
Flying at Altitude

Obama Balances Disarmament against US Nuclear Primacy

Aiden Warren

During the 2008 Presidential campaign, Barack Obama pledged to implement a new direction in US nuclear weapons policy. He would 'show the world' that the United States believed in its existing commitment under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In other words, he committed to working towards, ultimately, eliminating all nuclear weapons. In his 2009 speech in Prague, Obama defined this transformative quest in greater detail and in doing so suggested what appeared to be a marked break from the policies of his predecessor. The Bush administration had banished the term 'disarmament' from its official vocabulary and broken with past nuclear policy pronouncements by pushing vigorously for an expanded role for nuclear weapons. There has indeed been a break from the declarations of an 'American Century'. However, while the Obama administration has presented optimistic rhetoric on disarmament, it has in essence pursued a policy of maintaining the nuclear balance while only taking incremental steps towards disarmament. These steps, I will argue, have been accompanied by clear measures to retain US nuclear primacy. This article will focus on the transition between the Bush and Obama administrations and, more specifically, the extent to which Obama has attempted to 'rebalance' the nuclear option.

Beginning with the vision and goals posited in the 2009 Prague Speech and reaffirmed in the National Security Strategy of 2010, I will outline and evaluate the core Obama declaratory policies, initiatives and multilateral efforts, namely the Congressionally mandated Nuclear Posture Review and New START Treaty, while also acknowledging developments pertaining to the Nuclear Security Summits of 2010/12, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. An evaluation of such initiatives will illustrate the degree to which the lofty goals posited in Prague have turned away from the assertive nuclear path pursued by the Bush administration by flying high in a rhetoric of optimistic but unachieved possibilities.

The Promises of Prague

In what was perceived to be a landmark speech delivered four years ago in Prague's Hradcany Square, President Barack Obama posited his vision for strengthening the global effort to thwart the spread of nuclear weapons, drive disarmament measures and prevent nuclear terrorism.¹ Emphasizing the moral imperative for action — which itself was a remarkable change in the Presidential 'lexicon for international security policy' — Obama enumerated a series of steps his administration would undertake as a means to put the vision into practice.² The series of steps encompassed a dual pledge. The first was to 'take concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons' and to 'put an end to Cold War thinking' by reducing 'the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, and urge others to do the same'. The second was to 'maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies'.³ To reduce US warheads and stockpiles, his administration would negotiate a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with the Russians. To achieve a global ban on nuclear testing, the administration would immediately and 'aggressively' pursue US ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. And to stop the spread of nuclear

1 B. Obama, 'Remarks By President Barack Obama', Hradcany Square, Prague, Czech Republic, Washington DC: The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 5 April 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered/>.

2 P. Meyer, 'Prague One Year Later: From Words to Deed', *Arms Control Today*, May 2010, <http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2010_05/LookingBack>.

3 Obama, 'Remarks By President Barack Obama'.

weapons, Obama would attempt to strengthen the NPT as a basis for cooperation.⁴

The Nuclear Posture Review of 2010

The release of the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) of 2010 was Obama's first attempt at transforming the Prague vision into reality. It stipulated that a reduced *role* for nuclear weapons, a reduced *number* of nuclear weapons, and a reduced potential to *produce* new nuclear weapons would be the core focus. The document was assertive in its rhetoric in committing the United States to work for non-proliferation and, for the first time, the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons was enshrined into the NPR. In what appeared to be a broader range of policy issues employed in defining the nuclear posture, the review looked to be a significant shift away from the Bush administration's NPR, which had been more focused on military capabilities. However, if we delve further into the Obama NPR we discover a cautious document that recommends curtailing the US nuclear posture further in the future, but maintains many of the core nuclear weapon force structures and policy elements of the previous administration. As put by David Hoffman, 'the document is filled with laudable goals that mark a change from the past and may help advance ... [Obama's] dream of a world without nukes. But flying at high altitude also has certain advantages; you can avoid the rough terrain below'. At 'ground level', the President stopped short of changing the status quo on critical issues that have lingered since the Cold War, such as tactical nuclear weapons and keeping missiles on alert.⁵

Despite such concerns, a number of proponents have argued that the NPR provided a much-needed clarification of the US negative security assurance, a significant incentive intended to help persuade states not to acquire nuclear weapons. While not a new policy by any means, the Obama NPR streamlined the policy of 'nuclear enticement' in which the 'United States would not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and in

4 Obama. 'Remarks By President Barack Obama'.

5 D. E. Hoffman, 'Reviewing the Review: Obama's New Nuke Strategy is a Good Start. But the Cold War's Legacy Lives On', *Foreign Policy*, 6 April 2010, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/04/06/reviewing_the_review>.

compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations'.⁶ This is in distinct contrast to the 2002 version put by the Bush administration where the United States would not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states parties to the NPT, except in the case of an 'invasion or any other attack on the United States, its territories, its armed forces or other troops', its 'allies' or on a 'state toward which it has a security commitment, carried out or sustained by such a non-nuclear weapon state in association or alliance with a nuclear weapon state'.⁷ There were many exemptions buried in the Bush version, to the extent that it was at times difficult to comprehend. In positive contrast, the Obama version addressed these crucial matters in more simple terms.

