
Seeking a Starting Point for Common Action Toward a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World

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In this article Senior Colonel Wang Zhongchun, Professor at National Defense University of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), provides a Chinese perspective on the prospects for a nuclear-weapons-free world.

Ever since the appearance of nuclear weapons more than six decades ago, the international community has made unremitting efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation and nuclear war, and to strive for nuclear disarmament. After the end of the Cold War, the possibility of global nuclear war has greatly diminished and the international community has looked forward to lasting peace. Unfortunately, however, since the late 1990s nuclear proliferation has become more and more complicated and grave. In particular, the combination of nuclear proliferation and terrorism poses an unprecedented threat to global security.

It was against this background that US President Barack Obama proposed to “establish a world without nuclear weapons” in his famous ‘Prague Speech’ on 5 April 2009. This was the first time that a US President made a clear statement that nuclear weapons should be destroyed globally, and that United States would take the lead in this endeavour. This US initiative immediately attracted attention all over the world.

The purpose of this article is to explore the reasons behind the rapid nuclear proliferation of the past decade and to offer a preliminary Chinese perspective on the goal of “establishing a world without nuclear weapons”.

The International Community's Efforts on Non-proliferation and Nuclear Disarmament

The appearance of nuclear weaponry is the result of the interaction between advancements in science and technology and the strategic demands of major powers. Enormous resources and efforts have been invested in the research and development of nuclear power, which unfortunately was first put into practice for the purpose of winning a war rather than for the benefit of human beings.

On 24 January 1946, Resolution No. 1 was passed by the newly established United Nations (UN) during its first assembly in London, the theme of which was to eradicate and limit the employment of nuclear weapons and other weapons of massive destruction, and to ensure the peaceful use of nuclear energy. On the occasion, nations also accepted the proposal put forward by United States, the United Kingdom and Canada to establish a UN Nuclear Energy Committee to act as an international management agency for nuclear energy. This committee could be regarded as the precursor of the international non-proliferation regime.

Shortly after that, the Cold War started and lasted for nearly half a century. As a result of a fierce arms race, the United States and the Soviet Union built up formidable nuclear arsenals, which could destroy the world several times. This development was accompanied by painstaking and time-consuming arms control negotiations. It cannot be denied that during the Cold War the United States and the Soviet Union controlled and even monopolised the major international efforts involving nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

In August 1967, the United States and the Soviet Union jointly presented a draft for a *Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty* (NPT), which was adopted by the 22nd UN Assembly. However, it is worthwhile to note that the main purpose of the United States' and Soviet Union's signing of this treaty was to codify the status of their respective large nuclear arsenal, which was partially the reason for China and France refusing to sign the treaty at that time.

In order to impede the spreading of a global arms race, the United Nations Assembly made the 1970s and 1980s the first and second "disarmament decade". Three special sessions of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament were held during this time calling on all the countries, especially the two nuclear superpowers, to take effective measures to stop the arms race.

The early post-Cold War years saw a number of achievements in the field of non-proliferation, including the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995 followed by the signing of the *Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty* (CTBT) in 1996. At about the same time, the United States and Russia succeeded in jointly pushing forward the denuclearisation of the Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan. All of these gains, in addition to the *Chemical Weapons Convention* (CWC) passed by UN Conference on Disarmament in Geneva in 1992 and the *Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention* (BTWC) signed during the Cold War, indicated that the international non-proliferation regime has been consolidated and strengthened.

Challenges to Global Nuclear Security

However, the favourable trend mentioned above did not endure. Instead, the trend became adverse in the late 1990s, and the objectives of international non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament were confronted with serious challenges.

The first challenge came from new countries pursuing nuclear weapons, which makes the arena of international nuclear postures more complicated and unstable. In South Asia, India and Pakistan carried out a series of nuclear explosions in May 1998, bringing the grave danger of a nuclear arms and missile race to the region. Even worse, a conventional military conflict between India and Pakistan may turn into a nuclear war.

In East Asia, North Korea conducted two nuclear experiments, on 9 October 2006 and 25 May 2009, and declared it would continue its nuclear experiments and intercontinental missile launch tests in spite of the resolutions of UN Security Council. In the Middle East, Iran still insists on implementing its “nuclear program”, rendering international mediation and sanctions fruitless. The emergence of new nuclear states has increased the probability of triggering a chain-reaction of nuclear programs among neighbouring countries. The reality that more and more countries may acquire the will to jump on the “nuclear bandwagon” seriously threatens the validity of the international non-proliferation regime and global nuclear security.

