting ahead of the Washington and major-power consensus, or, conversely, that he has not been radical enough. Leaders of nuclear-armed states that want to retain these arsenals will be emboldened, as will states that want to prevent stronger nonproliferation rules that would make it harder for them to hedge their nuclear bets in the future. The lingering question is whether those who support the president's agenda will become more active or instead will turn away in passive resignation.

By the end of the May 2010 NPT Review Conference, Obama should be able to assess whether any leaders of key nuclear-weapon and non-nuclear-weapon states are seriously committed to putting in the time, energy, and political capital required to strengthen the international nuclear order. They would have to recognize that this is a long-term, frequently dull process. Progress occurs incrementally and imperfectly. Success is measured best by things that don't happen and therefore do not win votes or riches—bombs don't go off, fissile materials aren't diverted, nuclear accidents don't occur. But the consequences of failure would be so disastrous that good leaders should see the value of working in this domain. If Obama finds confrères, he should invite them to join him in detailing a ten-year action plan to further reduce the roles and numbers of nuclear weapons, strengthen stability in regions where the risks of proliferation and war are greatest, and strengthen confidence in the safety, security, and proliferation-resistance of nuclear energy.

This is a process point: the president of the United States is ready to lead, but he needs colleagues. The existing formal bodies have been proven too large and ineffectual for purposes other than signaling whether things are going in a constructive or destructive direction. There already is a policy agenda around which a core of nuclear-armed and unarmed states could regroup. The

International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament was created by the governments of Japan and Australia and comprises eminent persons from the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, France, India, Pakistan, Germany, Indonesia, Mexico, and Saudi Arabia. This diverse group concluded that the “role and utility of nuclear weapons” needs to be shifted “from occupying a central place in strategic thinking to being seen as quite marginal, and ultimately wholly unnecessary.”<sup>11</sup> The ultimate goal must genuinely be to achieve “a nuclear weapon-free world” but achieving it will “be a long, complex and formidably difficult process.” To achieve it, the Commission urges a two-phased approach. From now until 2025, efforts should focus on achieving a “minimization point” at which global stockpiles of nuclear arsenals would be reduced by 90 percent from today’s totals, to no more than 2,000 nuclear warheads. The roles of nuclear weapons in national security doctrines should be steadily reduced to a point where first-use is no longer threatened and force postures reflect this. In parallel with these and other benchmarks, specific measures should be taken to strengthen the IAEA’s writ and capacity to safeguard the peaceful uses of atomic energy and to strengthen other bulwarks of the nonproliferation regime to reduce the proliferation risks associated with the expansion of civil nuclear energy.

The agenda sketched in some detail by the ICNND does not promise “Global Zero” at a predetermined date, nor require resolving some of the most daunting obstacles to that ultimate goal. But, if it were implemented in the coming decades, this practical agenda would lead the world to a point where the path forward could be mapped with greater confidence than can be done today. President Obama sought to begin movement on this course a year ago in Prague. If he and others who could lead their states for much of the next decade impart momentum to the negotiation and implementation of constructive nuclear policies, their successors will gain confidence that the global nuclear order can be made more secure. If misinterpretation of Obama’s agenda—or competition, or disinterest, or passivity—keeps other leaders from joining in its pursuit, the risks of nuclear explosions will rise and the benefits of nuclear electricity will fall.

The most important way that other leaders can contribute is to use whatever influence they have to help resolve or at least temper regional tensions—in Europe, between Russia and the eastern-NATO states; in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf; in South Asia between India and Pakistan, and Pakistan and Afghanistan; on the Korean Peninsula. The United States clearly affects each of these regional dynamics more than any other outside power, and President Obama has injected new energy into each region’s diplomacy. This regional diplomacy converges with the nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation agenda in ways that sometimes escape notice but actually constitute a coherent international security strategy. However, here again, U.S. leadership is necessary but insufficient. Meaningful change requires others to want the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons and work for it as much as the U.S. leader does.

## Notes

Global Zero Action Plan, February 2010,

[http://static.globalzero.org/files/docs/GZAP\\_6.0.pdf](http://static.globalzero.org/files/docs/GZAP_6.0.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Melanie Kirkpatrick, “Why We Don’t Want a Nuclear-Free World. The Former Defense Secretary on the U.S. Deterrent and the Terrorist Threat,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 13, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124726489588925407.html>.

<sup>3</sup> John Kyl and Richard Perle, “Our Decaying Nuclear Deterrent. The Less Credible the U.S. Deterrent, the More Likely Other States Are to Seek Weapons,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 30, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124623202363966157.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Kirkpatrick, “Why We Don’t Want a Nuclear-Free World.”

<sup>5</sup> Zamir Akram, Statement by the Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the Conference on Disarmament, February 18, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Rajesh Rajagopalan, “Obama’s Prague Speech: A New Push for Nuclear Disarmament?” Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, article no. 2855, April 29, 2009.

[http://ipcs.org/print\\_article-details.php?recNo=2878](http://ipcs.org/print_article-details.php?recNo=2878).

<sup>7</sup> The Middle Power Initiative encourages its adherents to “press for a commitment at the Review Conference to commencement of deliberations and negotiations on a convention or framework of instruments for the sustainable, verifiable and enforceable global elimination of nuclear weapons.” From “Making Good on the Promises: From the Security Council Summit to the 2010 NPT Review,” Middle Powers Initiative Briefing Paper, October 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Scott Sagan makes this point compellingly in, “Shared Responsibility,” *The Global Nuclear Future*, Daedalus Special Edition, vol. 1, MIT Press, 2009, pp. 7–18.

<sup>9</sup> George H. W. Bush, Address to the Nation on Reducing United States and Soviet Nuclear Weapons, September 27, 1991. Available at:

[http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public\\_papers.php?id=3438&year=1991&month=9](http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=3438&year=1991&month=9).

<sup>10</sup> David Albright, “South Africa and the Affordable Bomb,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, July/August 1994.

<sup>11</sup> International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament, *Eliminating Nuclear Threats: A Practical Agenda for Global Policymakers*, p. xix,

<http://www.icnnd.org/reference/reports/ent/downloads.html>.

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