Obama's Prague vision promised to 'reduce the role of nuclear weapons' to 'put an end to Cold War thinking', and reaffirmed that the NPR would reduce the role of nuclear weapons.⁸ In the executive summary of that document it is stated that the 'fundamental role of US nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack on the United States, our allies, and partners'.⁹ Under the section 'Reducing the Role of US Nuclear Weapons' the NPR listed three overall aims. Firstly, that the United States would continue to strengthen conventional capabilities and reduce the role of nuclear weapons in deterring non-nuclear attack, with the objective of making deterrence of nuclear attack on the United States or its allies and partners the sole purpose of US nuclear weapons. Secondly, the United States would only contemplate the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the critical interests of the United States or its allies and partners. Thirdly, the United States would not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the NPT and in compliance with their nuclear proliferation obligations.¹⁰ The language, 'deter nuclear attack' and 'sole purpose', was clearly new, and if implemented, would signify a roll-back of the Clinton and Bush administrations' policy of using nuclear weapons to deter all forms of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

However, as the document progressed it was clear that the actual

6 US Department of Defense, *The Nuclear Posture Review 2010*, Washington, DC, April 2010, <<http://www.defense.gov/npr/docs/2010%20Nuclear%20Posture%20Review%20Report.pdf>>, p. viii.

7 US Department of Defense, *The Nuclear Posture Review*, 2002.

8 Obama, 'Remarks By President Barack Obama'.

9 US Department of Defense, *The Nuclear Posture Review 2010*, p.16.

10 US Department of Defense, *The Nuclear Posture Review 2010*, p. 17.

reduction in the nuclear mission was rather moderate. In fact, it was difficult to see the extent to which it truly was a shift in US nuclear planning. In what might be seen as reality coming to the fore, the Obama NPR continued nuclear planning against regional adversaries with WMD and explicitly rejected the adoption of a 'sole purpose' policy. Continuing the trend established by previous administrations, 'sole purpose' was merely articulated as a goal 'rather than a reality of current US nuclear force posture'.¹¹ Indeed the NPR put off to the indefinite future the acceptance of a policy that would unequivocally limit the role of US nuclear weapons to deterring the use of such weapons by others. For now, this remains the 'fundamental' rather than the 'sole' role for US nuclear forces.¹² A residual deterrent role was still claimed for potential future biological weapons threats and against nuclear weapon states and non-compliant states to deal with an unspecified 'narrow range of contingencies'¹³ in which US nuclear weapons could deter attack by conventional, chemical or biological weapons. Many analysts were also hoping for a 'no first-use' declaration — a clear statement that nuclear weapons would only be used in response to a nuclear attack by others.

Instead, the Obama NPR promised to 'reduce the role of nuclear weapons in deterring non-nuclear attacks, with the objective of making deterrence of nuclear attack on the United States or our allies and partners' the core purpose of US nuclear weapons. In short, the Obama administration was not prepared to rule out first use against other nuclear weapons states. The rhetorical response that the United States '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', while also promising to 'work to establish conditions under which [a sole purpose] policy could be safely adapted', was not part of any major break.¹⁴ In essence, it appeared that Obama's declaratory policy wanted to maintain all its nuclear forces, as well as the very nuclear option that it stated it would reduce.¹⁵

11 D. G. Kimball and G. Thielmann, 'Obama's NPR: Transitional, Not Transformational,' *Arms Control Today*, May 2010, <http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2010_05/Kimball-Thielmann>.

12 US Department of Defense, *The Nuclear Posture Review 2010*.

13 US Department of Defense, *The Nuclear Posture Review 2010*, p. v.

14 R. A. Cossa, 'Moving Toward "No First Use"', *International Security Network*, 9 April 2010, <<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch/Detail/?lng=en&id=114713>>.

15 Kimball and Thielmann, 'Obama's NPR'.

The Prague vision also promised to 'reduce the number of nuclear weapons'.¹⁶ The NPR force structure analysis became the basis for New START limits of 1550 deployed strategic warheads and 700 deployed strategic delivery vehicles. Those limits represented a reduction compared with previous limits set by the 1991 START and 2002 Moscow Treaty. However, as acknowledged by Obama, while New START reduces the limit for how many warheads can be deployed, it does not limit the actual number of warheads in the arsenal. Additionally, the NPR did not identify how the New START limits would be achieved. Overall, it can be argued that the NPR retained the Cold War force structure of nuclear weapons deployed on a triad of delivery vehicles. Indeed it was concluded that, 'the current alert posture of US strategic forces — with heavy bombers off full-time alert, nearly all ICBMs on alert, and a significant number of SSBNs at sea at any given time — should be retained for the present'.¹⁷ Obama's campaign assurance to 'work with Russia to take US and Russian ballistic missiles off hair trigger alert' appears to have been put on hold. No doubt, retaining a Cold War posture with only modest reductions and delaying decisions about where the cuts would take place enabled his administration to attain critical votes in the Senate for ratification of the New START treaty. Moreover, such reductions are conditioned on further strengthening regional deterrence, maintaining strategic stability with Russia and China, providing nuclear umbrellas over allies, and building new bomb-making factories.¹⁸

The Obama NPR also stipulated that the United States would not develop new nuclear warheads. However, it leaves 'new' undefined. Instead, Life Extension Programs (LEP) 'will use only nuclear components based on previously tested designs, and will not support new military missions or provide for new military capabilities'.¹⁹ This policy leaves the opportunity for extensive modifications of nuclear warheads. And it could potentially enable production of the Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW) — although officials insist that program is 'dead'. Indeed, the NPR stated that the full range of warhead work will be considered: refurbishment of existing warheads, re-use of nuclear components

16 Obama, 'Remarks By President Barack Obama'.

17 Obama, 'Remarks By President Barack Obama', p. 25.

18 H. M. Kristensen, 'The Nuclear Posture Review', *FAS Strategic Security*, 8 April 2010, <<http://www.fas.org/blog/ssp/2010/04/npr2010.php#more-2908>>.