The second challenge is the hegemonic nuclear policy of the United States, which poses obstacles to international non-proliferation progress. In 1999, the US Senate refused to ratify the CTBT,¹ which made its entry into force essentially impossible. Further, in 2002 the United States unilaterally withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty² to clear away restrictions on its missile defence programs, and triggered a race both in strategic defence capabilities and in ways of defeating these capabilities. The United States employs “double standards” in its policy on nuclear non-proliferation: using sanctions, embargo and even military strikes against some countries, while tacitly consenting to and even patronising some other countries, which has seriously undermined the authority and validity of the nuclear non-proliferation regime rather than strengthened it. Moreover, the United States has not given up its nuclear weapons modernisation program, and continues the practice of vertical proliferation of nuclear weapon and technology.

¹ Nine more states (China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan and the United States) must ratify the CTBT before it can enter into force.

² The ABM treaty was signed by the United States and the Soviet Union on 26 May 1972 and came into effect on 3 October 1972. The treaty, which was intended to prevent the establishment of a nationwide defence or the creation of a base for deploying such a defence, was the cornerstone of strategic stability between the two nuclear superpowers.

Thirdly, the risk of nuclear proliferation is growing due to the fact that terrorist organisations and other non-state entities may obtain nuclear technology and weapons. It is obvious that the combination of nuclear proliferation and terrorism will bring unmeasurably disastrous consequences to human beings.

Fourthly, serious limitations exist in the current international non-proliferation regime. There is no doubt that the present nuclear non-proliferation regime, which includes the NPT, CTBT, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), still plays an important role in constraining nuclear proliferation. However, in light of on-going proliferation, the international non-proliferation regime is clearly not up to the challenge. The NPT, the cornerstone of the global non-proliferation regime, lacks coercive measures and feasible procedures. Moreover, the IAEA, which is authorised as the inspection agent for non-nuclear countries to ensure their nuclear energy, is unable to monitor and detect non-nuclear states' secret activities in the nuclear field. The challenge in respect of non-state entities and clandestine networks for the acquisition of sensitive materials and technology is even more formidable.

Obama's Initiative for a World without Nuclear Weapons

As mentioned at the beginning of the article, in April 2009 US President Barack Obama declared that the United States would take the lead in building a "nuclear-weapon-free world". Before the President's speech, four important political figures of the United States, former Secretaries George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger and former Senator Sam Nunn jointly published two articles in the *Wall Street Journal* (4 January 2007 and 15 January 2008) arguing for the objective of global nuclear disarmament.

Seeking establishment of a world without nuclear weapon is indeed a noble aspiration. However, the goal is so distant that we do not even have a clear idea of what the concept of a nuclear-weapon-free world exactly means. Does it mean that all nuclear states will completely destroy their nuclear weapons both deployed and stored, and that all non-nuclear weapon states will pledge not to develop nuclear weapons? If that is the case, how can we build confidence that nuclear weapons will not re-appear in the future?

To start with, we have to make a hypothesis that all countries will support the strategic goal of a nuclear-weapons-free world. The following discussion is based on this hypothesis.

It is not difficult to initiate the idea to "seek the establishment of a nuclear-weapons-free world". What is difficult is to determine the starting point for common action and to chart a course towards achieving this objective. We know that the realisation of this goal needs the combined efforts of all

member states of the international community, and that, unfortunately, their ideas on the approaches to the goal vary greatly.

In today's world, the global structure of nuclear power consists of a multi-level array: two nuclear superpowers, the United States and Russia; three medium-sized nuclear states, Britain, France and China; three de facto nuclear states, India, Pakistan and Israel. North Korea has just crossed the nuclear threshold, but has yet to be recognised as a nuclear weapons state by the international community. Finally, there are also a large number of non-nuclear weapon states. Thus, countries do not share a common starting point. Each country faces a distinctive security environment and has different security interests, and these differences will be reflected in their attitudes toward nuclear disarmament. To investigate the different opinions is helpful to locate the common fulcrum to push the world toward the goal of a nuclear-weapons-free world.

For most of the years since the appearance of nuclear weapons, preventing nuclear proliferation has been the top priority for the international community, as well as for US nuclear strategy. Despite this effort, and the expectations of the international community, the number and variety of nuclear weapons have continued to increase, and so has the number of nuclear weapon states.

More than twenty years after the Cold War, we cannot find a definite answer to the question of whether today's nuclear posture is more stable than during the Cold War when 'Mutual Assured Destruction' prevailed. I do not think this is an easy question. The United States thinks that today's world is less stable and less secure, because it is becoming increasingly concerned about the proliferation of nuclear weapons, nuclear technology and nuclear materials.

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks against America have proved that non-state actors have the capability to carefully plot and successfully launch large-scale terrorist attacks and to seriously endanger global nuclear security. In recent years, the activities of secret nuclear proliferation networks involving several countries and regions have been continuously exposed.

Although there continue to be divergent views on non-proliferation and disarmament issues, a consensus has been reached that the convergence of terrorism and nuclear proliferation may bring immeasurable catastrophe to human societies and that the international community should take strict and effective non-proliferation measures to prevent terrorist organisations from obtaining nuclear weapons.

Positive Comments on the Initiative in China

President Obama is not the first to make the initiative “to seek a peaceful and secure world without nuclear weapons”, for it is consistent with China’s proposal for the “comprehensive and complete destruction of nuclear weapons” from 1964.³ However, because of America’s high international status and enormous influence, President Obama’s proposition took on much more significance. This US initiative immediately attracted attention from all over the world, and also triggered extensive discussion in China. In academic circles in China, there have been positive comments and support, as well as questions and criticism. The positive comments are as follows:

Firstly, it is necessary to make “establishing nuclear-weapon-free world” and “comprehensive and complete destruction of nuclear weapons” a goal shared by all nations. Only when such a long-term goal is established, will the course of nuclear disarmament, arms control, non-proliferation, and nuclear security find its direction, and make substantial progress.

Secondly, in order to realise the ultimate goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world, President Obama has contended that nuclear disarmament and arms control, nuclear non-proliferation, and nuclear security are three interconnected areas, which makes a large number of people believe that the US initiative for a nuclear-weapons-free world is earnest and convincing.

Thirdly, in the field of nuclear disarmament, President Obama has signed the new START treaty with Russia to reduce the amount of its nuclear weapons, has promised to push forward the ratification of CTBT by Congress, and has aimed to reach a verifiable *Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty* (FMCT).⁴ If the treaty and promises are implemented, and if the United States stops its modernisation program of nuclear weapons, there will be more chances that not only the momentum of vertical nuclear proliferation will be stopped, but also that a favourable atmosphere for multilateral nuclear disarmament will be established.

Fourthly, when President Obama chaired the Global Nuclear Security Summit in April 2010, a broad consensus was reached with regard to strengthening global nuclear security and countering nuclear terrorism. All the representatives at the summit meeting expressed the desire to take common action to maintain and strengthen the international regime of nuclear non-proliferation, which helped the NPT Review Conference achieve a substantive outcome in May of this year.

³ On 16 October 1964, the Chinese government’s statement on the success of its first detonation of an atomic bomb proposed that all the world’s countries’ heads of state meet to discuss the total prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons.

⁴ The linkage between a FMCT and other items on the Committee of Disarmament’s agenda (including arms control in outer space) has blocked the start of FMCT negotiation.

Fifthly, if the United States can balance the relationship between nuclear disarmament, nuclear non-proliferation, and the peaceful use of nuclear energy, it may create a favourable environment for the resolution of the nuclear problems with North Korea and Iran through dialogue.

Questioning and Criticism

There were also voices questioning and criticising President Obama's goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world and his prescription for achieving it. Some Chinese scholars think that it is hard for the United States to push forward common action toward this goal, for this initiative is mainly based on America's own security interests, rather than the security concern of other members of the international community.

These voices have become stronger, especially since 19 January 2010, when the four important political figures of the United States mentioned jointly published another article, arguing that the United States must maintain a safe, secure, and effective nuclear arsenal to deter any adversary and guarantee the defence of US allies and partners. On 28 February 2010, the *New York Times* quoted a speech of President Obama's assistant that the United States will not give up the right to use nuclear weapon first, and will invest more in its missile defence systems, which made more people begin to question America's goal of nuclear-weapons-free world, and the sincerity to realise it.

It is worthwhile to note that there are significant differences between the United States and China with regard to the role of nuclear weapons. The first difference is that the United States believes that nuclear weapons are the cornerstone of its national security strategy, which will provide not only security guarantees for its homeland, but also extended deterrence protection for its overseas military bases and its allies. China argues that nuclear weapons are only a retaliatory capability which will only be used when fundamental national security interests are at stake. In short, China regards its nuclear weapons fundamentally as a political tool and does not incorporate them into a concrete military strategy and operational plans as American does.

Secondly, in America's point of view, nuclear deterrence is "full spectrum and omnidirectional". The former means that US nuclear deterrence can be implemented during all levels of armed conflict, including limited war, large-scale conventional war, and nuclear war. The latter refers to the fact that US nuclear deterrence has global coverage, not only aiming at nuclear states, but also at non-nuclear states. In contrast, China's nuclear deterrence just aims at the nuclear superpowers which may launch a nuclear strike against China.

The third difference is the assessment of external nuclear threats. The United States holds that the possibility that rogue states and terrorist organisations may get access to nuclear weapons is the most severe challenge to its national security. Contrary to that, China thinks that big nuclear powers' hegemony and nuclear deterrence policy are the primary threats to its national security.

Precisely because of these differences, the US initiative on a "nuclear-weapons-free world" has been controversial in China. The nature of this controversy can be summarised as follows:

1. America has pursued a nuclear deterrence policy based on the first-use of nuclear weapons, which constitutes one of the root causes of the proliferation of nuclear weapons. China believes that the no-first-use policy it has pursued for a long time is extensively supported by the non-nuclear-weapon states and constitutes an important precondition for fostering a stable international environment. This policy should be an important and feasible intermediate step to reduce the role of nuclear weapons. However, while initiating the "nuclear-weapon-free world", the US Government still highlights the nuclear deterrence policy based on the first-use of nuclear weapons, which casts shadows on the sincerity of its initiative and frustrates the efforts of the international community to move towards this objective.
2. America's commitment to the development of global missile defence systems has seriously undermined global strategic stability. Although the Obama administration adopted a more moderate tone in this regard, it did not make fundamental adjustments to the policy. According to the US administration, the deployment of missile defence systems will be limited and is directed only against threats from Iran and North Korea. However, most Chinese experts believe that the continuous development of missile defence technology and capability will definitely impair the credibility of China's minimum nuclear deterrence. They even fear that the initial deployments are a precursor to a more comprehensive system of missile defence.
3. According to US nuclear strategy, China is still a potential adversary. The *Nuclear Posture Review Report 2002* listed seven countries, including China, as potential nuclear targets and considered the possible use of nuclear weapons in the scenario of "a military confrontation (with China) over the status of Taiwan".⁵ Although the new *Nuclear Posture Review Report* of 2010 changed the objectives of nuclear weapons policies and reduced the role of nuclear weapons in US national security strategy, the report still accused China of "lack of transparency", reiterated that the United States remained concerned about China's current military modernisation efforts and stressed that the United States would "sustain a safe, secure and effective

⁵ Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington DC: Department of Defense, 2001), pp.16-7.

nuclear arsenal". As a result, China has become very keen on sustaining its minimum nuclear deterrence capability.

4. Although the new START treaty was signed between the United States and Russia in this April, the United States will still have powerful strategic deterrence strength after the treaty has been fully implemented. What is more important now is whether the United States and Russia will really reduce their respective nuclear arsenal in accordance with the treaty and carry out further reduction thereafter. That is why many Chinese scholars still take a wait-and-see attitude.

5. Non-weaponisation of outer space is closely related to nuclear disarmament and arms control. Although US representatives have expressed US willingness to have bilateral dialogue with countries, including Russia and China, on security and cooperation in outer space, America is unlikely to change its basic policy of "dominating outer space".

China's Basic Position on Non-proliferation and Nuclear Disarmament

Currently, the international process of non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament is at crossroads. It is an absolute necessity for the maintenance of international peace, security and stability to seize opportunities, meet challenges and consolidate and constantly strengthen the existing international regime on arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation.

