

The Obama Administration: Caught between Disarmament and Deterrence

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Introduction

Since his inauguration in January 2009, President Barack Obama has invested substantial effort and political capital to advance an ambitious nuclear disarmament agenda. Well intended though the administration may be, some of its goals appear to be at odds with one another. In the related realms of disarmament and deterrence, such apparent inconsistencies can mean the difference between success and failure. This article will explore some of the Obama administration's disarmament policy contradictions, their implications for deterrence, and what might be done to resolve them.

The Administration's Disarmament Goals

In 2008 then-Senator and presidential candidate Barack Obama spelled out the disarmament goals he planned to achieve if elected. In a written response to questions posed by the Arms Control Association, Obama made his intentions plain:

As president, I will set a new direction in nuclear weapons policy and show the world that America believes in its existing commitment under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to work to ultimately eliminate all nuclear weapons....I have made it clear that America will not disarm unilaterally. Indeed, as long as states retain nuclear weapons, the United States will maintain a nuclear deterrent that is strong, safe, secure, and reliable. But I will not authorize the development of new nuclear weapons. And

I will make the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons worldwide a central element of U.S. nuclear policy.¹

Candidate Obama's overarching arms control goal was – and continued to be, once he was elected – global nuclear disarmament, and he appears to view nuclear deterrence more as a necessary side effect of the difficulty involved in meeting that goal than as a goal in and of itself. Obama is not alone either in his desire to rid the world of nuclear weapons or in his recognition of the deterrent need for them in the interim, nor is this the exclusive domain of US Democrats. For example, Ronald Reagan has been described as a “nuclear abolitionist,” and he dedicated substantial efforts to the cause, most prominently by signing the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 1987 and by pursuing the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with the Soviet Union, which ultimately was signed by George H. W. Bush in 1991.² More recently, in a series of opinion articles published in the *Wall Street Journal* since early 2007, Republicans George Shultz (secretary of state under Reagan) and Henry Kissinger (secretary of state under Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford) and Democrats William Perry (secretary of defense under Bill Clinton) and Sam Nunn (former chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee) have also envisioned an eventual “world free of nuclear weapons.”³

Nevertheless, President Obama appears to be pushing the nuclear disarmament agenda more vigorously than any American president since Reagan. In his Prague speech, delivered less than three months after his inauguration, Obama reiterated and expanded on his disarmament agenda and how he aims to achieve its goals. Since then, he has acted on nearly all of what he promised, albeit on some elements more meaningfully and successfully than others.⁴ Moreover, Obama has demonstrated his commitment to the two-pronged approach of total disarmament and continued deterrence not just in speeches. His approach is reflected most prominently in the April 2010 Nuclear Posture Review Report (NPR) and the May 2010 National Security Strategy, both of which emphasize America's commitment to move away from reliance on nuclear weapons, while emphasizing the ongoing need to deter enemies and reassure allies and partners.⁵

Implications of the Administration's Disarmament Agenda

The administration's disarmament goals and its obvious commitment to them is one matter, but the value and possibility of implementing those goals is another. The elimination of nuclear weapons has unmistakable appeal – no nuclear weapons, no threat of nuclear destruction, the theory goes – but is this achievable?

The question of nuclear disarmament is almost as old as nuclear weapons themselves, and the practical answer, provided by both analysts and statesmen for nearly as long, seems to be no, though not unanimously so. Writing half a century ago in his classic work *On Thermonuclear War*, strategist Herman Kahn wrote off the possibility of eliminating nuclear weapons:

Even if all nations should one day agree to total nuclear disarmament, we must presume that there would be the hiding of some nuclear weapons or components as a hedge against the other side doing so. An international arrangement for banishing war through disarmament will not call for total disarmament but will almost undoubtedly include provisions for enforcement that cannot be successfully overturned by a small, hidden force. Otherwise, it would be hopelessly unstable. Even if the problem of what we may call the "clandestine cache" were solvable, the writer is still of the belief that one could not disarm the world totally and expect it to remain disarmed. But the problem of the clandestine nuclear cache in itself makes total disarmament especially infeasible.⁶

One could dismiss Kahn's conclusion as the cynical, if considered, opinion of an analyst arguing – controversially – that nuclear war is both fightable and winnable. However, the actions of decision makers, including even some of the most celebrated arms control and disarmament measures of the last 50 years, strongly suggest that Kahn's assessment was correct.

