

Obama's Nuclear Disarmament Agenda: Blurred Aims and Priorities

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Introduction

In his April 5, 2009 Prague speech, newly-inaugurated President Barack Obama set forth his vision for moving towards a world without nuclear weapons.¹ With this speech, Obama intended to underscore his seriousness of purpose as far as turning a disarmament agenda that was gaining ground at unofficial levels – sparked and inspired by the op-eds written by George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn in January 2007 and again in January 2008 – into official US policy.² This speech set in motion the series of arms control and disarmament events that occurred over the course of 2009-2010, with the most prominent milestones taking place in rapid succession during the first six months of 2010: agreement with Russia on New START; release of the US Nuclear Posture Review; the Nuclear Security Summit; and the May 2010 NPT Review Conference.

Through his adoption of a new agenda for nuclear arms control and disarmament, Obama was determined to demonstrate that the US was serious in its commitment to disarmament according to Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Building on the logic set forth by Shultz et al in their articles, a principal rationale of this agenda was that due to the very real fear of nuclear weapons finding their way to terrorist organizations, nuclear arsenals must be reduced and secured. On one level this is rather straightforward: with fewer existing nuclear weapons, the chance of nuclear technologies and components finding their way to terrorists is curtailed. However, disarmament in and of itself does not solve the problems of large stocks of enriched uranium in the hands of many

states or nuclear know-how in the minds of scientists, which are major sources of concern regarding the possibility of nuclear or radiological capabilities being leaked to terrorists.

A second important driving force behind the disarmament agenda embraced by Obama relied on a more indirect logic. The idea was that renewed and enhanced commitment of the nuclear states to Article VI was necessary in order to grant greater legitimacy to determined US efforts to confront emerging nuclear proliferators, thereby increasing these efforts' prospects of success.³ Ostensibly the nuclear state parties to the NPT have an obligation to demonstrate their own intention to fulfill their NPT commitment to work towards nuclear disarmament, in order to legitimately make demands of other states that were violating their NPT commitment to remain non-nuclear. Obama's specific concerns were of course Iran's nuclear advances and North Korea's open nuclear defiance. In short, the US wanted to take the sting out of the "double standards" charge that it was facing from many of the non-nuclear weapons states parties to the NPT.

The essay that follows addresses this indirect rationale for advancing nuclear disarmament, which hinges on the perceived need to overcome the double standards accusations in order to improve the prospects of success of US efforts to stem proliferation. It then assesses the implications of the new disarmament agenda for three major issues: US nuclear arms control and nonproliferation priorities; specific efforts to confront Iran; and attitudes towards Israel in the nuclear realm.

The Dubious Logic of the Obama Agenda

While Obama's disarmament agenda speaks of the great importance of moving towards a world free of nuclear weapons, the urgency attributed to this goal is clearly a function of the perceived danger of nuclear leakage and nuclear proliferation to dangerous states and non-state actors. Indeed, if today's global nuclear situation (even including North Korea's current small cache of plutonium) could be reliably contained and maintained, it is hard to imagine that the goal of total nuclear disarmament would be so passionately embraced by the US or any other current nuclear state. Moreover, although the overall aim of the disarmament agenda adopted by Obama is undoubtedly laudable, it is weakened by its own underlying rationale: namely, the perceived need to neutralize the double standards

argument as an essential step to deal more forcefully with potentially dangerous proliferators. The logic of this position is not wholly convincing, for a number of reasons.

First, in light of the significant steps that both the US and Russia have taken in the direction of nuclear reductions since the height of the Cold War, the double standards argument is of questionable persuasiveness. As far as the two nuclear superpowers are concerned, it is simply not the case that they have not made significant movement in the direction of disarmament, as promised in the NPT. From the tens of thousands of nuclear weapons in the hands of these two states at the height of the Cold War, the quantities have dropped significantly, to number approximately 22,000 today. While this process has been underway for much time and the stockpiles undoubtedly remain too large, the reductions that have been made – and the stability established – are nevertheless a notable achievement.

