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THE OBAMA TRANSFORMATION: CAN IT SUCCEED?

President Barack Obama has one of the most comprehensive, progressive and ambitious arms control and disarmament agendas ever proposed by a U.S. president. With his joint statement with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on April 1, 2009 and his speech in Prague on April 5, President Obama began the transformation of U.S. nuclear policy. Implementing this agenda, however, will require the president to secure the active cooperation of Russian leaders while overcoming serious domestic resistance to his plans.¹

President Obama developed his plan during his presidential campaign, based on years of cooperative work in the Senate with both Democratic and Republican leaders. Overall, it appears that prospects are improving for sustaining and building a bipartisan consensus around the basic elements of the Obama plan. This is due to several factors, including the increase in the nuclear threats, the failure of previous strategies, the development of new policies, and the commitment of the new president and other state leaders to this new approach. The next twelve to eighteen months will determine if these plans can succeed.

GROWING NUCLEAR THREATS

There are four main categories of threat: nuclear terrorism, the dangers from the existing arsenals, attempts by additional nations to acquire nuclear weapons, and the weakness of the non-proliferation regime. These threats are interrelated and developments in one area impact others. For example, failure to reduce existing arsenals increases the risk that other nations will acquire their own nuclear weapons, which, in turn, raises the risk of terrorist theft or diversion of materials. If unchecked, one or more of our nuclear nightmares is likely to be realized.

Nuclear terror. While considerable attention, particularly in the U.S. media, is focused on the nuclear and missile programs of North Korea and Iran, the combination of terrorist groups, nuclear weapons and an unstable government now makes Pakistan our greatest threat. Pakistan has enough material for perhaps 60 to 100 weapons, and is rapidly expanding its fissile material production facilities. It has a weak civilian government, its army and intelligence services contain strong fundamentalist influences, and Taliban militants have taken over swaths of Pakistan's frontier provinces.

If Pakistan destabilizes from this or future conflicts, *Al Qaeda* – now securely rooted in Pakistan – could gain control of nuclear materials for a bomb or the weapons themselves. This scenario could be unlikely, but the mere possibility makes it a grave concern. Robert Gallucci, dean of the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service says, “Pakistan is not only a problem that could go bad at any moment – it could have gone bad yesterday.”²



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Deadly arsenals. There are an estimated 23,000 nuclear weapons in global stockpiles – 96 percent held by the United States and Russia. If any one of these weapons was launched through accident, miscalculation, or unauthorized use, it would decimate a city. The U.S.A and Russia maintain approximately 3,000 nuclear warheads on high-alert status, ready to launch within 15 minutes.

These arsenals have become a hefty liability for the U.S.A and Russia, and the consequences to accident would be catastrophic. Former Senator Sam Nunn says, “We have hundreds of nuclear weapons on hair-trigger launch status. Every day that goes by, we are depending on the Russian warning system working. And they are dependent on ours. That is unacceptable. We have to lengthen the warning time.”³

New nuclear states. Iran and North Korea are the most pressing proliferation concerns, and their nuclear advancements pose serious threats to neighboring states and the stability of the global nonproliferation regime. The fundamental danger is not that either state would use a weapon that they developed – the certain retaliation would make any use suicidal – the true threat is regional, as rival states seek their own nuclear deterrent.

This deadly chain reaction is already underway in the Middle East where states are developing a nuclear hedge against Iran. Over the past three years, a dozen Middle Eastern states declared their interest in civilian nuclear power or research programs. Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E. and others are beginning to acquire independent nuclear technological bases. Given time and provocation, these energy programs could become the seeds of a nuclear-armed Middle East.

Repairing the regime. Finally, the nonproliferation regime – the interlocking network of agreements and treaties that has slowed if not altogether prevented horizontal proliferation over the past 40 years – has been deteriorating. Several observers have warned of its possible collapse (particularly if trends noted above continue).