For example, according to some observers, the New START agreement, signed by Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in April 2010, mandates that the US and Russia reduce their nuclear stockpiles to levels unknown since the mid 1950s, but leaves both sides with many more weapons than they need.⁷ If this is indeed the case, the disarmament

achievement of New START, while statistically significant (a 30 percent reduction from the maximum number of allowed deployed warheads under the 2002 Moscow Treaty),⁸ does not necessarily imply that either side believes that total disarmament is either desirable or possible. It might indicate the opposite to be true.

The Tension between Disarmament and Deterrence

Determining the success of arms control in general and disarmament in particular is not as simple as counting warheads. Of major concern is the fact that while the administration may be leaving enough weapons in place to ensure nuclear deterrence in the interim period, its stated goals and actual policies regarding those weapons might weaken deterrence. This threatens to create a situation where reducing the number of nuclear weapons might make their use more, rather than less, likely.

Obama has repeatedly acknowledged that global disarmament will take many years to achieve (“perhaps not in my lifetime”).⁹ Both Obama and the bi-partisan authors of the *Wall Street Journal* articles have called for gradual reductions in force size and reliance on nuclear weapons, while emphasizing the need for maintaining effective nuclear deterrence until disarmament is accomplished. This approach stands to weaken deterrence in two ways. First, insofar as deterrence between two similarly armed nuclear powers is stabilized by sufficient weapons and redundant delivery systems to ensure a second strike (i.e., the conditions of mutual assured destruction), there is likely to be a point on the road to total disarmament where these conditions would no longer hold. That is, if a certain number of weapons (estimated to be between 311 and 1000 in the articles cited above) can lead to stable deterrence, and zero weapons ostensibly make deterrence unnecessary, there is a number between them where deterrence might no longer prevail, and a first strike could become an appealing option because of the real or perceived ability to inflict a decisive nuclear strike (including counter-force) on the other side with no (or limited) perceived danger of suffering nuclear retaliation. This does not mean that at that point one side will necessarily choose to strike first. For example, the current US-Russian relationship is marked by nowhere near the enmity and hostility that prevailed during the Cold War. But what of other nuclear states (or non-states)? What if North Korea no longer feared a US nuclear response?

What if India and/or Pakistan no longer feared the other's second strike? Under these circumstances, the temptation to use nuclear force once might prove irresistible.

It is unclear how supporters of total disarmament intend to avoid the dangerous point where the sides have the greatest incentive to strike first. In addition, the clandestine cache problem Kahn described appears nearly as unresolvable today as it did in 1960. Without satisfactory answers to these questions, total disarmament appears to be an empty, if politically valuable, slogan or a possibly reckless, if idealistic, dream because it potentially weakens deterrence, encourages hiding weapons, and in the worst case incentivizes nuclear first use.

The second and more immediate threat to deterrence by the administration's well publicized, combined approach of moving away from nuclear weapons and simultaneously depending on them for deterrence stems from the mixed messages it sends to potential challengers. In order for deterrence, nuclear or otherwise, to be as reliably effective as possible, its threat needs to be both unambiguous and beyond doubt. And while two of the "key objectives" of the NPR relate to strategic and regional deterrence, another is "reducing the role of U.S. nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy." The explicit move away from reliance on nuclear weapons, and the new self-imposed limitations regarding their use described in the NPR make it difficult not to conclude that the United States is less willing to use nuclear weapons today than it has been in the past. That might sound like a step in the direction of greater safety and sanity, but how does that stance figure in the calculations of potential challengers? With such mixed messages, conventional war and nuclear miscalculation, as well as greater nuclear proliferation, could become more likely.

