
Nuclear Disarmament: Pipe Dream or Policy Objective?

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In a landmark speech in Prague in April 2009, US President Barack Obama committed the United States to seeking “the security of a world without nuclear weapons”. Obama then developed a bunch of initiatives and opportunities to help codify America’s new outlook on nuclear weapons. An immediate political objective was to sharpen the Administration’s case against Iran, including ensuring that the Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in May 2010 would not further weaken the centrality of that instrument. In the intervening period, Obama took the unusual step of chairing a special session of the UN Security Council devoted to nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, committed the United States to resuming the practice of negotiating nuclear reductions with Russia; foreshadowed a *Nuclear Posture Review (NPR)* that would align US declaratory policy with the President’s public rhetoric, and announced a special summit in Washington in April 2010 to address the issue of security of nuclear materials.

Against this background, the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University held an international conference on 26-27 August 2010 titled “Nuclear Disarmament: Pipe Dream or Policy Objective?” in order to gauge whether America’s new stance on nuclear weapons had proved manageable domestically and whether it had provoked any consequential debate in the other nuclear weapon states and those countries relying on extended nuclear deterrence assurances from the United States.

Any US consensus to lead by example will founder if other key players remain reluctant to embrace the objective in substantive ways. In this context it is to be expected that the United States in due course will be seeking hard commitments from the other states with respect to their nuclear forces and to zero tolerance of nuclear proliferation in order to sustain its domestic consensus to continue down the path of nuclear diminution. The United States, together with Russia, as owners of some 95 percent of the remaining nuclear weapons, will have to lead for some considerable time. But this process will stall long before they cease to have distinctively large arsenals if they lack confidence that nuclear diminution has become a shared enterprise.

The issue of getting to 'global zero' clearly cannot be decoupled from US domestic politics. As one of the conference speakers pointed out, interest and expertise in arms control in both houses of the US Congress and in the bureaucracy have diminished significantly since the end of the Cold War. Moreover, as demonstrated by the current ratification process for the 'New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) between the United States and Russia, bipartisanship in US domestic politics, even on foreign and security policy, has become much more elusive. New START provides for modest reductions in the ceilings for strategic nuclear forces set out in the Bush administration's 2002 'Moscow Treaty' with Russia.

The main purpose of New START was to rescue a substantial body of principles, protocols and procedures, mostly to do with verification, which had accumulated during the process of negotiating and implementing the Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty (SALT) and START agreements, predominantly ratified during Republican administrations. These were attached to START I which lapsed in December 2009. Simple ratification of New START was precluded by contrived concerns that it would inhibit US freedom to pursue ballistic missile defences and demands for funding for nuclear weapon support facilities additional to substantial increases the Obama administration had provided to support its commitment to a viable nuclear deterrent for as long as nuclear weapons existed. The outlook for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)—rejected by the Senate in 1999 – and an essential milestone on the President's near-term agenda has to be for an even tougher ratification battle, particularly as polling suggests that nuclear disarmament has not caught the imagination of the American public.

An equally important question is how the major powers Russia, China and India perceive the Obama initiative. The conference discussion revealed that, while Obama's vision had sparked considerable debate in these countries on the implications for their own security, there was no evidence of a supportive shift in official positions or public discussions on this subject. The bottom line in each case was that other states (the United States being the common denominator) had much to do before a substantive response would be warranted.

As the other nuclear superpower, Russia will play a pivotal role in any enduring process of nuclear diminution. However, as was stressed during the conference, Russia is the most forthright of all the major nuclear powers about the centrality of nuclear weapons to its security posture. Many Russian experts continue to see a strong correlation between a peerless nuclear status and the continued revival of the Russian Federation's national confidence and self-esteem from the depths that it had sunk to after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Russia will certainly remain strongly attached to the status of being America's necessary partner in the nuclear arms

control process but, on present indications, its raw attachment to being a nuclear superpower could become an inhibiting factor.

The Chinese view provided on this topic focussed on the broad question how the United States positioned China as a fellow nuclear weapon state. Moreover it also related the push for a nuclear-weapon-free world to the general role of nuclear weapons, ballistic missile defences and the priority the United States sought to assign to terrorist acquisition of nuclear weapons. It recalled China's resentment at the George W. Bush administration's 2002 *NPR* which listed China among seven mostly small and unsavoury regimes that could give rise to "nuclear contingencies". The Obama administration's 2010 *NPR* was acknowledged to be a significant improvement but is still deemed to fall short of China's expectations which include unqualified US acceptance of China's right to possess the capacity to deter the United States with nuclear weapons.

This expectation feeds into China's strenuous objections to US ballistic missile defence programs. China recognizes that the Obama administration has also moderated this program (in the European context at least) but, in China's eyes, it remains fundamentally unchanged and poses a threat to its nuclear deterrent. Similarly, Beijing is of the view that the United States continues to regard nuclear weapons as a versatile capability relevant to a range of contingencies beyond responding to the threat or use of nuclear weapons against the United States itself. This in turn, inclines China to rank the postures of the major nuclear weapon states as a greater danger than nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists, and to contend that the United States cannot lead this endeavour if it solely focuses on its own concerns.

A more favourable Chinese position on Obama's vision would depend on future steps including major reductions in US and Russian arsenals beyond the new START agreement, US ratification of the CTBT, the negotiation of a verifiable Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT), an end to the development of new nuclear warheads, and reliable restraints on ballistic missile defences.

The Indian perspective seems to be driven even more strongly by the intangibles of status and acceptance. India's perspective is informed by the view that it should always have ranked among the major players in the international system but eventually conceded that it had to develop nuclear weapons to be considered seriously for membership of the club of major powers. India deems its journey to be incomplete. It senses, for example, that China remains loath to recognise India as a fellow nuclear weapon state and that the other members of the nuclear club are similarly reluctant to offer India unqualified acceptance as an 'insider'.

While India's acquisition of nuclear weapons has not materially altered its long-standing promotion of nuclear disarmament, it is fiercely resistant to any imputations that, simply because it is a late-comer to the nuclear club, its capacity to behave responsibly has to be considered suspect or, at least, unproven. Suggestions that India should subscribe to some special set of equivalent undertakings are considered anathema. At the same time, allowing India a complete free pass is seen by many as corrosive of the NPT, the centrepiece of the international non-proliferation regime.

If the other nuclear weapon states have largely contained any excitement or concern about America's new determination to examine the possibility of nuclear abstinence, it has been harder for the states under the US nuclear umbrella to remain similarly inscrutable. With the drastic cuts in US nuclear arsenals after the Cold War and the rise of China in the Asia-Pacific, Obama's vision of 'Global Zero' raises significant issues for the consumers of US extended nuclear deterrence assurances.

In the past, nuclear weapons have been considered a compelling antidote to provocative and adventurous behaviour by large states and unchallenged as a means of limiting the effects of broader shifts in relative power. A core motive for the United States in offering extended nuclear deterrence in the first place was to dampen incentives in recipient countries to acquire their own nuclear forces. With some 30 recipients of US nuclear extended deterrence around the world, a loss of confidence in these assurances by just a fraction of them could well generate a proliferation surge substantially larger than anything the international community has had to manage to date. Moreover, the stress on the credibility of US extended nuclear deterrence assurances is likely to be greater in the Asia-Pacific than elsewhere and very difficult judgements lie ahead on just how nuclear weapons play into particular power balances in the region.

Japanese and South Korean views offered during the conference proceedings confirmed many of these concerns. In Japan's case, close consultations with the United States on the 2010 *NPR* resulted in Japanese satisfaction with the balance struck in that document between the requirements of credible extended nuclear deterrence and US nuclear non-proliferation objectives. The Japanese dilemma, however, is that the United States is currently resolved to press further down the road of nuclear diminution while Japan is conscious of a loss of its power relative to China. For some years, Japan has compensated for this loss by intensifying its security linkages with the United States and, at the same time, worrying about possible developments in Sino-US relations that Japan would see as 'decoupling' or the emergence of tensions between US interests in respect of China and its security obligations toward Japan. The conference also confirmed the fact that Japan's security community regards itself as a key stakeholder in America's nuclear posture and that elements within this community study US capabilities as though they were their own.

The outlook from South Korea was not dissimilar except that North Korea rather than China was depicted as the driving concern. There has been some surprise in South Korean security circles that the United States seemed determined to eliminate a core element of its power base. Some South Korean analysts questioned the feasibility of Obama's vision and even the merit of striving to achieve it, while also wondering about US resolve to support its deterrent commitments toward its East Asian allies.

Moreover, these reservations about the more direct security implications of regional developments and US policy settings are being overshadowed by South Korea's quest to secure the right to possess an indigenous capacity to manufacture fuel for civilian nuclear energy purposes. Seoul may be driven exclusively by considerations of long-term competitiveness in the international market for nuclear power plants. An alternative, or supplementary, consideration may well be a South Korean assessment that its longer-term interests require a degree of latency with respect to nuclear weapons closer to that already possessed by Japan.

Presentations on imbalances in conventional military capabilities and ballistic missile defence confirmed observations by other participants that these issues further cloud the prospect for substantive nuclear diminution and disarmament. America's conventional military superiority and its technological leadership on ballistic missile defence are useful, perhaps even necessary, advantages that the Obama administration has relied on to present nuclear diminution as safe and responsible. At the same time, worst-case thinking in Russia is still alive in respect of recent US interest in exploring a non-nuclear precision global strike capability that Russian commentators are portraying as a possible threat to their nuclear deterrent. From China's view, US conventional superiority has also contributed strongly to the current nuclear proliferation challenges posed by North Korea and Iran.

Both Russia and China zero in on ballistic missile defences as a capability driving them toward larger nuclear arsenals while it has a status in the United States that makes restraint all but impossible politically. Ballistic missile defences address such a diversity of security interests that the sort of constraints that Russia and China appear to desire will be very difficult to put in place.

The conference proceedings abundantly confirmed that the aspiration to eliminate nuclear weapons is bedevilled by a formidable array of difficulties, tensions and contradictions. It may be the case that continuing to whittle away at the more prominent features of the nuclear disarmament agenda, such as CTBT and FMCT, will gradually transform this sombre outlook. Certainly, we cannot be content to accept as wise or even as inescapable, basing our security on a capability that in the context of humankind is

powerful beyond purpose, a capability that violates our moral boundaries and the absorptive capacity of our environment.

In terms of future policy priorities, the conference highlighted the absence of a shared determination to contribute to the objective in practical ways. The preference to bask in the purity of one's commitment to an objective that is the responsibility of others to deliver remains widespread. The United States, with help from any and all quarters, has to find a way of getting the key players to declare nuclear disarmament to be a shared and imaginable objective. The United States in particular has to find ways of convincing others that it will take their interests and concerns into account. Equally, however, the others need to display some responsiveness to US interests, concerns and responsibilities and to qualify their approach to the major issues accordingly.

The other key powers in the international system, particularly the nuclear weapon states, cannot wait for the United States to erase all of their security concerns. This is not simply because they also possess nuclear weapons. It is also because they played a full part in creating the tangled mosaic of security challenges laced with nuclear capabilities that we now seek to unravel. These states are as much part of the problem as the United States, and they now need to become part of the solution.

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