The new U.S. position has had an immediate and positive impact, exciting delegates to the 2009 NPT Preparatory Committee and producing an agenda for the 2010 conference in record time, breaking the logjam at the Conference on Disarmament that has prevented negotiations of the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty, and raising the possibility of a consensus agreements over the next year that could raise the barriers to proliferation.

There is widespread recognition that the previous administration’s strategy for countering proliferation, the so-called *Bush Doctrine*, failed to deter these threats and in several cases made them worse. The Bush policy posited that the greatest danger came from the nexus of terrorists, outlaw states, and weapons of mass destruction. Their solution was direct military action to overthrow regimes before their full threats materialized. Iraq was the first implementation of the policy.

When then-Undersecretary of State John Bolton was asked what lesson Iran and North Korea should draw from the Iraq War, he said, “Take a number.”⁴ We don’t deal with dictators, officials thought, we destroy them.

The war’s architects expected regime change in Iraq to lead to regime change in Syria, Iran, North Korea, and other states. The opposite occurred. The ill-conceived invasion soon became a protracted quagmire for U.S. political and military influence. Unbound by regional adversaries and unchecked by U.S. power, the indirect targets of the Bush doctrine grew bolder and advanced their nuclear programs. Both states have advanced their programs more in the past five years than they had in the previous ten.

THE NEW MOMENT

The collapse of the Bush policy left a void, into which grew a movement advocating the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. Roland Timerbaev documents the “generally positive

impact” of the various new nuclear disarmament campaigns, including the efforts of the so-called *four horsemen* (Republicans George Shultz and Henry Kissinger and Democrats William Perry and Sam Nunn),⁵ the joint Australia-Japan commission, and the new international campaign, *Global Zero*.⁶ These groups have expanded their influence in the public debate and capitalizing on popular support for verifiable nuclear disarmament.

We are already seeing the shift in arms control policy in Europe. Current and former senior statesmen and stateswomen from the United Kingdom, Norway, Italy, France, and Germany have given their support for the goal of progressive nuclear disarmament. From the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Gordon Brown,⁷ Secretary of Defense Des Browne,⁸ and Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs David Miliband⁹ offered their support and partnership for working towards global nuclear disarmament. Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre¹⁰ pledged his country’s support, backed up by substantial government funding for conferences and other initiatives. From Italy, five senior statesmen gave their endorsement,¹¹ and Secretary of State Enzo Scotti affirmed his country’s commitment.¹² Chancellor Angela Merkel¹³ gave her support, as did four German statesmen,¹⁴ and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier.¹⁵ French President Nicolas Sarkozy has stated his country’s work on disarmament.¹⁶ In a letter on behalf of the Council of the European Union to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, President Sarkozy declared the EU’s ambition and plan of action¹⁷ for working towards general nuclear disarmament.¹⁸ This consensus of European views provides strong international support for President Obama’s disarmament agenda.

On April 5, 2009, before a crowd of 15,000 in Prague, President Obama declared, “Today, I state clearly and with conviction America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.” This was a landmark statement, promising a fundamental shift in U.S. nuclear policy and posture. The President stressed that his long-term goal will take patience and persistence. The U.S. media’s response was generally skeptical, and several columnists called President Obama naïve or worse.

As Roland Timerbaev noted in this journal,¹⁹ there have been several previous high-level initiatives urging the elimination of the world’s nuclear weapons. Indeed, Obama’s speech is not the even first time a sitting U.S. President has sought to rid the world of nuclear weapons. In November 1945 – two months after dropping the first atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki – President Harry Truman signed a declaration calling for the “elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and of all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction.”²⁰ President Kennedy said, “World order will be secured only when the whole world has laid down these weapons which seem to offer us present security but threaten the future survival of the human race.”²¹ President Reagan was a strong yet unlikely believer in the elimination of nuclear weapons. In 1983, after realizing the peril they invite, Reagan said, “I know I speak for people everywhere when I say our dream is to see the day when nuclear weapons will be banished from the face of the Earth.”²² President Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev at the 1986 Reykjavik Summit nearly agreed to full disarmament within ten years.²³ This glimmer of a nuclear weapons-free world was then put out, as further negotiation foundered on Reagan’s attachment to his Strategic Defense Initiative.