Because numerous US allies rely on American nuclear weapons for their own protection (e.g., the NATO countries, Japan, perhaps the Gulf states in the future, if not now), the perception of American nuclear hesitancy could embolden those states' enemies, which in turn might lead those states to seek nuclear self-reliance. For example, China might conclude that the US is no longer willing to risk nuclear war to defend Taiwan. In this situation, not only would a Chinese invasion of Taiwan become more likely, so would Taiwan's development of its own nuclear deterrent, which it has explored in the past, to the dismay of successive American administrations.¹⁰

Additionally, the American move away from nuclear weapons could strengthen the perception that it is becoming easier to deter the United States with nuclear weapons. Regional competitors like Iran and North Korea (as opposed to more global competitors like Russia and to a lesser extent China) already seem to believe that development of nuclear weapons will grant them greater freedom of action in their spheres of influence. This is the same conclusion reportedly reached by an Indian general after observing Operation Desert Storm in 1991: “The Gulf War emphasized again that nuclear weapons are the ultimate coin of power. In the final analysis, they [coalition members] could go in because the United States had nuclear weapons and Iraq didn’t.”¹¹

Detering Iran

In the specific case of Iran, there are two different, though related, deterrence scenarios to consider. The first concerns a future scenario where the US might need to deter a nuclear Iran from employing its nuclear weapons. In theory this is the more straightforward scenario, though it critically depends on the United States’ ability to clarify convincingly that an Iranian nuclear attack on another state (i.e., not just on the United States or its forces) would result in an American nuclear counter-attack.¹² A potentially beneficial indirect effect of sending such a message, even now, is that it could encourage an Iranian conclusion that the anticipated benefits of nuclear weapons are not worth the investment.¹³

The second, and more difficult, scenario focuses on the current situation – namely, deterring Iran from pursuing nuclear weapons in the first place. Here the American message is noteworthy for its obfuscation. On the one hand, the United States appears to be asserting the “right” to threaten non-NPT compliant states with its nuclear weapons as a disincentive to nuclearization. On the other hand, it makes clear that the range of circumstances under which the United States would use nuclear weapons is quite narrow and does not include nuclearization itself.

In the NPR, the section “Reducing the Role of U.S. Nuclear Weapons” reformulates America’s longstanding “negative security assurance” by declaring that “the United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and in compliance with their nuclear

non-proliferation obligations.”¹⁴ Elsewhere in the document, the NPR makes clear that the United States sees Iran (and North Korea) as being in noncompliance with its NPT obligations. This creates the appearance that the United States is using the threat of nuclear weapons to convince states that they should foreswear nuclear weapons themselves. The document seems to imply that the United States could use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against even a non-nuclear, but nuclearizing, Iran:

This revised assurance is intended to underscore the security benefits of adhering to and fully complying with the NPT and persuade non-nuclear weapon states party to the Treaty to work with the United States and other interested parties to adopt effective measures to strengthen the non-proliferation regime.¹⁵

This is a powerful message, but the actual picture is not what it seems initially. First, such a message could be understood to reinforce the logic of nuclear acquisition mentioned above, namely, that the only way to avoid an American diktat is by deterring the United States with nuclear weapons. Second, the NPR rather unhelpfully (in this context) elucidates the circumstances whereby the United States would – and by implication, would not – rely on nuclear weapons vis-à-vis states like Iran:

In the case of countries not covered by this assurance – states that possess nuclear weapons and states not in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations – there remains a narrow range of contingencies in which U.S. nuclear weapons may still play a role in deterring a conventional or CBW attack against the United States or its allies and partners. The United States is therefore not prepared at the present time to adopt a universal policy that the “sole purpose” of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack on the United States and our allies and partners, but will work to establish conditions under which such a policy could be safely adopted.

Yet this does not mean that our willingness to use nuclear weapons against countries not covered by the new assurance has in any way increased. Indeed, the United States wishes to stress that it would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in

extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners.¹⁶

In other words, one page after apparently linking nuclear targeting to NPT noncompliance, the NPR makes it clear that nuclear proliferation alone is far from being enough to lead to actual or threatened use of US nuclear weapons. Explicitly limiting the scenarios in which the United States would use nuclear weapons, and thereby reducing their value, arguably serves the disarmament agenda of the United States. However, doing so also weakens the power of the “negative security assurance” by making it clear that proliferation itself is not sufficient cause for American nuclear threats or attack.

