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U.S. Nuclear Policy

The Open Window for Transformation

By: Joseph Cirincione

It is often said that the world is at a nuclear tipping point. By this, analysts mean that the policy choices we make over the next few years may determine if we tip over into nuclear catastrophe or pull back from the various brinks on which we now teeter. Those who thought talk of nuclear disasters was a thing of the past, that the end of the Cold War ended nuclear threats, might want to pay attention to this debate.

Today, there is deep, growing concern about four categories of nuclear threats. The first is the possibility of a terrorist group getting a nuclear weapon and detonating it in a major city. The second is the danger of an accidental, unauthorized or intentional use of one of the existing 25,000 nuclear weapons held by nine nations today. Third is the emergence of new nuclear-armed nations: North Korea today, perhaps Iran tomorrow, and others to follow. Last is the possible collapse of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty regime, the interlocking network of treaties and controls that has effectively slowed, if not altogether prevented, the spread of nuclear weapons.

US President Barack Obama has the most detailed, comprehensive, and transformative nuclear policy agenda any candidate has ever carried into the White House. As elaborated during his campaign and described on the president's web site, it is a plan to "set a goal of a world without nuclear weapons and pursue it." Obama has promised to thwart nuclear terrorism by securing all loose nuclear materials in the world within four years; to reduce nuclear threats by cutting US, Russian and other states' nuclear and missile arsenals; and to prevent any new nuclear weapons, new nuclear explosive tests and new production of fissile material for weapons. Can he do it?

Well, yes, he can. The failure of the Bush Doctrine, the intensification of nuclear threats, and the developing bipartisan, transnational consensus for deep reductions in nuclear arsenals create a unique convergent moment in which Obama could realize his desired transformation of

global nuclear policy. Obama's plan to "secure, reduce, and prevent" demonstrates his commitment to seize this opportunity, but those wedded to the nuclear status quo threaten to delay or deny real progress towards nuclear threat reduction and disarmament.

Nuclear Dangers

The Obama plan recognizes that today's threats are interrelated. Developments in one area affect other areas. For example, a weakening of export controls and treaty restraints increases the probability of additional states developing nuclear weapons, which increases the number of sites from which terrorists might acquire those weapons. The reverse is also true. Dramatic decreases in global nuclear arsenals could help generate the international cooperation needed to secure and eliminate stocks of nuclear weapons materials, making it less likely terrorists could steal or build a bomb.

Currently, each of these threats is growing. If unchecked, one or more nuclear nightmares are likely to be realized: Pakistan, a nation with enough material for perhaps 100 nuclear weapons and strong Islamic fundamentalist influences in its military and intelligence services, could destabilize. If it does, al Qaeda, now securely based in Pakistan, could gain control of nuclear materials for a bomb or the weapons themselves. Pakistan could go from a major non-NATO ally to our worst nuclear nightmare overnight.

One or more of the approximately 3,000 nuclear warheads Russia and the United States maintain on high-alert status, ready to launch within 15 minutes, could be fired through accident, miscalculation, or unauthorized use. Last year, the US Air Force lost track of 6 nuclear weapons—each ten times the size of the Hiroshima bomb—for 36 hours as they flew across country on a bomber no one realized had live weapons aboard. This year, a British and a French submarine collided in the middle of the second largest ocean on earth; together they carried 100 warheads. If this loss of control is occurring in the nations with the best command and control mechanisms, what might happen in the countries with the worst? If we have had accidents with planes and subs, is it unreasonable to expect accidents with missiles?

Over the past three years, a dozen Middle East nations have declared their interest in starting civilian nuclear power or research programs. Behind the stated desire for new energy lies a darker motive: a nuclear hedge against Iran. It is not Iran's nuclear reactor that worries neighboring states, but rather its rush to construct a uranium enrichment plant and a plutonium reprocessing plant. Both can be used to make fuel—or weapons. Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and others are now starting the decades-long process of acquiring their own nuclear

technological base. The results could be a Middle East with not one nuclear-armed state, Israel, but four or five. This is a recipe for nuclear war.

