

Obama's Nuclear Policy: Limited Change

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Publication date:

2010-05

Permanent link:

<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-a-006122143>

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Originally published in:

CSS Analyses in Security Policy 74

OBAMA'S NUCLEAR POLICY: LIMITED CHANGE

The change in US nuclear policy as announced by President Obama in his Prague speech finds reflection in the Nuclear Posture Review, the New START Treaty, and the Nuclear Security Summit held in Washington. Obama has succeeded in reintroducing nuclear disarmament to the international agenda, but domestic factors, alliance policy, and strategic considerations limit the scope for major turns in US policy. Neither a sustainable reinforcement of the non-proliferation regime nor substantial progress in multilateral arms control are in the offing.



Signing of the New START Treaty in Prague, 8 April 2010.

REUTERS / Jason Reed

US nuclear policy is undergoing change. President Barack Obama defined the conceptual framework for this transformation in his Prague speech on 5 April 2009. At the time, he declared his support for the idea of a world free of nuclear weapons and outlined an ambitious disarmament agenda. He also emphasised the goal of strengthening the non-proliferation regime. What is more, he identified nuclear terrorism as “the most immediate and extreme threat to global security” and announced an initiative for securing all nuclear material worldwide within four years.

One year on, Obama’s policies have yielded some first practical results. On the doctrinal level, the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) published on 6 April 2010 assumes a reduced importance of US nuclear weapons within the overall national security strategy. Two days later, Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signed the New START Treaty on the reduction of strategic offensive arms.

Finally, on 12 and 13 April 2010, Obama received more than 40 heads of state and government for a summit on nuclear security in Washington, D.C. that produced a timetable for implementation of Obama’s four-year target.

Although all these measures demonstrate Obama’s determination to create new impetus in US nuclear policy, a closer look reveals that the scope for change is limited in some areas. This is due to divergent assessments on nuclear strategy within the US political establishment, alliance policy considerations, and the stances adopted by other nuclear states. Accordingly, Obama’s approach of pushing nuclear disarmament to garner international support for strengthening the non-proliferation regime and effective measures against Iran and North Korea may only deliver limited results. This is also because the nexus between proliferation issues and the state of

disarmament is weaker than is often claimed.

New nuclear doctrine

The review of the US nuclear posture was accompanied by intense controversies within the Obama administration. As a result, the NPR was only published after several months’ delay. The document features some substantial changes compared to the previous version. In accordance with the changing threat picture, there is a modified hierarchy of strategic priorities. Non-proliferation and nuclear security are moving to the centre of nuclear policy – although the US continues to attribute great importance to traditional challenges of nuclear deterrence and strategic stability vis-à-vis Russia and China.

Also, nuclear weapons are assigned a more limited role. The “fundamental role” of US nuclear arms is now defined as deterring a nuclear attack on the US or its allies. Thus, the deployment scenario in case of biological or chemical weapons attacks, as envisaged under the previous Bush administration, has been abolished. By confirming that the US will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against those countries that are members of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and meet their respective obligations, the Obama administration is expanding its negative security assurance. The new NPR justifies this measure by pointing to the changed strategic situation, advances in missile defense, and the huge conventional superiority of US forces that greatly reduces the im-

importance of nuclear weapons for deterring non-nuclear attacks.

Overall, however, the changes in the NPR are more limited than had previously been speculated. Many had hoped that Obama would define deterrence of a nuclear attack as the “sole purpose” of the US nuclear arsenal. The new nuclear doctrine explicitly disclaims this formula and argues that scenarios involving nuclear deterrence of non-nuclear attacks are still conceivable in cases of nuclear powers and of non-nuclear states that fail to meet their non-proliferation obligations. This accommodates both the wishes of allies such as South Korea and the concerns voiced in the Department of Defense, not to mention the deep ranks of the Republican Party. The new US stance is further qualified by the caveat that the negative security assurance could be reconsidered should the threat of biological weapons increase. Moreover, the NPR does not commit the US to a policy of no first use of nuclear arms as some had hoped.

