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Obama's nuclear diplomacy

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On his first major journey abroad as President of the United States, Barack Obama called for a world free of nuclear weapons, on several occasions. He acknowledged that this vision would likely remain unfulfilled during his lifetime, yet made clear commitments to further reduce the number and salience of these weapons during his administration. The level of the President's continuing engagement with allies and Russia on nuclear arms control, and the results of posture reviews back home, could result in significant progress on the road toward nuclear disarmament.

The President's Euro-trip

President Obama called on fellow global leaders to cooperate in moves toward a world free of nuclear weapons while in London, Prague and Ankara. He met Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on April 1 immediately prior to the G20 Summit in London. They pledged to fulfill their nuclear disarmament obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), with "a new emphasis on arms control and conflict resolution measures."¹ The two presidents acknowledged that a verifiable and legally-binding Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) follow-up agreement, on which they requested their staff to report to them by July 2009, would only be a first step in showing their leadership on reducing arsenals worldwide. They felt that future stages could usefully involve the other nuclear weapon states, and agreed to improve their own relationship that had recently been characterized by mistrust and misunderstanding. They also promised to improve communication through the NATO-Russia Council and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

The highlight of President Obama's trip was his speech to an audience of tens of thousands in Prague's Hradčany Square on April 5. He communicated the importance of having the long-term vision of a nuclear weapon-free world, while also noting several of the critical concrete actions that the United States must provide in moving toward this goal. In addition to mentioning the follow-on to START, the President said that these actions must include:²

- the U.S. ratification of the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT);
- promoting a "new treaty that verifiably ends the production of fissile materials intended for use in state nuclear weapons;"
- a strengthening of the NPT; and,
- securing "all vulnerable nuclear material around the world within four years" as part of an effort to ensure that "terrorists never acquire a nuclear weapon."

Calling the NPT's bargain "sound," the President highlighted the challenges of Iran and North Korea (the latter had launched a missile test only hours before his speech). He called for "more resources and authority to strengthen international inspections" and "immediate consequences for countries caught breaking the rules or trying to leave the Treaty without cause." He also advocated the building of "a new framework for civil nuclear cooperation, including an international fuel bank," adding that "no approach will succeed if it is based on the denial of rights to nations that play by the rules." He expressed an intention to "turn efforts such as the Proliferation Security Initiative and the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism into durable international institutions," and to host a Global Summit on Nuclear Security within the next year.³

Speaking before Turkey's parliament the following day about the dispute over Iran's nuclear program, he said:⁴

"No one is served by the spread of nuclear weapons, least of all Turkey. You live in a difficult region and a nuclear arm race would not serve the security of this nation well. This part of the world has known enough violence. It has known enough hatred. It does not need a race for an ever-more powerful tool of destruction."

At NATO's front line facing a strategically sensitive area, Turkey will play a defining role in Middle East nuclear diplomacy, and in how NATO develops its strategic policies toward the Middle East, West Asia and Russia. Acknowledging the impact of President Obama's visit, Turkey's President Abdullah Gul said on April 15 in Bahrain that he would push to make the Middle East into a zone "free of weapons of mass destruction."⁵ Turkey is thought to host U.S. tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs), though without aircraft attached to them.

While discussions were of course off the record, there were no proclamations about a nuclear weapon-free world arising from the NATO summit in Strasbourg and Kehl. The Declaration of Alliance Security, intended to serve as the outline for discussions around a new Strategic Concept, merely stated that.⁶

"Deterrence, based on an appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional capabilities, remains a core element of our overall strategy. NATO will continue to play its part in reinforcing arms control and promoting nuclear and conventional disarmament in accordance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, as well as non-proliferation efforts."

The current Strategic Concept agreed in 1999, and past communiqués, have consistently pointed to the importance of nuclear sharing for Alliance cohesion and the strategic nuclear umbrella as offering the "supreme guarantee" of NATO's security.⁷ Given President Obama's stance on nuclear weapons and recent declarations by other European leaders,⁸ the next Strategic Concept is expected to downgrade the role of nuclear weapons in Alliance doctrine. To what extent their role is downgraded will, in great part, depend upon developments in the United States' own nuclear posture, how negotiations proceed with Russia, the outcome of the NPT Review Conference in May 2010 and how nuclear diplomacy develops elsewhere in the world.

Next steps to watch

The Congressional Commission on the U.S. Strategic Posture is expected to release its concluding report in early May. Its interim report, released in December 2008, seemed to retain a central role for nuclear

weapons in the strategic posture, although it also indicated that the Commission would have a few things to say about moving toward the long-term goal of a world without nuclear weapons.⁹

The President's **Nuclear Posture Review** is due by the end of this year. The last review, conducted by the Bush administration in 2001, led to reductions in operationally-deployed warheads, but emphasized a more flexible role for nuclear weapons and suggested that the United States would need to develop new ones for new missions. The Posture raised suspicions that Washington was disinterested in pursuing the disarmament commitments made at the 2000 NPT Review Conference.¹⁰ President Obama has already said clearly that his administration will refrain from seeking new nuclear weapons designs¹¹ and has entirely cut funding for a Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW).¹² The administration's current review could be influenced by a number of factors,¹³ possibly the most important being the support the President's long-term vision receives among military leaders, which will involve give-and-take on nuclear weapons policies and planning throughout the administration's term(s).¹⁴

President Obama's nuclear arms control agenda will also entail at least two treaties that will require Senate ratification. He has assigned Vice President Joseph Biden, a former long-serving Senator and former Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to push for the Senate's approval of the **CTBT**. The last attempt at ratifying this treaty was dogged by political retaliation against then-President Bill Clinton for issues unrelated to international security. Although it is unknown exactly how difficult it will be to secure the 67 votes needed to ratify the treaty (which will likely involve a number of deals),¹⁵ the technological improvements¹⁶ that have occurred since the last time the treaty was up for ratification should play strongly in the debate.

START-follow-up negotiations will commence on April 24 in Rome.¹⁷ Discussion will focus on whether to include delivery vehicles or only warheads, the future of strategic missile defense, and overall Russian concerns about the U.S. conventional arsenal,¹⁸ but will not include non-strategic nuclear weapons at this stage.¹⁹ Of course, political and international security crises, such as the one in Georgia last August, could stymie negotiations, but early indications reveal a thaw in relations over arms control in particular.

Although **tactical nuclear weapons** (TNWs) will not feature in START talks, the United States and its European allies may seriously consider reaping the security benefits from consolidation of the U.S. TNWs still in Europe, or even their withdrawal.²⁰ There is increasingly open recognition that they have little relevance to extended deterrence. German Foreign Minister and SPD candidate for Chancellor, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, has been an avid promoter of NATO's role in nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament,²¹ and recently called for the removal of U.S. TNWs from Germany.²² With the election in September, U.S. TNWs in Germany could become a publicly-contested issue in the months to come.

Outside of NATO, Japan is the number one ally of concern when it comes to sensitivities about U.S. guarantees of extended nuclear deterrence. But on April 13, Japan's Prime Minister, Taro Aso, said that he will send a letter to President Obama, declaring his support for the President's vision of a nuclear weapon-free world.²³ The announcement comes only a few days after President Obama's former election opponent, Senator John McCain (Republican-Arizona), visited Japan and reaffirmed his continuing support for the long-term vision of working toward zero.²⁴

Notes

¹ Text of U.S.-Russia statement on nuclear arms, The Associated Press, April 1, 2009, http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5iVZVQZKurqCWMUI_tMQk8_latXKAD979LOBG4

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- ² Remarks of President Obama, Prague, Czech Republic, April 5, 2009, U.S. Embassy in Prague, <http://prague.usembassy.gov/obama.html>
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Full text of the U.S. President's speech at Turkish Parliament, Hurriyet DailyNews.com, April 6, 2009, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/11376661.asp?gid=244>
- ⁵ "Turkey pushes for nuclear arms-free Middle East," Reuters, April 15, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSTRE53E2IZ20090415>
- ⁶ Declaration on Alliance Security, Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council meeting in Strasbourg/Kehl, *NATO Press Release*, April 4, 2009, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_52838.htm?mode=pressrelease
- ⁷ The Alliance's Strategic Concept, Approved by Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington, D.C., *NATO Press Release*, April 23-24, 1999, <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/1999/p99-065e.htm>
- ⁸ For example, see the British Prime Minister's speech of March 17 and Italy's placement of nuclear disarmament on the G8 agenda on March 3. ("Speech on nuclear energy and proliferation," Transcript of a speech given by the Prime Minister, Number 10.gov.uk, The Official Site of the Prime Minister's Office, March 17, 2009, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page18631> and "Nuclear Disarmament on G8 Italian Presidency's List of Priorities," Official website of the G8 Summit 2009, posted March 3, 2009, http://www.g8italia2009.it/G8/Home/News/G8-G8_Layout_locale-1199882116809_1199891166861.htm
- ⁹ The Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, "Interim Report," December 15, 2008, http://www.usip.org/strategic_posture/sprc_interim_report.pdf
- ¹⁰ "International reactions to Leaked Posture Review (NPR)," BASIC, 2002, http://www.basicint.org/nuclear/US_Policy/NPRreactions-0402.htm
- ¹¹ The Agenda, Foreign Policy, The White House, last accessed April 21, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/agenda/foreign_policy/
- ¹² "A New Era of Responsibility: renewing America's Promise," The U.S. Department of Energy 2010 Budget, Information prepared by the White House Office of Management and Budget, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/assets/fy2010_factsheets/fy10_energy.pdf
- ¹³ For example, see the report by Andrew Grotto and Joseph Cirincione, *Orienting the 2009 Nuclear Posture Review: A Roadmap*, Center for American Progress, Washington, D.C., November 2008, http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/11/pdf/nuclear_posture.pdf
- ¹⁴ For example, see the report by Hans M. Kristensen, Robert S. Norris, and Ivan Oelrich, "From Counterforce to Minimal Deterrence: A New Nuclear Policy on the Path Toward Eliminating Nuclear Weapons," *Federation of American Scientists Occasional Paper No. 7*, April 2009, http://www.fas.org/pubs/_docs/OccasionalPaper7.pdf
- ¹⁵ John Isaacs, "A strategy for achieving Senate approval of the CTBT," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, April 15, 2009, <http://www.thebulletin.org/web-edition/features/strategy-achieving-senate-approval-of-the-ctbt>
- ¹⁶ "The Future of the CTBT," Carnegie International Nonproliferation Conference, Washington, D.C., Transcript by the Federal News Service, April 7, 2009, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/npc_ctbt.pdf
- ¹⁷ "Arms Talks with U.S. Will Start Next Week," *The Moscow Times*, April 17, 2009, <http://www.moscowtimes.ru/article/600/42/376309.htm>
- ¹⁸ Charles J. Hanley, "Gorbachev: U.S. military power blocks 'no nukes'," The Associated Press, via SignOnSanDiego.com, April 16, 2009, <http://www3.signonsandiego.com/stories/2009/apr/16/eu-italy-nuclear-gorbachev-041609/?world>
- ¹⁹ "START Talks to Ignore Non-Strategic Nukes, Official Says," Global Security Newswire, April 16, 2009, http://gsn.nti.org/siteservices/print_friendly.php?ID=nw_20090416_2600
- ²⁰ Hans Kristensen, "USAF Report: 'Most' Nuclear Weapons in Europe do Not Meet U.S. Security Requirements," FAS Strategic Security Blog, June 19, 2008,

<http://www.fas.org/blog/ssp/2008/06/usaf-report-%e2%80%9cmost%e2%80%9d-nuclear-weapon-sites-in-europe-do-not-meet-us-security-requirements.php>

²¹ For example, see Steinmeier's speech at the 45th Annual Munich Security Conference, text of speech (English translation from German), *Auswärtiges Amt*, February 6, 2009,

<http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/en/Infoservice/Presse/Reden/2009/090206-BM-Sicherheitskonferenz.html>

²² "Yankee Bombs Go Home: Foreign Minister Wants U.S. Nukes out of Germany," Spiegel Online International, April 10, 2009,

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,618550,00.html#ref=nlint>

²³ "Aso signs on to Obama no-nuke bid," Kyodo News Agency, April 14, 2009,

<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/rss/nn20090414a9.html>

²⁴ "McCain backs Obama's call to end nuclear weapons," AFP, April 10, 2009,

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