The United States and Russia in the 1960s led the negotiations for the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty—the backbone of the international nuclear nonproliferation regime. The treaty worked. From the 20 or so states exploring nuclear weapons programs then, only nine have weapons today. But the treaty's core is shaky. States have lost confidence that the two nuclear giants who together hold 96 percent of all nuclear weapons will ever fulfill their pledge to eliminate these arsenals. The commitment to disarmament has weakened in this decade, as progress has slowed and, effectively, no verifiable arms reduction treaty has been ratified since 1992. Meanwhile, the possibility of new nuclear states in Asia challenges the value of the treaty for many non-weapons states. If both trends continue, the treaty will collapse, triggering a “cascade of proliferation,” as a high-level expert panel warned the UN Secretary General in 2004.

The Collapse of the Old and the Rise of the New

The urgency of these threats combines with three other trends—the failure of past policy, the development of a strategic alternative, and the near simultaneous emergence of new leaders in the major nations—that together create a rare policy moment in which dramatic global shifts—such as that envisioned by President Obama—are not just possible, but probable.

The first trend is the widespread recognition that the Bush Doctrine failed. The policies of the last US administration not only did not make the United States safer, but they made the world's nuclear threats worse. The Bush policy posited that the greatest danger came from the nexus of terrorists, outlaw states and weapons of mass destruction. The solution was said to lie in direct military action to overthrow rogue regimes. Iraq was the first implementation of the policy. 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. North Korea and Iran accelerated their nuclear programs, making more progress in the past five years than they had in the previous ten. US legitimacy and credibility in the world weakened as political, financial, and human resources drained into the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Meanwhile, relations with Russia, whose cooperation is necessary for resolution of many of these issues, deteriorated. While the terrorist threat increased, programs to secure global stockpiles of nuclear weapon materials languished. Seeing this record of results, many nations and the US public rejected the policy and the policy-makers. This

strategic collapse left a policy vacuum.

Into the breach stepped “the four statesmen”, unlikely heroes carrying a bold strategic alternative: the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. Republicans George Shultz and Henry Kissinger and Democrats William Perry and Sam Nunn promoted this once utopian dream in a bipartisan appeal in two Wall Street Journal op-eds for “A World Free of Nuclear Weapons.” This is the second trend. Their call led to an organized campaign and won the endorsement of two-thirds of the living former national security advisors and secretaries of state and defense, including James Baker, Colin Powell, Melvin Laird, Frank Carlucci, Warren Christopher, and Madeleine Albright. The group detailed a series of practical steps that can lead towards this goal, including deep, negotiated reductions in US and Russian forces, the US ratification of the nuclear test ban treaty, and an end to global production of nuclear weapon fissile material.

There is growing domestic and international support for this agenda across ideological lines. Public opinion polls show that 84 percent of Americans would feel safer knowing that no country—including the United States—had nuclear weapons. The European Union has proposed a detailed non-proliferation agenda, presented by conservative French President Nicholas Sarkozy, who called it an “ambitious program that is truly capable of achieving concrete progress on the path of disarmament.” Labor Party Prime Minister Gordon Brown has pledged that the United Kingdom “will be at the forefront of the international campaign to accelerate disarmament amongst possessor states, to prevent proliferation to new states, and to ultimately achieve a world that is free from nuclear weapons.”

Similarly, UK Foreign Minister David Milliband said in December 2008: “I believe the moment is now right to work with the new US administration and our partners for a renewed drive: to stop proliferation, realize the benefits of nuclear energy, and radically accelerate progress on six key steps necessary to move the world towards the abolition of nuclear weapons.”

The chances that this policy could be adopted have been increased by the final trend: a nearly simultaneous change in executive leadership in most of the world’s major powers. The leaders of the G8 nations in 2008 included only one, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who was in office in 2006.