19 Kristensen, 'The Nuclear Posture Review', p. 28.

from different warheads and replacement of nuclear components. Mindful of how controversial a decision to build replacement warheads is, the NPR assured readers that decisions to modify warheads 'will give strong preference to options for refurbishment or reuse' rather than replacement.²⁰

The President spoke of merely maintaining a nuclear deterrent in his April 2009 speech. However, a 2010 National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) document spoke of '*evolving and sustaining* the nuclear deterrent'.²¹ NNSA's FY 2011 Stockpile Stewardship and Management Plan (SSMP) provided new information on what the Obama Administration planned to spend on maintaining and modernizing nuclear weapons and facilities over the next fifteen to twenty years.²² Over the course of the past decade Congress has cancelled or delayed, as NNSA described them, 'opportunities to exercise the full suite of design competencies through life extensions and modernizations' of nuclear weapons (presumably, including the Nuclear Robust Earth Penetrator and the Reliable Replacement Warhead). The new plan is designed for 'providing the opportunity to fully exercise design and production skills' and 'vastly improved capabilities' of modified warhead components. While this appears to affirm the pledge of reducing the nuclear weapons stockpile, the goal is conditioned on constructing new nuclear weapons production factories and creating a 'more agile deterrent'.²³ As the plan firmly stated, a 'multi-year and steady investment in the modernization of the complex is an essential element of the NPR, allowing the United States to safely reduce the role of nuclear weapons'.²⁴ Attaining a balance between disarmament and deterrence — a balance that conveys a clear transition towards disarmament — will be delicate. The Obama administration must work to ensure that the good will of Prague is not undercut by nuclear modernizations.²⁵

More worryingly, the willingness to fund and undertake such modernizations has not necessarily closed the door to development of a new nuclear weapon. Whether life-extension activities are sufficient for the long term (twenty or more years) they continue to

20 Kristensen, 'The Nuclear Posture Review', p. 39.

21 H. M. Kristensen, 'Nuclear Plan Shows Cuts and Massive Investments', FAS Strategic Blog, June, 2010, <<http://www.fas.org/blog/ssp/>>.

22 Kristensen, 'Nuclear Plan Shows Cuts and Massive Investments'.

23 Kristensen, 'Nuclear Plan Shows Cuts'.

24 Kristensen, 'Nuclear Plan Shows Cuts'.

25 Kristensen, 'Nuclear Plan Shows Cuts'.

be questioned by those who see a transition into new development and deployment of new weapon designs highly probable, particularly with the door being left so ambiguously ajar.²⁶

New START Treaty

The second important pillar by which one can assess the Prague vision in a 'real' context is Obama's mission to sign and ratify the New START Treaty. The treaty was designed to replace the 1991 Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty (START), which expired after fifteen years of implementation, on 5 December 2009.²⁷ On 8 April 2010, the United States and Russia signed the new strategic arms reduction treaty — officially titled the Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms.²⁸ The Treaty's duration will be ten years, and unless superseded by a subsequent agreement, parties are permitted to extend the Treaty for a period of no more than five years. Additionally, the Treaty has included a withdrawal clause that is standard in arms control agreements.²⁹

While there were apparent positives relating to conversion and elimination, monitoring and verification and ballistic missile defence, several analysts have argued that one could find in the 'fine print' of the terms of New START 'limits versus reduction'.³⁰ The new limit of 1550 deployed strategic warheads is a 74 per cent reduction of the 6000 warhead limit of the 1991 START Treaty, and 30 per cent lower than the 2200 deployed strategic warhead limit of the 2002 Moscow Treaty. However, while this is so, the *limit* allowed by the Treaty was not the actual *number* of warheads that could be deployed. The reason for this inconsistency can be attributed to a new counting rule that aligns one weapon to each bomber rather

26 G. Evans and Y. Kwaguchi, *Eliminating Nuclear Threats*, International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, Paragon, Canberra/Tokyo, p. 105.

27 For a brief summary of the original START Treaty, as well as a review of the US–Russian negotiations on the new START Treaty, see CRS Report R40084, *Strategic Arms Control After START: Issues and Options*, by A. F. Woolf.

28 The treaty is officially titled the Treaty Between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms. The text of the Treaty, its Protocol, annexes, and article-by-article analysis can be found at <<http://www.state.gov/t/vci/trty/126118.htm>>.

29 Office of the Press Secretary, 'Key Facts about the New START Treaty', Washington, DC, The White House, 26 March 2010, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/key-facts-about-new-start-treaty>>.

30 I. Oelrich and H. Kristensen, *Verification Extended Public Interest Report*, The Federation of American Scientists, vol. 63, no. 2, Summer 2010, p. 8.

than the actual number of weapons assigned to them.³¹ This 'decoy' counting rule enables a rather large bank of warhead spaces under the Treaty limit in which both states can deploy many more warheads than would seem to be the case.