This inconsistency is consistent with the often contradictory stance the US has taken regarding any use of force to prevent Iranian development and deployment of nuclear weapons.¹⁷ This is not to say that the United States should use the unambiguous threat of nuclear attack against Iran to keep it from crossing the nuclear threshold; the issue of what deterrent threats the United States can and should use is another matter. However, if the United States wishes to deter Iran from acquiring a military nuclear capability, the prevailing lack of clarity leaves far too much to the assessment and judgment of decision makers in Tehran.

Potential Effects on the NPT

These various scenarios, where friends and foes alike see value in, and little obvious downside to, developing nuclear weapons, can have compound effects on proliferation. First, as is evident in much of the discussion regarding the likely regional effects of Iranian nuclearization, states developing nuclear weapons are likely to lead other states to conclude that they need them as well. Second, the only way for most non-nuclear states to become nuclear states is either by withdrawing from or violating the NPT. In other words, even as Obama has called for the strengthening of the NPT, the administration’s policy of denuclearization and its related mixed deterrent messages stand to make the NPT weaker while turning the goal of nuclear disarmament on its head.

Other American policies could also weaken the NPT. The 2008 signing and Congressional approval of the Indo-US Civilian Nuclear Agreement,

made possible by the passing of the Henry J. Hyde United States-India Peaceful Atomic Energy Cooperation Act of 2006 (“The Hyde Act”), established a framework in which the United States would conduct civilian nuclear trade with India, even though the latter is not an NPT signatory and is an overt nuclear power. The guidelines of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) forbid the NPT-recognized nuclear weapons states (the US, Russia, China, France, and the UK) from transferring nuclear materials or technology to non-recognized nuclear weapons states (or to aspiring nuclear weapons states). The agreement was signed by George W. Bush, and essentially inherited by the Obama administration (though then-Senator Obama voted for both the Hyde Act, which he attempted to amend, and the agreement itself).

Regardless of the political wisdom of the agreement – it allows for the United States to engage with a nuclear India and to sell it expensive nuclear technologies – it undoubtedly created the impression that the American (and NSG) commitment to the NPT is subjectively conditional, and it weakened the mix of carrots and sticks that are intended to impel states to sign and comply with the NPT in the first place. For all of its shortcomings, the NPT remains the most important international legal instrument that restrains states from acquiring nuclear weapons. The Indo-US Civilian Nuclear Agreement and its approval by the NSG stand to make the NPT less effective. Recent reports of a similar though less formal agreement between the US and Israel,¹⁸ if true, and possibly even if not, are likely to reinforce the undermining effects of the US-India agreement on the NPT.

Conclusion

The well intentioned disarmament agenda of the Obama administration is thus on a collision course – with itself. While the administration’s disarmament activity might succeed in the relatively short term in advancing its primary goal – reduction of the size of the world’s largest nuclear arsenals – the way it is proceeding carries the danger of less effective and less stable deterrence, ultimately greater nuclear proliferation among friends and foes, and an overall weakening of the NPT.

A more productive disarmament approach would acknowledge explicitly the difficulties, if not impossibility, in achieving total disarmament, and build from there. The NPT’s initial and longstanding success has been

based on its creation of a successful mix of incentives to compliance and disincentives to nuclear weapons development. Perhaps what is required now is an update to the NPT regime that recalibrates that mix so that both its enticements and its punishments are more compelling. A revised NPT regime could reflect the recognition that in the more than forty years since its original formulation, other states have become nuclear weapons states, while including measures to induce those states to renounce that status.

The administration's emphasis on nuclear security and the limitation of fissile material production is well placed and should be expanded, as should states' individual and collaborative efforts to develop means and methods of verification that could, in theory, someday address the issue of the clandestine cache. Until then, however, and as long as deterrence remains a primary function of its nuclear weapons, the United States must ensure that its deterrence efforts are consistent and unequivocal. To do so, it needs to spell out its willingness – though of course not eagerness – to use force, including nuclear force, when unacceptably challenged. The 2010 NPR does this to some extent, but in trying to balance its many goals it also dedicated a great deal of attention to cases where the United States would not use nuclear weapons or “may” rely on them.¹⁹ Thomas Schelling, writing in the same year Kahn wrote about the infeasibility of total disarmament, observed, “To say that one may act is to say that one may not, and to say this is to confess that one has kept the power of decision – that one is not committed.”²⁰ “May” has no place in a strategy aimed at deterring potential challengers.

This is not to say that the United States should change its strategy by loudly and overtly threatening other states. On the contrary, the US must use great caution to avoid creating the perception that American nuclear weapons are a tool for coercion and intimidation rather than deterrence. That mistaken perception could also lead to an arms control backfire, as it would create the understanding that states need to arm themselves with nuclear weapons to deter the US.

The balance between all of these various measures is delicate, and striking it is likely to take many years – perhaps not in our lifetimes – but it offers the eventual possibility of more significant arms control, including disarmament, and more effective and stable deterrence than does the current course.

Notes

- 1 “*Arms Control Today* 2008 Presidential Q&A: President-elect Barack Obama,” *Arms Control Today* 38 (December 2008), <http://www.armscontrol.org/2008election>.
- 2 Paul Lettow, “President Reagan’s Legacy and U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy,” Lecture at the Heritage Foundation, July 20, 2006.
- 3 George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn authored: “A World Free of Nuclear Weapons,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2007; “Toward a Nuclear-Free World,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 15, 2008; and “How to Protect Our Nuclear Deterrent,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 19, 2010.
- 4 Presumably steps towards realization of these goals were already underway at the time of the speech.
- 5 The White House, National Security Strategy, May 2010, http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf; and US Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, <http://www.defense.gov/npr/docs/2010%20Nuclear%20Posture%20Review%20Report.pdf>.
- 6 Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), pp. 5-6.
- 7 Gary Schaub, Jr. and James Forsyth, Jr., “An Arsenal We Can All Live With,” *New York Times*, May 23, 2010; Bruce Blair et al., “Smaller and Safer,” *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 5 (September/October 2010).
- 8 International Institute for Strategic Studies, “New START Provides for Significant Arms Cuts,” *IISS Strategic Comments*, Volume 16, Comment 13, April 2010, <http://www.iiss.org/EasySiteWeb/getresource.axd?AssetID=39163&type=full&servicetype=Attachment>.
- 9 “Remarks by President Barack Obama,” Hradcany Square, Prague, Czech Republic, April 5, 2009.
- 10 See William Burr, ed., *The Nuclear Vault: The U.S. and Taiwan’s Nuclear Program, 1976-1980*, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 221, June 15, 2007, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ebb221/index.htm>.
- 11 Quoted in Keith B. Payne, Statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, *Why Nuclear Weapons are Critical for U.S. Security*, Hearing, March 31, 1998, http://www.fas.org/spp/starwars/congress/1998_h/s980331kp.htm.
- 12 This zero-tolerance approach is a matter of policy. Of course the United States could limit its deterrent policy to protecting itself and its forces only, but in all likelihood that would lead to greater regional nuclear proliferation.
- 13 At the same time, such a threat, depending on its execution and the prism through which it is viewed on the receiving end, could lead to the opposite conclusion as well. That is, a strong deterrent message would not guarantee a good outcome. However, the presentation of a weak deterrence message is more likely to lead to an undesirable result.
- 14 US Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, p. 15.

- 15 US Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, p. 15.
- 16 US Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, p. 16.
- 17 See Jonathan Schachter, Emily B. Landau, and Ephraim Asculai, "Muddling the Iran Issue," *INSS Insight* No. 177, April 26, 2010, <http://www.inss.org.il/publications.php?cat=21&incat=&read=3969>.
- 18 "Report: Secret Document Affirms U.S.-Israel Nuclear Partnership," *Haaretz*, July 7, 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/report-secret-document-affirms-u-s-israel-nuclear-partnership-1.300554>.
- 19 US Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, p. 15.
- 20 Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 187.