Other key nations, including Israel, Pakistan and India also have new leaders, and Iran’s 2009 elections may replace its president as well. All are less tied to the policies of the past; all look for new directions that

can help them make their mark on the world stage. A bold, new nuclear policy might fit the bill.

The Current Debate

The policy shift, of course, is not guaranteed. The debate today is split into roughly two camps, each with its own factions. The advantage still lies with the camp favoring the status quo. This is composed of the nuclear bureaucracies in various countries (including the nuclear laboratories and sections of the military whose careers depend on continuing current nuclear weapons programs), conservative analysts loyal to the strategies developed during the Cold War, and political figures seeking to use the issue to the advantage of their party.

The “Nuclear Permanence Camp” has two main factions. The conservative wing likes things just the way they are and has contempt for those seeking dramatic change. Former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger says only “religious zealots” want the elimination of nuclear weapons. “The bomb is with us to stay. It is, after all, the ultimate guardian of our safety,” said Guy Roberts, who represented the United States on nuclear policy to NATO during the Bush administration. He told a European Parliament conference in November: “The peace and stability which nuclear deterrence provides is immeasurable. In this uncertain and increasingly dangerous world where proliferation is a given fact, it is the best—albeit not perfect—answer to the question of how we continue to ensure the safety and security of our nations, our people, our freedoms.”

The liberal permanence faction favors reductions in existing US and Russian arsenals, perhaps down to 1,000 warheads each, but would hold the line about there. Former Secretary of Defense Harold Brown wrote in the *Washington Quarterly* in late 2007: “The assertion that we intend to abolish nuclear weapons is likely to gain less in goodwill and cooperation in nonproliferation programs from others than it will lose when it becomes clear that there is no believable program or prospect of doing so.”

On the other side is the “Nuclear Change Camp.” It includes former military and civilian officials who helped create the nuclear order they now believe obsolete, political figures including President Barack Obama and some members of his cabinet, international leaders such as those identified above, non-government groups and philanthropic foundations. All support the goal of the elimination of nuclear weapons; all support practical steps towards that goal.

Some in the Change Camp tend to see nuclear disarmament as a distant goal and emphasize progress on the steps. The Nuclear Threat Initiative, led by former Senator Sam Nunn and CNN founder Ted Turner, focuses

much of its efforts on achieving near-term victories on the steps, such as rapidly securing and eliminating nuclear materials around the globe, preventing the spread of nuclear technologies, and eliminating civilian use of highly-enriched uranium. The group is working to build consensus around a nuclear “base camp” on the way to climbing the still difficult to see summit of nuclear elimination.

The other wing emphasizes the attainment of the nuclear-free vision. Global Zero, for example, is a new, international alliance working for a comprehensive agreement to eliminate all nuclear weapons through phased and verifiable reductions. It has garnered the support of a wide range of leaders including Queen Noor of Jordan, Virgin Group CEO Richard Branson, former President Jimmy Carter and his national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, former Reagan strategic arms negotiator Richard Burt, and former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Jack Sheehan. There are dozens of organizations and governments working on similar efforts. A creative tension exists between the two wings as they vie for influence. Some “eliminationists” believe a focus on near-term steps will drain momentum into a swamp of arms control negotiations; some in the “step-by-step” wing believe stressing elimination discredits efforts to make real reductions now.

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown artfully embraced both wings when he declared in a March 17 speech, “I know from President Obama and the new US administration that America shares with us the ultimate ambition of a world free from nuclear weapons. But let me be clear this will be a difficult path that will be crossed in steps – not in one leap.” He promised a “Road to 2010” plan in preparation for the 2010 NPT Review Conference, that would include “detailed proposal on civil nuclear power, disarmament and non-proliferation.” This plan would lead to multi-lateral nuclear disarmament, he said, “With each step we must aim to build confidence, confidence that action to prevent proliferation is working and that states with weapons are making strides to live up to their commitments.