Thus, previous presidents have declared similar ambitions, but their initiatives have consistently fallen short. What sets the Obama plan apart is that it marries this long-term vision with a comprehensive set of near-term steps. And it comes at a time when, as a result of the factors listed above, the American president seems to have a willing partner in the Russian president, and the center of America’s security elite have significantly shifted in favor of arms control.

The Obama plan begins with reestablishing cooperation with Russia. As former Republican Senator Chuck Hagel notes, “Without the U.S. and Russia working together – the nations that control 95 percent of the world’s nuclear weapons – there will be little done to stop the spread of these weapons. Fortunately, the atmospherics have changed dramatically in Moscow. The receivers are on and the transmitters are off. The same is true in Washington. There is a willingness to listen.”²⁴



In their April 2009 Joint Statement, President Obama and President Medvedev pledged to take the first steps to disarmament and laid out a “step-by-step process.”²⁵ The two leaders spoke with unusual clarity, defining intentions and joint projects. As they noted, their words must be translated into action, but these words are a sharp break from past, self-congratulatory, diplomatic dodges.

First, their nuclear discussions had a distinct frame. They did not start, as did almost all Bush-era statements, with warnings of new nations or terrorists getting nuclear arms, but with a focus on their own arsenals and their own obligations. They declared their commitment to achieving a nuclear-free world. They restored arms control and conflict resolution to central policy roles.

Obama and Medvedev committed to replacing the 1991 START treaty (talks began on April 24) and called for a progress report by their July summit. These are not the words of officials just going through the motions. They do not specify numbers, but that is reasonable. They will have to talk before committing to a figure lower than current agreements. The number of 1,500 deployed warheads has been widely mentioned, which is below the 1,700–2,200 limit referenced in the Bush SORT treaty.

They called for “joint assessments” of the missile threat, something some experts have advocated for years.²⁶ The U.S. and Russian leaders clearly want to work out a compromise on anti-missile weapons in Europe. Obama recognizes that the system Bush was rushing to deploy does not work and Medvedev seems to acknowledge that there are ways to deploy defenses that would not threaten Russia. This statement may be the beginning of a cooperative approach.

Both leaders pledged to bring the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty into force. Russia has already ratified, Bush and Republican leaders refused to, and Obama now promises to finish the job. This marked the beginning of a serious administration effort, since confirmed by the naming of Vice President Joe Biden to head the ratification effort.

Above and beyond the specifics, however, is the tone and vocabulary of the document. Diplomatic double-speak often hides disagreements and obscure intentions. (See, for example, the Bush-Putin statement at the 2006 G-8 meeting.)²⁷ The April 1 statement is filled with action verbs, dynamic adjectives and specific nouns. The very first paragraph talks of a “substantive agenda” and their “resolve to work together,” “jointly meet contemporary global challenges,” and about “addressing disagreements openly and honestly in a spirit of mutual respect.” By the third paragraph they have already “committed our two countries to achieving a nuclear free world.” It would have been easy to say, instead, “support the vision of” or “agree to work towards.” But the chosen phrase indicates a feasible goal and a determination to reach it. This is an indicator of a new, committed approach.

This intention is underscored by talk of a “work plan,” and repeated references to “joint” work, “coordinated” approaches, “new impetus,” etc. The discussion is broadened beyond security issues near the end of the statement to their “desire for greater cooperation not only between our governments, but also between our societies” and plans for scientific cooperation, and student and cultural exchanges.

If there was any doubt about their commitment, the two leaders clearly state in the final paragraph: “Now it is time to get down to business and translate our warm words into actual achievements.”

OBSTACLES PROGRESS

There will be opposition, both in the United States and in Russia, to this approach, as indicated by the cynical coverage by some in the U.S. media, and statements by some in the Russian foreign policy apparatus. Officials in both countries, however, are forging ahead. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said he was hopeful of quick agreement on joint reductions,

“The U.S. approach seems very constructive to me.” Assistant Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller and Russian negotiator Anatoly Antonov report steady progress in their talks.

This joint statement, coupled with Obama’s Prague speech April 4, marked the beginning of the attempted transformation of U.S. nuclear policy. The struggle to implement the change has now begun. The question is: “Can he finish the job?”

There are four major obstacles. First, the global economic crisis presents a difficult context for a bold agenda. If the global economy worsens, it threatens to swallow any transformational agenda, including on nuclear policy.

Second, the nuclear hardliners, those with financial or ideological ties to the existing nuclear bureaucracy and posture. They will put up formidable resistance to change, however, this is a group in decline, with shrinking influence in the military and strategic thinking.

Third is a more serious problem: the divisions within the administration itself. The tensions between the *transformationalists*, who share the president’s vision of a world without nuclear weapons, and the *incrementalists*, who do not believe elimination possible or proliferation reversible, will intensify. Though all are serious people, the half-steps favored by the *incrementalists* will not give us full security. Going slowly when we must go boldly, risks the failure of the president’s agenda. Still, with skill, presidential leadership and the active participation of nongovernmental organizations, these divisions can be softened, coalitions forged, and the forces of reaction defeated.

The last obstacle is cynicism. This is the perhaps the most serious as it pervades much expert thinking and media coverage. There is cynicism of the right, which holds that nuclear disarmament is undesirable. Critics from the American Enterprise Institute and other neo-conservative bastions regularly mount their opposition from this posture.

Moderate cynicism holds that nuclear disarmament is unachievable. This is the pose of many editors and journalists. It argues with vapid phrases, little knowledge and nonsensical assertions that eliminating nuclear weapons is as futile as eliminating gunpowder. It is the pose of those who wish to appear worldly and wise-without exerting too much effort.

We also have the left cynicism of those who believe disarmament is both desirable and feasible, but who do not believe this president is up to the task. They disparage the appointments that are not good enough, the reports that do not go far enough, and a president who does not believe deeply enough.

Overcoming this pervasive cynicism may be the greatest challenge, for it can sap the will of officials, filling them with a fear of appearing weak or foolish, and demoralize proponents, who will shrink from commitment to an apparently hopeless cause.

Cynicism is sometimes justified. But it should never substitute for research or reason. We should not let attitude replace analysis. Obama understand this. In his Prague speech, he says “such fatalism is our deadly adversary.” He notes: “Now, I know that there are some who will question whether we can act on such a broad agenda. There are those who doubt whether true international cooperation is possible, given inevitable differences among nations. There are those who hear talk of a world without nuclear weapons and doubt whether it’s worth setting a goal that seems impossible to achieve.”

He rebuts that pessimism: “But make no mistake: We know where that road leads. When nations and peoples allow themselves to be defined by their differences, the gulf between them widens. When we fail to pursue peace, then it stays forever beyond our grasp. We know the path when we choose fear over hope. To denounce or shrug off a call for cooperation is an easy but also a cowardly thing to do. That’s how wars begin. That’s where human progress ends.”



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And speaking directly to our experience: “I know that a call to arms can stir the souls of men and women more than a call to lay them down. That is why the voices of peace and progress must be raised together.”

THE NEW REALISM

Overall, the arrows are moving in Obama’s direction. The growing consensus that the policies of the past administration have failed is now joined with a new consensus that sees disarmament and nonproliferation as two sides of the same coin – that disarmament develops the unity needed to prevent proliferation, which, in turn, provides the security needed for disarmament.

This is an historic shift of the center of America’s security elite to a renewed embrace of disarmament and arms control.

Arms control seems to have become the new realism. There is a global sense of urgency that is fueling new efforts, new alliances and new progress in New York, Geneva, Vienna, Moscow and Washington.