Ironically, Obama's own contribution to this effort so far does not appear of a dramatically different order of magnitude than the incremental progress of the past few decades. While much time and energy was invested in efforts over the course of 2009-2010 – New START, the Nuclear Security Summit, and the “successful” (as it were) 2010 NPT Review Conference – there have been only modest results in nuclear disarmament terms. The New START treaty is probably the most concrete achievement so far, but the agreed-upon reductions are not revolutionary and the ratification process was long and arduous. And although Obama made US-Russian agreement on New START part of his disarmament agenda, in fact it was a continuation of previous efforts: the previous START treaty expired on December 5, 2009, which demanded its renegotiation and renewal. The administration emphasized that without a treaty in force, verification mechanisms were not in place.

But more importantly, the link between a nuclear disarmament agenda and an enhanced ability to confront dangerous proliferation has not been established. There is no indication that any legitimacy gained through a demonstrated commitment to equality in the nuclear realm is critical for more effective dealing with Iran, or that the lofty disarmament goals and events impress Iran or North Korea to relate more seriously to the US now that it has “cleaner” hands.⁴ The Obama administration's demonstrated commitment to disarmament – and effort to establish a basis to refute the

double standards charge – has thus not earned itself greater legitimacy or improved its ability to deal with dangerous nuclear proliferators in any noticeable manner.

While it could be argued that the new US approach might help gain the support of additional non-nuclear states for its efforts directed against Iran and North Korea, in and of itself this kind of legitimacy has little to no bearing on actual efforts to curb these states' nuclear ambitions. The problems that have been encountered in this regard lie elsewhere. In the case of Iran, for example, lack of success in confronting its nuclear activities over the past eight years is better explained by the lack of international coordination, cooperation, and determination among the states that have taken it upon themselves to address the issue – namely, the *primarily nuclear* P5+1. The issues that hinder progress stem from conflicting economic and strategic interests among these powers.

These difficulties have been further exacerbated by insufficient understanding in the West about how to encourage Iran to be serious about negotiating, especially when Iran seems to gain much more – without paying too high a price – with its tactic of playing for time. In fact, if there is a case to be made that the US needs more legitimacy in its efforts to confront Iran, it would have nothing to do with the double standards issue, rather with the legitimacy that the other nuclear states could bestow upon the US to lead this process. Yet what interests the latter has little to do with disarmament credentials – what they want is for the US to take their national interests and other concerns into account. This has played out very clearly since 2006 with regard to the sanctions dynamic directed against Iran. The common background to these problems is the growing shadow of doubt whether the US even wants to take the lead in confronting Iran.

Nonproliferation Priorities

The questionable logic underlying the new approach is especially problematic given the impact the administration's disarmament agenda has had on its nonproliferation policies and order of priorities. While the nuclear states certainly have an obligation to uphold their commitment to work towards disarmament, the unfortunate result of the administration's new emphasis on "across the board disarmament" has been, in practice, a problematic shift in its nonproliferation priorities, i.e., the preference for

broad multilateral treaties over the confrontation of actual proliferators. When the administration discusses its nuclear arms control and nonproliferation goals, the need to confront Iran and North Korea is not even included on the agenda.

This was starkly apparent in the arms control agenda presented by US Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance Rose Gottemoeller, when she addressed the First Committee of the UN General Assembly in early October 2010. After praising the steps already taken – the Nuclear Posture Review, New START, the Nuclear Security Summit, and the NPT RevCon – Gottemoeller proceeded to delineate “the elements of the US arms control and nonproliferation agenda.” She talked about the New START Treaty, CTBT, CWC, BWC, FMCT, and Space Policy; lastly, she spoke briefly about the next steps. But Iran and North Korea were not mentioned as part of what was specifically defined as an arms control *and nonproliferation* agenda, even though there is no more burning proliferation challenge than stopping these two dangerous proliferators.⁵ Within the new arms control framework, Iran is accorded significantly lower priority than the other disarmament goals.

While the aim of an enhanced disarmament policy is to make it easier to confront determined proliferators, the wisdom of the US putting the weight of its nonproliferation agenda behind broader disarmament efforts – ratification of international treaties like the CTBT, and its own commitment to nuclear disarmament with Russia – at a time when dangerous nuclear proliferators are marching forward, is questionable. These proliferators, which pose the most acute threat to the nonproliferation regime today, compounded by the threat they pose to stability in their respective regional environments, are not waiting on the sidelines while the US pursues its own disarmament goals.