The New Administration's New Policy

While President Obama has embraced the goal of elimination of nuclear weapons, his administration has officials in both wings, plus some who favor minor adjustments to the status quo. The most detailed outline of its still developing nuclear policy came from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's opening statement at her confirmation hearing.

Secretary Clinton stated that, “The gravest threat that America faces is the danger that weapons of mass destruction will fall into the hands of terrorists. To ensure our future security, we must...take the lead in working with others to reduce current nuclear stockpiles and prevent the

development and use of dangerous new weaponry.”

To prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and defend against nuclear terrorism, Secretary Clinton laid out a policy that “[gets] America back in the business of engaging other nations to reduce stockpiles of nuclear weapons.” She said the United States will “act with urgency to prevent proliferation in North Korea and Iran, secure loose nuclear weapons and materials, and shut down the market for selling them.”

Laying out the agenda on engagement with Russia, Clinton said that the administration will work with Russia to “secure their agreement to extend... the START Treaty,” seek “agreements for further reductions in nuclear weapons,” and take US and Russian missiles off hair-trigger alert.

Supporting the nonproliferation regime, Clinton emphasized the importance of the Nonproliferation Treaty, stating, “The United States must exercise the leadership needed to shore up the regime.” She then said that the administration will work with the Senate towards ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and begin negotiations on a verifiable Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty.

This strategy of secure, reduce and prevent is still in policy and budgetary development. There will be a natural tension between those who favor a transformation of US nuclear policy and those who seek incremental change. Ivo Daalder—Obama’s nominee for US ambassador to NATO—and former defense department nuclear policy official Jan Lodal wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in late 2008, that the president “will have the opportunity to make the elimination of all nuclear weapons the organizing principle of US nuclear policy.” They and other experts favor a presidential declaration that the only purpose of US nuclear weapons is to prevent the use of nuclear weapons by others, and negotiations to rapidly reduce US and Russian arsenals to 1,000 or fewer total warheads each. Others in the administration, such as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, favor negotiations but may not want to reduce as much, favor the development of new nuclear weapons and see these weapons as vital to US and NATO security even against states that have no nuclear weapons. Gates and others may want to reserve the right to use nuclear weapons even against non-nuclear targets.

The administration is on the move even as it refines its approach. Four days into office, President Obama established a new office of the coordinator for the preventions of proliferation and terrorism in the National Security Council (secure). He soon sent officials for private talks in Moscow to explore new agreements to cut nuclear arms and directed his team to cut funding for the troubled anti-missile programs (reduce). He also eliminated funds for new nuclear weapons favored by the Bush

administration and signaled his intention to win Senate ratification of a treaty banning all nuclear explosive tests and to negotiate a treaty banning the production of nuclear weapon materials (prevent).

As the administration crafts its policy, it will need to repair the damage done to the nonproliferation regime over the last eight years, as detailed in the discussion of the collapse of the Bush Doctrine, above. He will have to work with close allies, such as Prime Minister Brown, to develop a concrete plan for achieving the strategic objectives detailed by Secretary Clinton. The president can, in this process, take advantages of successful policies still in place. Working with other governments, the United States has the capability through threat reduction programs to secure global nuclear assets within the next four years; through international agreements to reduce and dismantle excess US and Russian nuclear weapons; through international diplomacy to convince other states to increase the barriers to and penalties for proliferation.

As with the financial crisis, President Obama appears to see the failure of past nuclear policy and the dangers it created as a window of opportunity to draw upon past successes and current institutions, inspire and mobilize governments and citizens, and mold a new policy. Seizing this opportunity, the Obama administration seems to be crafting a nuclear policy that directly addresses the threats, deemphasizes the role of nuclear weapons in international security, and makes irreversible strides towards nuclear disarmament.

His time is short. As surely as the nuclear policy window has opened, it will close. Hesitation, timidity and ambivalence will squander the moment. President Obama has the ability to be bold when boldness is the only way to cut this nuclear Gordian knot. