

More than a dream?

Obama's vision of a nuclear arms-free world

"Our age has stolen the fire from the Gods. Can we confine it to peaceful means before it consumes us?" Henry Kissinger

In Prague on April 5th, Barack Obama announced a drastic change in U.S. nuclear policy. It would be his goal to eliminate all nuclear weapons, calling it "America's moral responsibility" to eventually "get to zero".

His initiative received mixed reactions from analysts around the world. On the one hand, optimists praised his efforts and hailed Obama's vision as a new beginning. On the other hand, pessimists called his plan inadequate for a world as dangerous as ever.

The timing could not have been worse. Only hours before the speech, North Korea's Kim Jong II had provided critics with ammunition by launching a nuclear capable missile that flew 3200 km, including over Japanese territory, before falling into the Pacific. After his speech, even more disappointment followed as China and Russia refused to reprimand North Korea, despite a UN resolution against Kim Jong II's missile testing. While this seems to indicate that a nuclear-free world is highly unlikely, Obama argued that North Korea's missile testing only increased the urgency to take immediate action.

Is Obama's plan utopian or realistic? Is it mere sloganeering or a serious undertaking? What were his motivations for launching this initiative, and how will his nuclear arms policy shape world politics in the future? What do the established nuclear powers, such as Russia and China, think, and what about new nuclear powers—such as India—and nascent nuclear powers—such as Iran? How exactly does Obama plan to im-

plement his strategy? Most importantly, will it work?

In fact, Mr. Obama's plan is not only timely, but also increasingly persuasive for mainstream thinkers. Whether it will work, however, is another matter entirely.

OBAMA'S NUCLEAR PROBLEM

President Obama's vision of a world without nuclear arms is not as revolutionary as it may seem. Days after the first nuclear devices were tested in New Mexico in 1945, several members of the Manhattan Project formulated their desire to put the nuclear genie back in the bottle. Every American President since Dwight Eisenhower has proclaimed the objective of a world without nuclear weapons. In 1986, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev discussed eliminating nuclear weapons altogether during a meeting in Reykjavik, causing outrage among Reagan's advisors. As recently as 2007, Henry Kissinger, George Schultz, William Perry and Sam Nunn, four foreign policy heavyweights, remarkably overcame their ideological differences and issued an appeal for a nuke-free world. Yet, while the idea of reducing the stockpile is becoming more accepted, the notion of a nuclear-free world still carries unrealistically pacifist associations.

Mr. Obama understands that while the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the main vehicle by which the world has tried to manage nuclear arms, is not dead, it is, in its current form, inadequate to deal with the new challenges the world faces. All three pillars of the NPT are fraught with problems.

The first is non-proliferation, which bars Nuclear Weapons States (NWS)¹ from transferring nuclear weapons or material to Non-Nuclear Weapons States (NNWS), and NNWS from receiving it, is becoming ever harder to implement in a world where several nuclear powers - India, Pakistan, Israel and soon North Korea - have not signed the treaty. The ease with which A.Q. Khan, a Pakistani nuclear scientist, was able to operate his illicit global nuclear market-place further points to the dangerously porous NPT.

The second pillar, disarmament, is an equally important bone of contention. It asks NWS to negotiate in good faith and move towards disarmament. Its ambiguous wording, however, has given NWS enough wiggle room to disarm very slowly, much to the criticism of the NNWS.² This has reduced the NWS' legitimacy to assume leadership in matters of non-proliferation.

The third pillar, peaceful use, is the most contentious. Peaceful use allows and regulates the transfer of nuclear technology to NNWS to develop strictly civilian nuclear energy programs. As the commercially popular light water reactor nuclear power station uses enriched uranium fuel, states must be able to either enrich uranium themselves or purchase it on the international market. This makes it relatively easy to build a nuclear bomb. As the global thirst for energy explodes, and environmental concerns about fossil fuels increase, the number of states to establish their own fuel cycle is set to increase, making nuclear material essentially available to everyone.

¹ The United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia and China

² Nuclear arms reduction is already taking place. The United States has eliminated over 10,000 nuclear weapons since the end of the Cold War, including over 80% of its deployed strategic warheads and 90% of non-strategic warheads deployed to NATO. Yet, they are nowhere near total disarmament, as stipulated in the NPT.

OBAMA'S NUCLEAR STRATEGY

In response to the inadequacy of the NPT, the Obama administration has committed to three principles that guide his nuclear strategy.

Most importantly, Obama believes that both the offensive and defensive usefulness of nuclear weapons are extremely limited. They are no deterrent against America's principal threat, international terrorism, because organizations such as Al-Qaeda defend no territory and can thus not be deterred by nuclear weapons. Even for possible future wars similar to those in Afghanistan or Iraq, nuclear weapons are of no use.

At the same time, the more nuclear bombs and fissile material exists in the world, and the more bombs are on high alert, the higher the risk of a catastrophe caused by human error, malfunction, or a terrorist who gains access to nuclear material. Obama thus sees the world at a tipping point, where nuclear weapons contribute, on balance, more to America's insecurity than its security.

A second principle is that the NWS need to fulfill their promise to disarm. Shortly after the end of the Cold War, the United States was so dominant that others could do nothing but acknowledge America's double standards. Yet, in an increasingly multipolar and 'post-American' world, rising powers have become more assertive, accusing the United States of hypocrisy and reducing America's ability to exercise leadership. For example, while the majority of countries dislike Iran and North Korea, they are now reluctant to allow America to push others around while not honoring its NPT obligations. Seeking the moral high ground and drastically reducing its nuclear stockpiles could thus help the United States increase its leverage in the discussions about non-proliferation.

Obama's third principle is that the United States can significantly reduce its nuclear stockpile without any security implications. Even in a nuclear standoff, 1000 nuclear warheads would be more than sufficient to destroy a large attacker such as Russia in a

retaliatory strike. Yet, such a large reduction from 6000 to 1000 would have lots of symbolic value and show the world that America is serious about disarmament.

These principles are not particularly controversial. Still, Obama's statement is bold. Not only did Obama choose a prominent occasion to unveil his vision, but he also provided unprecedented detail about his plan.

THREE STEPS

1. RESTORE CREDIBILITY, ASSUME LEADERSHIP

Obama's plan has three steps. First, the United States will recognize that nuclear weapons have only a deterrent function. This is significant, as in 2007, the US still argued that nuclear weapons remained a usable tool in actual warfare.³

As a consequence of this reformulation, Obama plans to reduce the stockpile to 1000 nuclear warheads and to take most weapons off hair-trigger alert. Obama will pursue disarmament even if Russia refuses to join America in this effort. Since America and Russia combined possess more than 90% of all nuclear weapons, Obama reasons that these two countries have to start the long journey of arms reduction before the other nuclear states reduce their much smaller, arsenals.

2. IMPROVE MONITORING, REDUCE INCENTIVES FOR INDIGENOUS FUEL CYCLE

Second, the US will seek to negotiate an end to the production of fissile material for weapons purposes, propose strengthening the authority of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). In order

³ The Bush administration argued that using nuclear weapons continues to be an option, especially when attacking targets only vulnerable to nuclear attacks. This strategy, called "nuclear utilization target selection", has been aptly given the acronym "NUTS".

to improve monitoring, the United States will seek to establish a universally supported system to account for all the fissile material in the world, somewhat similar to what exists today for chemical weapons. This institution, possibly built on the current IAEA structure, would verify, inspect and search for fissile material in both public and private companies in both NWS and NNWS. To minimize the incentives for countries to develop their own nuclear fuel cycle, Obama envisions the establishment of a global "nuclear fuel bank" to provide access to enriched nuclear fuel for countries that do not have access to enrichment technology. The US administration is said to be in contact with Kazakhstan, which would agree to host such a bank.

3. SET THE STAGE, GO TO ZERO

Once these steps are in place, the US will focus all its energy on convincing its fellow NWS to eventually incapacitate or destroy all of its nuclear weapons. The question remains as to what exactly "zero" means. Does it suffice to disassemble nuclear weapons, or is it necessary to eliminate production facilities? Supporters argue that these details are largely irrelevant and likely to prove easy to solve if the other, much more formidable obstacles have been overcome.

Obama argues that even if his long term vision does not become reality, initiating the process will render benefits for America - such as increased US credibility and leverage during negotiations. If monitoring can be improved, the risk of nuclear catastrophe by human error, malfunction, or terrorist attack is reduced.

BUT WILL IT WORK?

Domestic opposition is unlikely to derail Obama's plan. Not all Republicans may agree with Obama's vision of a world free of nuclear weapons, but they do recognize the need to discard Cold War paradigms and reduce the number of nuclear weapons in the world. Congress is also likely to approve the CTBT, which was rejected by Congress in 1999 on the grounds that the technical

means to detect cheaters were insufficient. Technical means have been improved, and Republicans have realized that a slashing of the nuclear stockpile will improve America's credibility in its fight against nuclear proliferation.

Russian President Medvedev has signaled that he is ready to engage in negotiations with Mr. Obama to accelerate the reduction of nuclear arsenals. US Assistant Secretary of State Gottemoeller held talks in Moscow on a replacement for the START, which will expire in December 2009.

The US administration will face its first significant obstacles when trying to establish an organization to manage, verify and inspect all the fissile material in the world. Many countries will be sensitive about issues of espionage and privacy. Yet, if America agrees to the concept of equality and universality, there is a chance a beefed-up IAEA can come into being. The US proposal of a global fuel bank is an interesting tool to reduce the incentives for NNWS to produce their own nuclear energy. Yet, nobody can force countries to refrain from using nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. To guard their autonomy, few countries will want to depend entirely on the fuel bank.

The final step is by far the most difficult. Even its supporters admit that realizing a world free of nuclear weapons is difficult and lies far in the future. Pessimists argue that once Russia and the United States have reduced their stockpile to 1000, it will prove impossible to even initiate the disarmament process, thus causing the plan to fail much sooner. They are probably right.

For the process of general disarmament to work, all NWS need to agree. While the UK, France, and even India and China may seriously consider disarmament, there are a number of NWS who are unlikely to engage: Pakistan, Israel, Russia and (by then) Iran and North Korea. Pakistan and Israel both live with a constant existential threat, represented by India and Iran, respectively. Even if Iran and India were to disarm, this threat would not disappear. The same is true for Iran. A non-nuclear America would

pose as much of a threat as the current, nuclear armed America. The incentive for them to get rid of their arms is thus extremely small.

Russia remains much of an enigma. While Medvedev is committed to initiating disarmament, it remains unclear how serious Russia is about a nuclear arms free world. Russia's foreign policy is largely focused on preventing its decline, and it feels increasingly under siege from China, which makes giving up the nuclear arsenal seem irrational.

WHEN THE RUBBER HITS THE ROAD

There are three reasons why the third and final step of Obama's plan will fail.

First, even with a powerful monitoring system, there will be widespread suspicion that some states will announce the successful destruction of their arsenal, while they in fact hide some nuclear weapons. But even if all states are ready to disarm in principle, they will still face the question of who is to take the first step. The magic number here is not zero, but somewhere between 50 and 100 nuclear weapons. This is the number below which a NWS loses its ability to retaliate after a nuclear attack - its so-called "second strike capacity". While this argument is based on the Cold War logic, the question about who will take the first step still presents a formidable dilemma.

Second, Obama's plan for a near -"airtight" monitoring system fails to resolve the NPT's major weakness - the fact that the universal right to peaceful use brings a country tantalizingly close to a nuclear weapons program. A flawlessly transparent system would quickly single out cheaters. Yet, the problem with non-compliant states has little to do with transparency. Iran has been singled out long ago, but that has not stopped it from pursuing its nuclear program. The presence of a fuel bank does not solve the problem, as it cannot take away a country's freedom to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. The failure to resolve proliferation threats by countries such as Iran or North Korea will make significant disarmament all

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

USA

OLIVER STUENKEL

Juni 2009

www.kas.de

www.kas.de/usa

but impossible. Even if disarmament were to start, the incentive for non-compliant states to acquire nuclear arms would only increase. The fewer nuclear arms there are in the world, the greater a national leader's or terrorist's temptation will be to acquire nuclear weapons - due to the bomb's increased 'marginal utility'.

Third, both NWS and some NNWS are concerned about the systemic power dynamics in a world without nuclear arms. If the United States were to dismantle their nuclear arsenal, states under the American security umbrella will have to change their security policy. Eastern European countries in particular are gravely concerned about being exposed to Russian conventional military superiority. Milan Vodicka, a Czech columnist, recently criticized Obama's plan saying that "living in Prague has taught me to feel safer with (American) nuclear weapons than without them." Eastern European nations may contemplate developing their own nuclear weapons systems if America were to disarm.

In Pakistan, a traditionally insecure and paranoid government is unlikely to take the risk of giving up nuclear weapons and exposing itself to a conventionally superior India. Nuclear arms are seen as an 'equalizer' for weaker states such as Pakistan. Pakistan will only agree to give up its nuclear arms once it ceases to consider India as a threat. India has a growing interest in resolving its conflict with Pakistan to focus on more pressing issues related to its global ascendancy. But even if India and Pakistan were to resolve their dispute, Pakistan would likely hang on to its nuclear arms. In any case, NWS mired in regional conflict are unlikely to embrace Obama's global vision.

Mr. Obama knows that nuclear proliferation is one of the most daunting problems of our time. We probably cannot solve it, because in a world where nuclear technology is ever more widespread, where non-compliant states and regional conflicts persist, NWS won't take the chance. Yet, the worst case scenario is so dire that we have to take action, even if it fails. Initial benefits are likely. By initiating disarmament, Amer-

ica will regain lost credibility. A stronger monitoring system reduces the risks of nuclear terrorist attacks, and makes it harder for cheaters to go undetected. His plan is thus a daring step in the right direction. It rests on a profound reassessment of the global security paradigm and it marks a significant break with the Cold War mindset. The image of a world free of nuclear weapons is inspiring and, no matter whether it will be realized or not, it will serve as a powerful lodestar in the debate.