Two examples demonstrate how American conservatives who just a few years ago condemned treaties as “the illusion of security” are now backing agreements to reduce nuclear arms.

The first is James Schlesinger, former Republican secretary of defense and energy, who just endorsed a new treaty with Russia, “The moment appears ripe for a renewal of arms control with Russia, and this bodes well for a continued reductions in the nuclear arsenal,” said the U.S. Strategic Posture Commission he co-chairs. Schlesinger once led the charge against further nuclear reductions and helped frame the Bush administration’s alternative approach. He wrote in his 2000 article, “The Demise of Arms Control?”, “The necessary target for arms control is to constrain those who desire to acquire nuclear weapons.” In this view, the threat comes from other states, and a large, robust U.S. nuclear arsenal was needed to counter proliferation.

In early May 2009, Schlesinger switched. The commission (whose leadership he shared with former Secretary of Defense Bill Perry) reported to Congress that: “the United States must seek additional cooperative measures of a political kind, including for example arms control and nonproliferation.”

The second is Brent Scowcroft, a perennial realist and a representative of a different wing of the Republican Party. He was never ideologically opposed to negotiated reductions with the Russians; however, in 1999 he opposed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Also in early May 2009, Scowcroft shifted. The Council on Foreign Relations Task Force he co-chaired with Bill Perry recommended the Senate ratify the nuclear test ban he once questioned. They also agreed, “U.S.-Russia relationship is ripe for a new formal arms control agreement, ‘one’ that would reflect current defense needs and realities and would result in deeper arms reductions.”

Charles Curtis at the *Nuclear Threat Initiative* describes the effect of these shifts and other changes as the thawing of frozen seas. Each day, we see new passages opened to Europe, Russia, and Asia.

We should not overstate the shift of hardliner positions. Secretary Schlesinger is still opposed to nuclear disarmament; Scowcroft still favors a large U.S. nuclear arsenal. But both (and many of their colleagues) have shifted significantly. While not endorsing Obama’s ultimate goal, they support several of his preliminary steps.

The Obama strategy seems to be to promote the ultimate vision, but to concentrate on the forging broad agreement on the immediate policies whose fulfillment can build confidence in the realism of nuclear disarmament. The success of this strategy, then, can be judged by its ability to achieve these steps. We will not have long to wait. Obama seems determined to mount a campaign over the next 12 months on this issue, which he listed as his top foreign pol-

icy goal. If he can build bipartisan support for the process, we should see results on the following steps:

- A follow-on treaty to START with a further lowering of the number of strategic nuclear weapons allowed under the SORT treaty.
- Negotiations underway for a new treaty to limit total U.S. and Russian forces to 1,000 or fewer weapons.
- U.S. Senate ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty;
- A new U.S. Nuclear Posture Review that will reduce the role of nuclear weapons in security policy and begin the transformation of the nuclear force to the 21st century threats;
- A successful 2010 NPT Review Conference that will increase the barriers to proliferation;
- Negotiations well underway for a verifiable ban on the production of nuclear weapons material;
- The containment and possible roll back of the North Korean program;
- Negotiations for the containment of the Iranian program, with some tangible signs of progress.

An accelerated program for securing and eliminating where possible all loose nuclear materials and weapons, propelled by an historic Global Summit on the Prevention of Nuclear Terrorism.

The U.S. administration, other governments, and many independent non-governmental organizations are already working on strategies to achieve these steps. Some are already in motion. Achieving most or all of these steps will be real progress, making the world more secure and more peaceful.

But tough problems will remain. The hard work will not be over. Indeed, it will never be over. But whereas 12 months ago the chances of achieving the accomplishments listed above were close to zero, the chances are high that Obama will realize most or all of them by the middle of the 2010.

Note

¹ This article was written with the assistance of *Ploughshares Fund* research assistant Benjamin Loehrke.

² Robert Gallucci, *Ploughshares Fund* Panel Presentation at Embassy of Italy, Washington, D.C., May 20, 2009

³ Sam Nunn, *Ploughshares Fund* Panel Presentation at Embassy of Italy, Washington, D.C., May 20, 2009.