It is the shared aspiration of the international community as well as the goal of China to thoroughly destroy nuclear weapons and free the world from such weapons. A nuclear-weapon-free world is not an objective that will be simple to achieve. What matters is to open a path toward this objective. China maintains that nuclear weapon states should take the following measures to further promote nuclear disarmament, prevent proliferation and to realise the strategic goal of a "nuclear-weapon-free world".⁶

1. An international legal instrument on the complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons should be concluded at an early date.

2. Nuclear disarmament should be a just and reasonable process of gradual reduction toward a downward balance. The two countries possessing the largest nuclear arsenals bear special and primary responsibilities for nuclear disarmament. They should comply with the recently concluded new START treaty and further reduce their nuclear arsenals in a verifiable and

⁶ Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, *China's Endeavors for Arms Control, Disarmament and Nonproliferation*, White Paper, 1 September 2005, p. 8.

irreversible manner so as to create conditions for achieving the ultimate goal of complete and thorough nuclear disarmament.

3. Before the goal of complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons is achieved, nuclear-weapon states should commit themselves to no first-use of nuclear weapons and undertake unconditionally not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states or nuclear-weapon-free zones.

4. Nuclear-weapon states should abandon the policies of nuclear deterrence based on the first-use of nuclear weapons and reduce the role of nuclear weapons in their national security.

5. Nuclear disarmament measures should follow the guidelines of maintaining a stable global strategic balance and of ensuring undiminished security for all countries.

6. The Conference on Disarmament should reach an early agreement on negotiations toward a FMCT, and establish ad-hoc Committees to address such issues as nuclear disarmament and security assurances to non-nuclear-weapon states.

Responsibilities of the United States on Non-proliferation and Nuclear Disarmament

As a country with the largest nuclear stockpile and the strongest conventional military strength, the United States itself has both the responsibility and the capacity to bring the international community together and advance the objective of nuclear disarmament.

In his speeches, President Obama has put forward some specific suggestions for action, which are viewed as positive and constructive by many Chinese scholars. Some of them even believe this program of action to be achievable. However, these suggestions alone are not sufficient to open a new path towards the nuclear-free world. The United States should do more and better.

Firstly, as the most powerful state playing a leading role in world affairs, the United States should not simply concentrate on the security interests and concerns of itself and its allies. It should pay attention to the security concerns of other members of the international community, because the objective of a nuclear-weapon-free world entails the joint efforts of the whole international community. The United States should abandon its nuclear deterrence policy based on the first-use of nuclear weapons, and commit to restrict the use of nuclear weapons to purposes of defence and retaliation, and to regard nuclear weapons as weapons of last resort. Given that the United States enjoys superiority in conventional military armament,

decreasing the role of nuclear weapons in its national security strategy will not undermine US security interests.

Secondly, as mentioned above, the United States and all other nuclear states should take on the obligation not to use nuclear weapons or threaten to use nuclear weapons against states or regions without nuclear weapons. Non-nuclear weapon states should be entitled to obtain the guarantee of not being under attack or threat of nuclear weapons by nuclear states, which is also the “moral responsibility” of nuclear states. Only by building an international environment of sustainable peace and stability can the path toward a nuclear-free world be opened up.

Thirdly, the two major nuclear powers, the United States and Russia, should further reduce their nuclear stockpiles. These reductions should cover strategic and tactical nuclear weapons, as well as nuclear warheads and their means of delivery. This process should be carried out in form of treaties and in a verifiable and irreversible way.

The security of the nuclear age is the common security of all human beings in the world, and the maintenance of nuclear security is the common responsibility and mission of all responsible members of international community. Of course, the ideal of a nuclear-weapon-free world cannot be realised in a short term. However, just as what President Obama has said in his speech titled ‘Working Toward a Nuclear-Free World’:

As a nuclear power, as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon, the United States has a moral responsibility to act. We cannot succeed in this endeavour alone, but we can lead it, we can start it. ... This goal will not be reached quickly ... perhaps not in my lifetime. It will take patience and persistence.⁷

It is believed that after unremitting effort by the international community the course of international non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament will get out of the predicament and will move forward steadily and achieve new progress.

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⁷ President Barack Obama, Speech in Prague, 5 April 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered/> [Accessed 9 December 2010].