Additionally, because there were no sub-limits for how warheads could be distributed on each of the three legs in the triad, the 'saved warheads' from the 'fake' bomber count could be used to deploy more warheads on fast ballistic missiles.³² The Moscow Treaty attributed real weapons numbers to bombers. The United States stated that weapons would be counted as 'operationally deployed' if they were 'loaded on heavy bombers or stored in weapons storage areas of heavy bomber bases'.³³ As a result, 'large numbers of bombs and cruise missiles have been removed from US bomber bases to central storage sites over the past five years, leaving only those bomber weapons that should be counted against the 2,200-warhead Moscow Treaty limit'.³⁴ Since the new Treaty aligns only one warhead to each bomber, it no longer matters if the weapons are on the bomber bases or not; it's the bomber that counts not the weapons.

Simply put, while the Treaty reduces the legal limit for deployed strategic warheads, it does not actually reduce the number of warheads. As Ivan Oelrich and Hans Kristensen affirm, this bizarre counting rule increases the significance of bombers in that each bomber counts only as one nuclear bomb although the B-52 can carry twenty nuclear armed cruise missiles and the Russian bombers, for example the Backfire and Blackjack, have similar payloads.³⁵ If the New START Treaty counting rule were used in today's context, then the United States' deployment figure would be 1650 strategic warheads, not the actual 2100 warheads, and Russia's deployment figure would be at 1740 warheads instead of 2600 warheads. In essence, the counting rule would 'hide' approximately 450 and 860 warheads, respectively, or 1310 warheads in total. Furthermore, the Treaty does not require destruction of a single nuclear warhead and actually permits the United States and Russia to deploy almost the same number of strategic warheads as were permitted by the 2002 Moscow Treaty.³⁶

31 Oelrich and Kristensen, *Verification Extended*.

32 Oelrich and Kristensen, *Verification Extended*.

33 Oelrich and Kristensen, *Verification Extended*.

34 Oelrich and Kristensen, *Verification Extended*.

35 Oelrich and Kristensen, *Verification Extended*, p. 7.

36 Oelrich and Kristensen, *Verification Extended*.

Despite this overt weakness, New START attained ratification on 22 December 2010, overriding the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty. It was considered by many as an important development in restarting relations with Russia. In terms of extending and updating the important verification regime, the document is said to create a platform for transparency and confidence building. Additionally, the Treaty is said to assist in strengthening the international non-proliferation regime and efforts to prevent other countries from developing nuclear weapons. Still, it has to be noted that the United States and Russia must be careful not to overemphasize the Treaty as creating defining reductions in nuclear arsenals and strategic delivery systems.³⁷ Although the Treaty apparently reduced the limit, the achievement was distinctly undermined by the above mentioned counting rule, enabling both states to deploy as many strategic warheads as under the Moscow Treaty. In essence, the New START Treaty was not so much a nuclear *reductions* treaty as it was a *verification* and *confidence building* treaty. It was a ballistic missile focused treaty that in essence removed strategic bombers from arms control. In the words of one senior White House official, the United States came away as a 'clean winner' in retaining its option and leaving Obama's bold rhetorical notes precariously positioned in maintaining the status quo on critical issues that have lingered since the Cold War.

Other Efforts and Initiatives

NPT Review Conference 2010

Despite the apparent difficulties and limitations experienced thus far in transforming the Prague speech into reality, the Obama administration has at least been persistent in linking its nuclear weapons position to the disarmament and non-proliferation commitments under the NPT and to 'strengthening' its 'ability to mobilize broad international support for the measures needed to reinforce the non-proliferation regime and secure materials worldwide'.³⁸ At the NPT Review Conference held at United Nations Headquarters in New York 3–28 May 2010, the Obama administration emphasized what it deemed to be the significant issues. These included the universality of the Treaty; nuclear

³⁷ Oelrich and Kristensen, *Verification Extended*, p. 9.

³⁸ Department of Defense, *The Nuclear Posture Review 2010*, p. vii.

disarmament, including specific practical measures; nuclear non-proliferation, including the promotion and strengthening of safeguards; measures to advance the peaceful use of nuclear energy, safety and security; regional disarmament and non-proliferation; implementation of the 1995 resolution on the Middle East; measures to address withdrawal from the Treaty; measures to further strengthen the review process; and ways to promote engagement with civil society in strengthening NPT norms and in promoting disarmament education.³⁹

The conference was a significant test of the feasibility of the Treaty and how it would evolve to meet current and new challenges. For Susan Burk, US ambassador to the NPT Review Conference, US priorities for the gathering included addressing cases of non-compliance, preventing abuse of the NPT's withdrawal provisions, garnering additional resources for the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and broader adherence to the Additional Protocol, and improving IAEA safeguards. The conference concluded with the adoption by consensus of a Final Document that included both a review of commitments and a forward-looking action plan for nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation and the promotion of the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. However, while the consensus document represented an achievement in comparison to the outcome of the 2005 Review Conference, much of the language in the action plan was watered down from previous versions, leaving it up to the next review, in 2015, to see how far these initial steps will take the global community towards fulfilling the NPT's goals.⁴⁰

Several states pushed for the inclusion of deadlines in the framework for nuclear disarmament — such as a Nuclear Weapons Convention (NWC) — to be included in the final document. While reference to this was evident in the review section,⁴¹ the language only 'notes' new proposals and initiatives for a nuclear weapon-free world, which was a lesser endorsement than if such proposals

39 Department of Defense, *The Nuclear Posture Review 2010*, p. 6.

40 A. Godsberg, *Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference Concludes in Final Document*, *The Federation of American Scientists*, vol. 63, no. 2, Summer 2010, p. 10.