⁴ Cited in *Business Week*, September 2005, http://businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/sep2005/nf20050920_2248_db016.htm (last visited on May 20, 2009).

⁵ George Pratt Shultz, Henry Kissinger, William Perry, Sam Nunn, "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2007.

⁶ Roland Timerbaev, "Nuclear Weapon-Free World: Ways of Moving Ahead," *Security Index*, No. 2, Spring 2009.

⁷ Gordon Brown, Speech at the Chamber of Commerce, New Delhi, India, January 21, 2008.

⁸ David Browne, "Laying the Foundations for Multilateral Disarmament," UN Conference on Disarmament, Geneva, February 5, 2008.



- ⁹ David Miliband, "A World Without Nuclear Weapons," *The Guardian*. December 8, 2008.
- ¹⁰ J.G. Støre, "Envisioning a World Free of Nuclear Weapons," *Arms Control Today*, June 2008.
- ¹¹ M. D'Alema, G. Fini, G. La Malfa, A. Parisi, F. Calogero, "For A World Free of Nuclear Weapons," *Corriere Della Sera*, July 24, 2008.
- ¹² E. Scotti, Speech by Secretary of State Scotti, UN Conference on Disarmament, Geneva, March 3, 2009.
- ¹³ Angela Merkel, Speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel, International Security Conference, Munich, February 7, 2009.
- ¹⁴ H. Schmidt, R. von Weizsäcker, E. Bahr, H.-D. Genscher, "Toward a Nuclear-Free World: A German View," *International Herald Tribune*, January 9, 2009; F.-W. Steinmeier, "A Fresh Start for Disarmament Policy," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, February 4, 2009.
- ¹⁵ Fank-Walter Steinmeier, "A Fresh Start..."
- ¹⁶ Nicolas Sarkozy, Presentation of SSBM *Le Terrible*, Cherbourg, March 21, 2008.
- ¹⁷ Council of the European Union (Political and Security Committee), December 8, 2009, "Statement on Strengthening International Security," (Doc. 16751/2/08, REV 2, COR 1), Brussels. Available at <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/App/NewsRoom/loadDocument.aspx?id=985&lang=en&directory=en/esdp/&fileName=104674.pdf> (last visited on May 18, 2009).
- ¹⁸ Nicolas Sarkozy, Letter to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, December 5, 2008.
- ¹⁹ Roland Timerbaev, "Nuclear Weapon-Free World..."
- ²⁰ H.S. Truman, C.R. Attlee, W.L.M. King, Declaration on the Atomic Bomb by President Truman and Prime Ministers Attlee and King, November 15, 1945.
- ²¹ J.F. Kennedy, State of the Union Address, Washington, D.C., January 11, 1962.
- ²² Ronald Reagan, Address Before the Diet, Tokyo, Japan, November 11, 1983.
- ²³ C. Hanley, "Gorbachev, Schultz Find Reykjavik Revived in Rome," Associated Press, April 28, 2009.
- ²⁴ C. Hagel, *Ploughshares Fund* Panel Presentation at Embassy of Italy, Washington, D.C., May 20, 2009.
- ²⁵ Joint Statement by President Dmitry Medvedev of the Russian Federation and President Barack Obama of the United States of America, London, April 1, 2009.
- ²⁶ A model for such assessments has been provided by a new U.S.-Russian expert assessment of the Iranian missile and nuclear program. The May 2009 report, published by the East-West Institute is titled "Iran's Nuclear and Missile Potential: A Joint Threat Assessment by U.S. and Russian Technical Experts." Available at <http://www.ewi.info/announcements/news/index.cfm?title=News&view=detail&nid=716&aid=7747> (last visited on May 25, 2009).
- ²⁷ Joint Statement by President George W. Bush and President V. V. Putin, St. Petersburg, July 18, 2006. Available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/07/print/20060717-2.html> (last visited on May 20, 2009).