Confronting Iran

For the Obama administration to discuss an arms control and nonproliferation agenda without highlighting first and foremost the urgent need to stop the actual nuclear proliferation in Iran and North Korea is problematic in terms of both the future of the nonproliferation regime itself and the immediate dangers these proliferators pose to Northeast Asia, the Middle East, and beyond. If Iran becomes a nuclear state, the blow to the nonproliferation

regime is likely to be devastating. The message that states can cheat and lie their way to a nuclear weapon will significantly devalue the NPT. Surely the dangers associated with Iran becoming a nuclear state are vastly more concrete and severe than anything that would result from a postponement of US ratification of the CTBT, even by several years.

To be sure, the problem is not that the administration is not devoting time and energy to the challenges of Iran and North Korea.⁶ Indeed, with regard to Iran in particular, the administration is – albeit slowly – carving out a more forceful approach to propel Iran to address Western concerns about its nuclear advances seriously. The sanctions agreed upon in June-July 2010 – both in the framework of the UN Security Council, and unilaterally, in the wake of the UN decision – are testimony to these serious and determined US efforts and to the relentless activity by outgoing Treasury Department Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Stuart Levey.⁷

Yet while the steps taken by the administration are themselves highly commendable, the problem is that both Iran and North Korea are not conceptually integrated into Obama's disarmament and nonproliferation agenda. This lapse is clear from documents such as Gottemoeller's that spell out the agenda without reference to these proliferators. This reflects a problematic order of priorities, and more importantly, a lack of coherence in the overall approach.

One could legitimately ask why this matters. If the US is pursuing broader disarmament goals while at the same time directing energy to stop Iran, why does it matter that Iran (or North Korea) is not conceptually integrated into the nonproliferation agenda as such? The first answer is that there is a simple issue of allocation of time and energy. If the administration pursues both goals simultaneously, it means that nonproliferation resources are split, rather than focused more clearly on the top priority: stopping the most urgent proliferation challenges emanating from Iran and North Korea.

A second indication that the lack of conceptual coherence is significant is an example from the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) that was released in April 2010. Through the NPR the Obama administration sought to underscore its disarmament agenda by limiting the scenarios in which the US might consider use of nuclear weapons. One manifestation of this goal was to clarify the nature of the negative security assurances that the US granted to non-nuclear states. In particular the US wanted to underscore

that it would not use nuclear weapons even in response to a chemical or biological attack from a non-nuclear state.

But the administration went one step further in the NPR and used it as a platform for broadcasting a message of isolation to Iran. To this end, it added a caveat to the negative security assurances formulated in the NPR: it clarified that these would not be extended to non-nuclear states that were not in compliance with their international NPT obligations. In other words, the assurances would not cover countries like Iran. Thus a message was directed to Iran that it would be preferable for this state to comply with its NPT commitment and obligations. However, this message is incorporated in a document on US nuclear policy, rather than its arms control/disarmament agenda. In conceptual terms it signals that in this case Iran was being integrated into US thinking on nuclear issues through the nuclear deterrence door, rather than via a strengthened nuclear nonproliferation policy.

This conceptual confusion raises some serious questions. Specifically with regard to Iran, the NPR suggests that perhaps at some level the US has given up on trying to actually stop this proliferator. Perhaps the US may be focusing energies not on stopping Iran, rather on isolating and deterring an (unstoppable) nuclearizing Iran. This theory is corroborated by US efforts over the past year and a half to bolster missile defenses in the Arab Gulf states, and gain regional support for isolating and pressuring Iran. Another challenge concerns the implicit message to much less advanced nuclear proliferators such as Syria, which has not yet been found to be in clear noncompliance by the IAEA. Will the administration avoid making this country a top nonproliferation concern as well? Syria has refused to allow IAEA inspectors to reenter the site bombed by Israel in 2007 since the summer of 2008, when suspicious material was found by the IAEA at the site. Without a strong nonproliferation agenda that focuses on actual proliferators, a forceful reaction to Syria is not a clearly defined priority of the administration's nonproliferation policy.

The lack of a coherent strategy in the realm of nuclear nonproliferation implies that while attempting to advance a disarmament agenda, the US seems to be losing sight of the fact that the key rationale of this agenda was to strengthen its hand in stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

As noted in the *Wall Street Journal* articles, the goal was to keep the most dangerous weapons ever invented out of the most dangerous hands.⁸

The final reason why attention must be directed to conceptual issues is that the global treaties that are at the heart of Obama's disarmament agenda and the specific challenge of Iran's nuclear proliferation bring into play two different understandings and traditions of nuclear arms control. Disarmament directs attention to the weapons as such (leaving the state outside the equation), whereas Iran's challenge brings into play the question of inter-state relations and the severe threat that Iran poses to the Middle East and beyond. As such, with its strong embrace of disarmament logic, the administration has elevated the "focus on weapons" understanding of arms control, at the expense of the "focus on inter-state context" logic that must also be included when dealing with nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. One problematic corollary has been a growing tendency in the international debate, at both official and non-official levels, to raise questions about Israel in the context of discussions on Iran, drawing legitimacy from an across-the-board "focus on weapons" arms control logic.

Attitudes towards Israel in the Nuclear Realm

The Obama administration's new arms control priorities have had specific implications for Israel. Elsewhere in this volume Yair Evron explores the implications of Obama's new dedication to nuclear nonproliferation from Israel's point of view, arguing that Israel should demonstrate greater commitment to the NPT and global nonproliferation aims.⁹ Here attention is directed to how the adoption of the US disarmament agenda has introduced a new complication in US relations with Israel. Reconciling the long term US commitment to uphold Israel's security and ensure its qualitative edge (in light of Israel's unique security predicament) with the disarmament imperative that the administration has taken upon itself has become a more difficult balancing act than in the past, with significant implications for Israel.

How the Obama administration has defined its priorities in the realm of nuclear arms control was clearly evident in the confusion over the 2010 NPT Review Conference (RevCon) final document. While prior to the conference the US had lowered the bar with regard to what would

be considered a successful outcome – specifically decoupling it from the achievement of a consensus document – the end result proved something different. Ultimately, achieving a consensus document was more important to the administration than mentioning explicitly that Iran was in noncompliance with its safeguard obligations.

What is puzzling is that there is no doubt that the US *wanted* to single out Iran. This was made quite clear in Secretary of State Clinton's emphatic opening speech at the RevCon, where she severely criticized Iran and Ahmadinejad's approach and said that Iran is the "only country represented in this hall that has been found by the IAEA Board of Governors to be currently in noncompliance with its nuclear safeguards obligations – the only one."¹⁰ The US was also opposed to singling out Israel, evidenced by strong statements issued by the administration almost immediately after the conference was adjourned.¹¹ Moreover, in their meeting in early July, Obama reiterated to Netanyahu the US commitment to Israel's strategic edge. Nevertheless, gaining a consensus document took precedence in US policy decisions, and carried the day at the RevCon.

The next expression of confusion in the US approach came surrounding the annual IAEA conference in September. This time it centered on the idea of a conference on a weapons of mass destruction free zone (WMDFZ) for the Middle East, which according to a clause included in the NPT RevCon final document is tentatively scheduled for 2012. Before the RevCon, it seemed the US was resisting pressure by Egypt to alter its outlook and accept an agenda that focused solely on Israel and the nuclear realm.¹² Since the final document was formulated, however, the US has signaled its willingness to help realize the idea of a WMDFZ conference – or at least not to actively obstruct it. In its attempt to dissuade states from supporting an Arab resolution at the IAEA conference calling for Israel to join the NPT, the US argued that if this resolution were to pass, it would distance Israel even further from the idea of the conference in 2012. This tactical use by administration officials of the conference proposal revealed that the US was lending implicit support to the idea itself.

The administration has set itself up for pressure from other states with regard to its position on Israel due to its rhetorical support for the "equality claim" in the nuclear realm, as a function of its disarmament agenda. Expressions of this new and self-made predicament – "normative

entrapment,” as it were – are likely to continue to play out with regard to the idea of the 2012 WMDFZ conference.

More important, the upshot of the administration’s attempt to balance the longstanding US commitment to Israel’s security with the newly embraced commitment to global nuclear disarmament is a lack of clear direction in its policy. Serious questions about how far the administration might be willing to go in allowing itself to be pressured on the issue of Israel in the future cannot be avoided. What are the administration’s red lines when it comes to demands by other states that concern Israel’s nuclear policy? How far will the US be willing to go in terms of its own interests, for the sake of confronting pressure from other states in this regard? The questions come into sharp focus against the backdrop of continued Iranian attempts to “push the envelope.” In October 2010, Iran set new preconditions for negotiating with the West; one of their demands was for the West to give its opinion on Israel’s nuclear posture. This predicament is likely to become more acute as 2012 approaches.

Conclusion

The US administration has embraced a worthy goal – working to reduce nuclear arsenals – without working through its implications. It has based its approach on a shaky rationale, and failed to integrate all of the implications into a comprehensive approach that would help generate more clear-cut and effective nonproliferation policies.

While advancing the goal of a nuclear-free world is admirable, the interim period demands an interim logic, and close attention must be paid to aligning all the relevant components in a coherent and convincing strategic posture. Taking into account the different traditions and logics of nuclear arms control is useful for this purpose. Most importantly, the “focus on weapons” logic of the global disarmament treaties must be confronted with the “focus on inter-state context” logic that stems from the superpowers’ own arms control experience during the Cold War, and has been incorporated in some of the regional initiatives, such as Nuclear Weapons Free Zones (NWFZ). While states have an interest to control the spread of nuclear weapons, they cannot ignore the fact that nuclear weapons also have considerable strategic value. The tension that results

from these opposing logics must be squarely recognized and dealt with in any attempt to advance a nuclear disarmament agenda.

Notes

- 1 See: http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered/.
- 2 George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons," *Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2007, and "Toward a Nuclear-Free World," *Wall Street Journal*, January 15, 2008. On the crystallization of and rationale behind the new disarmament agenda that was launched by these articles, see Emily B. Landau and Noam Ophir, "Unraveling the New Nuclear Disarmament Agenda: Between Vision and Reality," *Strategic Assessment* 11, no. 1 (2008): 60-67.
- 3 "While I know [that the goal of a world without nuclear weapons] won't be met soon, pursuing it provides the legal and moral foundation to prevent the proliferation and eventual use of nuclear weapons," Obama's commencement address at the New Economic School, Moscow, July 7, 2009.
- 4 In fact, and notwithstanding the disarmament-related momentum, in October 2010 Iran's ambassador to the UN blasted the US for spending money on modernizing its nuclear arsenal in contradiction to its claims to be working to achieve nuclear disarmament. *Press TV*, October 30, 2010.
- 5 See the text of Gottemoeller's remarks at <http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/2010/148648.htm>. Similarly, a document posted on the website of the Center for Arms Control and Disarmament in January 2010 cited the Obama administration's arms control: only the ninth (and last) point related to the need for successful negotiations to stop Iran and North Korea. See "Obama at One Year: 'A' for Transforming Nuclear Policy, Incomplete for Execution," January 19, 2010, http://www.armscontrolcenter.org/audience/media/011910_obama_at_one_year_nuclear_policy_execution/.
- 6 Documents exposed through Wikileaks in late November 2010 have driven home the extent of concern and preoccupation of the Obama administration with nuclear activities in Iran and North Korea.
- 7 For a recent assessment see William J. Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs, "Implementing Tougher Sanctions on Iran: A Progress Report," Statement before the House Foreign Relations Committee, December 1, 2010.
- 8 In the opening sentence of their January 15, 2008 op-ed, Shultz et al write: "The accelerating spread of nuclear weapons, nuclear know-how and nuclear material has brought us to a nuclear tipping point. We face a very real possibility that the deadliest weapons ever invented could fall into dangerous hands." In the 2007 article, the four authors advocated US leadership in order to build consensus for reversing reliance on nuclear weapons globally, "as a vital contribution to preventing their proliferation into potentially dangerous hands."
- 9 Yair Evron, "Israel and the Nonproliferation Regime," pp. 119-26.
- 10 Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State, Remarks at the Review Conference

of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, The United Nations, NY, May 3, 2010. US Department of State website: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/05/141424.htm>.

- 11 Notable was the statement attributed to National Security Advisor Gen. James Jones that the singling out of Israel and especially the lack of mention of Iran's nuclear activities was "deplorable." See, for example, Mary Beth Sheridan, "At Nuclear Conference, U.S. Expects Little, Gains Little," *Washington Post*, May 31, 2010.
- 12 For assessments of the politics surrounding the RevCon see: Emily B. Landau, "2010 NPT RevCon: Opening Bids and Conflicting Agendas," *INSS Insight* No. 180, May 9, 2010, <http://www.inss.org.il/publications.php?cat=21&incat=&read=4011>, and Emily B. Landau, "2010 NPT RevCon: Final Results and Implications for Israel," *INSS Insight* No. 185, June 3, 2010, <http://www.inss.org.il/publications.php?cat=21&incat=&read=4113>.