41 *2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons — Final Document*, Action 82: The Conference 'notes the new proposals and initiatives from Governments and civil society related to achieving a world free of nuclear weapons ... [and] notes the proposals for nuclear disarmament of the Secretary-General of the United Nations to inter alia consider negotiations on a nuclear weapons convention or agreement on a framework of separate mutually reinforcing instruments, backed by a strong system of verification', <<http://www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2010/>>.

and initiatives had been 'welcomed'.⁴² The Final Document also 'notes' the UN Secretary-General's Five Point Plan for Nuclear Disarmament, which included consideration of negotiating a NWC or 'agreement on a framework of separate mutually reinforcing instruments, backed by a strong system of verification', and 'affirms that the final phase of the nuclear disarmament process and other related measures should be pursued within an agreed legal framework, which a majority of States parties believe should include specified timelines'. Despite the final document stating that, 'all States parties commit to pursue policies that are fully compatible with the Treaty and the objective of achieving a world without nuclear weapon',⁴³ in real terms, the central focus of the NPT — disarmament for non-proliferation and access to peaceful uses of nuclear energy — remains unfulfilled.

Moreover, according to Jayantha Dhanapala, the 2010 NPT Review Conference Final Document 'deviated from agreed upon policy by continuing with the India nuclear cooperation deal and creating special conditions for the Republic of Korea (ROK) — this, while China supplies reactors to Pakistan'.⁴⁴ For James Traub, while some inroads were made, the twenty-eight page document contained 'no new commitments by the nuclear-weapons states to move toward the abolition of such weapons. Nor did the non-weapons states bind themselves to accept more intrusive inspections of their nuclear facilities. The parties made few other substantive new commitments'.⁴⁵ As in the cases of both the NPR and New START processes, the achievements at the NPT Review Conference were modest at best. This is not to say that the Obama administration should not be commended in pursuing such efforts, but when measured against the promises of Prague, limitations and compromises have often been the result.

Nuclear Security Summits 2010 and 2012

Of course such setbacks have not thwarted Obama's high-flying rhetoric on other nuclear issues. Over 12–13 April 2010, the United

42 Godsberg, *Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference*, p. 12.

43 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons — Final Document, Action 1, <<http://www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2010/>>.

44 J. Dhanapala, 'Evaluating the 2010 NPT Conference', Special Report 258, United States Institute of Peace, October 2010, <<http://www.usip.org/publications/evaluating-the-2010-npt-review-conference>>.

45 J. Traub, 'Two Cheers for Multilateralism: Why the Nuclear Review Conference was a Minor Triumph for Obama,' *Foreign Policy*, 8 June 2010, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/08/two_cheers_for_multilateralism>.

States hosted the first Nuclear Security Summit in Washington DC, bringing together forty-nine world leaders in an effort to foster cooperation and consensus on one further step towards nuclear zero. In his opening message at the conference, Obama emphasized that nuclear materials vulnerable to being sold or stolen and fashioned into a nuclear weapon exist in dozens of states. 'Just the smallest amount of plutonium — about the size of an apple — could kill and injure hundreds of thousands of innocent people', he said. Additionally, non-state actors 'such as al Qaeda have tried to acquire the material for a nuclear weapon, and if they ever succeeded, they would surely use it. Were they to do so, it would be a catastrophe for the world — causing extraordinary loss of life, and striking a major blow to global peace and stability'.⁴⁶

In response to such cautionary words, the summit produced a joint statement and a commitment to improve nuclear security standards and share best practices, and emphasized that international action was necessary to prevent an act of nuclear terrorism. As Vice President Biden stated, 'we cannot wait for an act of nuclear terrorism before coming together to share best practices and raise security standards, and we will seek firm commitments from our partners to do just that'.⁴⁷ The summit concentrated on the goal of securing weapons-useable nuclear materials (highly enriched uranium [HEU] and plutonium), but did not address nuclear weapons security issues specifically. It was argued by some analysts that concentrating on nuclear materials may have been a means by which to attain the participation of states most sensitive to discussing nuclear weapons issues. Radiological material security was similarly not emphasized, although many nuclear security practices relevant to weapons-useable nuclear materials are also relevant to other nuclear materials, including radiological sources in the civilian fuel cycle.⁴⁸

It can also be argued that the Nuclear Security Summit provided the platform for ongoing and new efforts to mitigate nuclear material development/transferral, including a Communiqué and an accompanying Work Plan. States attending the Summit agreed in the

46 Obama, 'Obama's Speech at the Nuclear Security Summit'.

47 J. R. Biden, 'The Path to Nuclear Security: Implementing the President's Prague Agenda', National Defense University, 18 February 2010, Office of the Vice President, Washington, DC, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-pressoffice/remarksvice-president-biden-national-defense-university>>.

48 M. B. Nikitin, 'Securing Nuclear Materials: The 2010 Summit and Issues for Congress', <<http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/142365.pdf>>.