As far as the structure and operability of the US nuclear arsenal is concerned, the NPR follows established patterns. The US government continues to adhere to the Cold War strategic nuclear triad of land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-based missiles, and strategic bombers. Neither has it heeded calls to modify the alert posture of its nuclear weapons (“de-alerting”). Concerning the modernisation of its nuclear arsenal, it does exclude the development of new warheads. The stated spectrum of measures for extending the lifetime of warheads does however admit the option of significantly modifying them. Furthermore, it is remarkable that Obama has promised to spend \$80 billion over ten years to maintain and modernise the US nuclear arsenal. All of these decisions should at least partially be understood as domestic concessions to disarmament skeptics.

Regarding the sensitive issue of the future role of tactical nuclear weapons that the US still keeps in several European NATO states, the NPR includes no decision. Some NATO members are urging for these weapons to be withdrawn, arguing that their two original purposes – preventing a nuclearisation of Germany and facilitating

a flexible, gradual escalation in case of a conflict – are obsolete today. They also consider the principle of nuclear sharing that is linked to these weapons to be inconsistent with Obama’s disarmament stance. The NPR, on the other hand, emphasises the importance of tactical nuclear weapons for transatlantic cohesion and as reassurance for the Europeans. This view is shared in particular by some Eastern European states, which point to Russia’s 3’000 tactical nuclear weapons. According to the NPR, the allies are to reach a consensual agreement in the process of elaborating a new strategic concept for NATO – which means that continuation of the status quo is a likely outcome.

Back to the START

The significance of the so-called New START treaty is mainly political. It represents an essential foundation for the improvement of bilateral relations between the US and Russia. At the same time, it instills new life to the long-neglected issue of disarmament. Unlike the Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty concluded by the Bush administration in Moscow in 2002, the new treaty contains verification mechanisms. These are indispensable elements of a credible arms control policy. In this way, New START is a follow-up to the START I treaty of 1991, which expired in December 2009. The fact that implementation of this core pillar of Obama’s nuclear policy was delayed by several months, despite early targets set by himself and Medvedev, indicates the enormous complexity of nuclear disarmament.

From a strategic perspective, New START is very modest on substance. While the new ceiling of 1,550 deployed strategic warheads is 74 per cent less than the specifications in START I, and 30 per cent less than those of the Moscow Treaty, the US and Russia will hardly have to reduce the actual number of their respective warheads relative to current levels, due to a new counting methodology. Although bombers can carry up to 20 warheads, the new equation is “1 bomber = 1 warhead”. Even if bombers constitute the least important element of the strategic triad today, the new counting method reduces the impact of New START. This is compounded by the fact that the treaty does not demand the destruction of warheads, but only stipulates that they be removed from

delivery systems. Also, reserve warheads in storage are not covered by the agreement. As far as deployed strategic delivery systems are concerned, the new upper limit of 700 amounts to approximately a halving compared to START I. But even here, the US and Russia will only have to undertake modest steps in arms reduction compared to current levels.

Missile defense is not explicitly covered in the treaty. The exclusion of this contentious issue was an important success for Washington. However, already now, Medvedev is interpreting the reference to the correlation between offensive and strategic arms in the (legally non-binding) preamble of the treaty as a proviso allowing Russia to withdraw from New START should it feel threatened by a missile defense system. From the Russian point of view, therefore, New START certainly constitutes a lever to be used against US plans for missile defense. The conflict will only be defused if the ideas of a shared missile defense shield of NATO and Russia should become more concrete.

The ratification of the New START Treaty, both in Russia and in the US, is a hurdle that should not be underestimated. In Russia, where a simple parliamentary majority is required, both the lack of an explicit reference to missile defense and the new counting system are criticised as unilaterally favoring the US. In the US, on the other hand, New START offers little real grounds for criticism, as the Obama administration ensured that its substance is modest due to domestic political considerations. Nevertheless, gaining the necessary two-thirds Senate majority will be a challenge for Obama.

Further disarmament steps?

Obama’s stated intention to push for further nuclear disarmament based on New START is unlikely to be successful in the foreseeable future. This is for three reasons: First, as Russia has vastly inferior conventional forces compared to the US, it has no interest in further reducing its nuclear arsenal to below the level of what it can finance in the medium term. Second, other nuclear states such as China remain skeptical towards the prospect of being involved in any multilateral disarmament negotiations. Third, with the US Congressional midterm elections approaching, the domestic support for any drastic cutbacks to the US nuclear arsenal may reduce even further.

“The changes in the Nuclear Posture Review are more limited than many had hoped.”

Obama has indefinitely postponed his stated intention to pursue ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) “immediately and aggressively”, as announced in Prague in 2009. Some concerns about the verifiability of the treaty’s provisions, which had caused ratification to be withheld in the US Senate in 1999, can today be alleviated due to technical progress. Still, considerable domestic skepticism remains when it comes to treaty-based restrictions on freedom of action in nuclear policy. Even though 151 of the 182 signatory states have so far ratified the treaty, it cannot come into force until it has been ratified by the specifically mentioned 44 states that have nuclear technology. It is questionable whether the US, by ratifying the treaty, can also compel states such as China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and North Korea to follow suit.

Obama gained a minor success when agreement was reached on taking up negotiations over a ban on producing fissile material for nuclear weapons in the framework of the UN disarmament conference in May 2009. This agreement was mainly due to

“The link between nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation should not be overestimated.”

a change of course that he initiated when the US accepted verification

measures as part of a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT). The brief euphoria after years of stalled negotiations has, however, already dissipated, as Pakistan is preventing implementation of the work program in protest against broad support for India’s nuclear program. In terms of substance, the 65 participating countries have greatly diverging views on the specifics of a verification system, as well as on the matter of including already available fissile material. Even if negotiations should be taken up at some point, a breakthrough is not to be expected in the foreseeable future.

The NPT Review Conference

From the very start, Obama’s disarmament efforts were presented in the context of his non-proliferation efforts. Thus, the NPR leaves no doubt that the US ultimately regards both New START and its CTBT and FMCT policies as a means of gaining international support for strengthening the non-proliferation regime. In this way, Washington hopes to head off critics who regard the non-compliance of nuclear NPT states with

their disarmament obligations as the main cause of increasing proliferation tendencies among non-nuclear NPT states. The increased transparency of the US nuclear arsenal (as announced at the NPT Review Conference in May 2010) should also be seen in this context.

In view of the ambiguous interim results, it remains questionable whether Obama’s disarmament policy will have a positive impact on his non-proliferation objectives beyond an improved atmosphere at the NPT Review Conference. But irrespective of the specifics of his disarmament balance sheet, the question remains how strong the nexus between the growing problem of proliferation and the state of NPT states’ disarmament efforts really is. There is much to indicate that states that refuse to support measures such as enhanced IAEA verification options, predefined sanctions in case of treaty violations, and the multilateralisation of the fuel cycle only point their finger at insufficient disarmament to deviate attention from their real motives, such as concerns over sovereignty and the desire to leave a

loophole for a nuclear option of their own. Against this background and with regard to the US efforts to put into place new sanctions against Iran, the NPT Review Conference is faced with a very difficult task.

Nuclear safety

Since the attacks in the US on 11 September 2001, the proliferation issue is increasingly also framed within the specter of proliferation to non-state actors. The US in particular has undertaken numerous measures to ensure worldwide safeguards of fissile material. At the Washington summit, Obama appealed to the responsibility of all states to enforce nuclear safety. This involves not only weapons-grade uranium and plutonium, but also radioactive material that can be combined with conventional explosives to create a radiological weapon (“dirty bomb”).

However, some states regard the threat of nuclear terrorism as being less acute than the Obama administration claims it to be. They think that an attack using a nuclear device is an unlikely prospect, since fissile material is well guarded

Key documents

- Obama’s Prague speech** [↗](#)
- Nuclear Posture Review 2010** [↗](#)
- New START: Treaty** [↗](#) and Protocol [↗](#)
- Washington Nuclear Security Summit: Communiqué** [↗](#) and Work Plan [↗](#)

in most countries and terrorist groups hardly have the know-how needed for such an undertaking. They believe that the problem is limited to a handful of states. The main focus here is on Pakistan, which faces political instability and a growing activity of Islamist militants and has been regarded as a potential hub for nuclear smuggling ever since the disclosure of the network of A.Q. Khan.

There is agreement, however, on the danger of radiological weapons. Still, only the follow-up conference to the Washington summit, to be held in South Korea in 2012, will show to what extent the participating states will really enhance safeguards for their nuclear and radiological material. Due to a number of unilateral measures already announced in Washington, Obama was able to claim some success at least at the opening summit. But it is unlikely that he will be able to meet his four-year-objective.

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