Communiqué that they would ‘commit to strengthen nuclear security and reduce the threat of nuclear terrorism’ by endorsing Obama’s initiative to secure within four years ‘all vulnerable nuclear material’.⁴⁹ They agreed on the need to improve security and accounting for HEU and plutonium, while strengthening regulations pertaining to such materials.⁵⁰ Without committing states to adherence to particular conventions or treaties, the Communiqué called for ‘promoting universality of key international treaties on nuclear security and nuclear terrorism’.⁵¹ States also ‘[reaffirmed] the essential role’ of the IAEA, calling for its ongoing support in implementing nuclear security practices. They also noted that additional radioactive materials (such as cesium and strontium) required similar security measures due to their potential use in dirty bombs.⁵²

While there were apparent inroads made at the Obama-driven summit, critics such as Republican Senator Jon Kyl of Arizona described the summit as failing to achieve progress on what he referred to as the most pressing issue: taking concerted international steps against Iran’s efforts to develop a nuclear weapons program. As Kyl stated, ‘the summit’s purported accomplishment is a non-binding communiqué that largely restates current policy and makes no meaningful progress in dealing with nuclear terrorism threats or the ticking clock represented by Iran’s nuclear weapons program’.⁵³ For Kenneth Luongo, an expert on nuclear security at the Partnership for Global Security, Obama had ‘put his personal prestige on the line like no other world leader has before on the nuclear issue’ and that the commitments were positive. However, he cautioned, ‘when the lights go down tonight, leaders need to hit the ground running on implementation’.⁵⁴

The Nuclear Security Summit held in Seoul, 26–27 March 2012, was clearly hindered by varying domestic agendas and geopolitics,

49 *Communiqué from Washington Nuclear Security Summit: Nations Pledge to Strengthen Nuclear Security, Reduce Nuclear Terrorism*, 13 April 2010, <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans_english/2010/April/20100413171855eafas0.6155773.html#>.

50 S. J. Diehl and P. Humphrey, ‘The April 2010 Nuclear Security Summit: One More Step Toward the Mountaintop’, *Monterey Institute for International Studies James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies*, 20 April 2010, <http://www.nti.org/e_research/e3_nuclear_security_summit.html>.

51 Diehl and Humphrey, ‘The April 2010 Nuclear Security Summit’.

52 Diehl and Humphrey, ‘The April 2010 Nuclear Security Summit’.

53 J. Kyl, ‘Kyl Statement on Nuclear Security Summit’, Jon Kyl Senator of Arizona website, 13 April 2010, <<http://kyl.senate.gov/record.cfm?id=323782>>.

54 K. Luongo, quoted in M. B. Sheridan, ‘Obama Secures 47-Nation Pact at Nuclear Summit’, *The Washington Post*, 14 April 2010, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2010/04/13/AR2010041300427.html>>.

best epitomized by President Obama's open-mike gaffe, when he was overheard telling President Medvedev, 'this is my last election ... After my election, I have more flexibility'. In what could have been a defining moment for nuclear security, where the Seoul conclave was set to embolden the commitment to reducing nuclear materials, implementing nuclear security procedures and innovating global governance, the conclusion was modest, at best. From the start, both the domestic election aspirations of various parties and North Korea's imminent rocket test became obvious impediments to fluid and progressive discussion. Still, the summit did conclude with a communiqué that specified important timelines for advancing nuclear security objectives, such as the target year (the end of 2013) for states to announce voluntary actions on minimizing the use of HEU and the goal year (2014) for moving the amended Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material into action. Additionally, it emphasized the need to address the issues of both nuclear security and nuclear safety in a consistent fashion for the sustainable peaceful uses of nuclear energy, while also articulating the need to improve means for securing spent nuclear fuel and radioactive waste.

However, Obama will need to reaffirm his driving role at the 2014 Summit, to be held in the Netherlands, and ensure it does not dissipate into a review of past 'accomplishments', concluding with a pedestrian communiqué (as some critics anticipate), but rather addresses new and evolving security concerns in *real* terms. While the Nuclear Security Summit may have begun as President Obama's project, Seoul 2012 proved that nuclear security is a global responsibility, and that greater emphasis on state and border accountability, firmer counting rules and transparent checks and balances pertaining to nuclear safety and security, nuclear materials and radioactive sources is urgently required.⁵⁵

Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty

One of the biggest tests of Obama's quest to transform vision into reality pertains to the ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Two of the three pillars of the NPT regime are that non-nuclear weapons states will forgo nuclear weapons and the nuclear weapon states will move towards nuclear disarmament. A

55 D. Kim, '2012 Nuclear Security Summit: What It Was and Wasn't', *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, 30 March 2012, <<http://www.thebulletin.org/web-edition/op-eds/2012-nuclear-security-summit-what-it-was-and-wasn%E2%80%99t>>.

ban on future nuclear testing is seen as fulfilling both disarmament and non-proliferation goals by thwarting the qualitative development of nuclear weapons in weapons states and preventing new states from testing nuclear weapons.⁵⁶ As the 2010 International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament Report emphasized, US CTBT ratification would be a significant 'circuit breaker' in gaining ratification by other 'hold-out' states.⁵⁷ Understanding this, President Obama's Prague speech called for a global ban on nuclear testing and promised that his administration would 'aggressively' pursue US ratification of the CTBT.⁵⁸ Similarly, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has stated that the CTBT is 'an integral part of our non-proliferation and arms control agenda', and that the United States 'will work in the months ahead both to seek the advice and consent of the United States Senate to ratify the Treaty, and to secure ratification by others so that the Treaty can enter into force'.⁵⁹ However, while Clinton subsequently participated in the Conference on Facilitating the Entry into Force of the CTBT (after years of the Bush administration boycotting such events), some commentators consider the lack of follow-through on the President's promise 'striking'.⁶⁰

Additionally, Vice President Joe Biden's 18 February 2010 speech promising a 10 per cent increase to seven billion dollars for the budget of the National Nuclear Security Administration's stockpile management programs was noteworthy, described by some 'as a harbinger of a more specific pursuit effort to attract opponents in the Senate',⁶¹ although as other analysts, such as Jon Medalia, have noted, 'there have been no hearings on CTBT in the 111th Congress, and it appears unlikely to be brought up in the lame duck session'.⁶² As has been the case throughout his administration, Congressional impediments have consumed much of the administration's time

56 J. Medalia, *Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty: Background and Current Developments*, CRS Report for Congress, 2 January 2013, pp. 1-8, <<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/RL33548.pdf>>.

56 Evans and Kawaguchi, p. xxi.

57 Evans and Kawaguchi, *Eliminating Nuclear Threats*, p. xxi.

58 Obama, 'Remarks By President Barack Obama'.

59 H. R. Clinton, 'Remarks at CTBT Article XIV Conference,' New York, 24 September 2009, p. 2, <http://www.ctbto.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Art_14_2009/240909_Morning_Session/240909_US.pdf>.

60 Meyer, 'Prague One Year Later'.

61 J. R. Biden, 'The Path to Nuclear Security: Implementing the President's Prague Agenda', National Defense University, 18 February 2010, Office of the Vice President, Washington, DC, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarksvice-president-biden-national-defense-university>>.

62 Medalia, *Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty*, Summary.

and political capital. In light of those demands and the priority afforded ratification of New START, it would appear that the 'aggressive' pursuit of CTBT ratification the President promised in Prague is not going to be easy to attain.⁶³ This was already apparent in a report released by the bipartisan Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States. While the Commission supported further, unspecified reductions in US and Russian nuclear arsenals, it was divided on the goal of ratifying the test ban treaty and disagreed on the desirability of seeking a world without nuclear weapons.⁶⁴

Despite such impediments, the CTBT has managed to stay on the administration's rhetorical radar. Recent comments by Assistant Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller indicate that the administration will still campaign for CTBT ratification: 'I would like to assure you of President Obama's unshakeable commitment to ratification of the CTBT by the United States and its entry into force at the earliest possible date'.⁶⁵ Similarly, Under Secretary for State Ellen Tauscher has also reaffirmed the ratification imperative: '[W]e are in a stronger position to make the case for the CTBT on its merits. To maintain and enhance that momentum, the administration is preparing to engage the Senate and the public on an education campaign that we expect will lead to ratification of the CTBT'.⁶⁶ Notwithstanding such optimism, many Republican senators remain firm in their opposition. They have raised questions that will have to be answered if a future CTBT ratification vote is to attain the support of the ten to fifteen or more Republican senators likely to be needed not only to ensure passage, which requires a two-thirds majority, but also to establish strong bipartisan support for continuing the policy in the future. The main objections to the CTBT pertain to the extent to which it can be verified; the extent to which it enhances the non-proliferation agenda; the extent to which it allows the United States to ensure the long-term reliability of its existing arsenal in a manner that provides robust deterrence; and the extent to which the Treaty is

63 Meyer, 'Prague One Year Later'.

64 J. Kitfield, 'Road To Zero Nukes Remains Fraught', *National Journal*, 1 June 2009, <http://gsn.nti.org/gsn/ts_20090601_8825.php>.

65 R. Gottemoeller, 'Statement of the United States to the CTBTO Preparatory Commission', Vienna, 14 June 2011, <<http://newsroom-magazine.com/2011/executive-branch/state-department/rose-gottemoeller-ctbt-an-essential-step-toward-world-peace-and-security/>>.

66 E. Tauscher, 'The Case for the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty', Arms Control Association Annual Meeting at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, 10 May 2011, <<http://www.state.gov/t/us/162963.htm>>.

consistent with future US nuclear weapons needs. It is these objections and concerns that left Obama's assertive Prague aspirations relating to CTBT ratification precariously positioned in its slow, if not tentative, pace.

However, with the crucial release of the National Academy of Sciences committee report on 30 March 2012, the CTBT has perhaps attained the much needed ingredient for shifting those votes needed for ratification.⁶⁷ The report assesses the ability of the United States to maintain the safety and reliability of its nuclear stockpile, while also examining the capability to detect, locate and identify nuclear explosions. Indeed, the ability of the United States to rely on modern scientific measures rather than test explosions is central to Obama's argument for reversing the Senate's 1999 vote against ratifying the treaty. Having lost some traction in the lead-up to the November 2012 Presidential election, the administration has indicated that 'banning the bang' will most certainly come back onto its non-proliferation agenda.⁶⁸ Like many of the other initiatives encompassed in Obama's nuclear weapons suite, it seems the second term in office will decide whether the CTBT truly moves towards the transformative goal envisaged at Prague. However, unless ratification is attained, any incremental moves will be viewed by its proponents as nothing short of failure.

Conclusion

As his first term in government progressed, an 'inevitable tension between [Obama's] soaring rhetoric and desire to depart fundamentally from the policies of the Bush administration, on the one hand, and his instinct for governing pragmatically, on the other'⁶⁹ came to the surface. In attempting to reconcile and placate such tensions, Obama's nuclear weapons strategy both in terms of

67 The new NAS report, *The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty: Technical Issues for the United States*, reaffirms that the United States no longer needs and would not benefit from nuclear explosive testing. Renewed nuclear testing would only help improve other nations' nuclear capabilities and reduce US security. And the report documents why US ratification and entry into force of the CTBT would significantly improve our ability to detect and deter nuclear testing by others.

68 D. G. Kimball, 'The New NAS Report: The Case is Stronger than Ever for the Test Ban Treaty', *Arms Control Association*, vol. 3, issue 5, 30 March 2012, <<http://www.armscontrol.org/issuebriefs/New-NAS-Report-The-Case-is-Stronger-Than-Ever-for-the-Test-Ban-Treaty>>.

69 A. Etzioni and A. Appel, 'Book Review: Martin S. Indyk, Kenneth G. Libenthal, and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Bending History: Barack Obama's Foreign Policy*', *Society*, vol. 49, no. 5, 21 August 2012, <http://icps.gwu.edu/files/2012/09/D85_Bending_History.pdf>.

initiatives and states, repeatedly rode the fine line between the realist's pragmatic approach to the world as it is and the idealist's progressive approach to the new world order that might be. Defined by some analysts as a 'hybrid president' — a 'progressive pragmatist' who has been 'progressive where possible but pragmatic when necessary',⁷⁰ Obama's nuclear weapon strategy has been a combination of compromise (both enforced and intentional), adjustment and negotiation, balanced with some bold gestures and some positive steps towards the vision. In essence, when judged by the standard of fulfilling his Prague vision of a world without nuclear weapons, unsurprisingly it remains very much a work in progress. As the above discussion has illustrated, bending history in the arena of nuclear policy is a difficult goal, and there are very few indications thus far that Obama has 'bent' it significantly to attain the transformation he ostensibly seeks, notwithstanding the robust intentions of his Prague speech.⁷¹

Certainly, the Obama Administration has placed non-proliferation on the same level in US nuclear policy as nuclear weapons posture. Moreover, it has emphasized that eventual nuclear disarmament is the central goal for US nuclear weapons policy and has attempted to establish the platform for possible future reductions in the role and numbers of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, in the critical domains of reduction of the role and number of nuclear weapons, developments have been limited and disappointing in their conservatism. The reduction options posited in the Obama NPR — including the number of warheads that will be retired and the ICBMs, SSBNs and bombers that will be cut — will only be fully conveyed in the months and years ahead. In this light the 2010 NPR can be seen as a very pragmatic policy that continues to maintain a strong nuclear arsenal, modest reductions in nuclear weapons, modest non-proliferation efforts, and a seemingly delusional vision of a world free of nuclear weapons.

The second and other significant plank in Obama's nuclear policy — New START — while reducing the limit for the number of weapons that may be deployed on long-range ballistic missiles and heavy bombers, does not require destruction of a single nuclear warhead. Considering that the United States and Russia possess more than 90 per cent of the world's nuclear weapons and

70 Etzioni and Appel, 'Book Review'.

71 Etzioni and Appel, 'Book Review'.

will continue to do so when the treaty limit is reached seven years from now, the 'changes' can also be viewed as moderate. Moreover, in an effort to ensure Congressional support for New START, the Obama administration committed itself to significant increases in expenditure on modernizing nuclear weapons and the production complex over the next decade.⁷² Such modernization will have to be balanced with the other significant goal of US nuclear policy, that of attaining international support for strengthening non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and materials.⁷³

For many listeners in the Prague audience and beyond, the President's address was a reassuring assertion of US commitment to and leadership in the effort to rid the world of its most devastating weapons. Despite the New START ratification, a bipartisan consensus on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament policy will continue to be an obstacle, and Obama will need all his powers of persuasion to obtain support for the program during his second term in office.⁷⁴ Cautious rather than bold, the policies have won relatively strong backing from the leadership at the Pentagon and in the military, but at a cost. Both the NPR and New START Treaty have ended up being transitional, rather than transformational. Having raised international hopes and expectations, where the United States would decisively move away from the Bush strategy to one of nuclear disarmament, the moderate NPR and New START, together with pragmatic developments at the Obama-driven Nuclear Security Summits of 2010/12, the NPT Review Conference, CTBT and the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty indicate that the significance of nuclear weapons in US security policy remains intact. While bold rhetorical notes and promises in relation to limiting the role of nuclear weapons have been broadcast, Obama has been limited on truly changing the status quo in relation to various critical issues that have lingered since the Cold War. His Prague speech aimed for the sky, but developments thus far have left the vision of nuclear transformation largely grounded.⁷⁵

72 H. M. Kristensen, 'Senate Approval of New START Moves Nuclear Arms Control Forward', FAS Security Strategy, 22 December 2010, <<http://www.fas.org/blog/ssp/2010/12/newstart-3.php>>.

73 D. G. Kimball, 'Disarmament and the Deficit', *Arms Control Today*, October 2011, <http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2011_10/Focus>.

74 Meyer, 'Prague One Year Later'.

75 Kimball and Thielmann, 'Obama's NPR'.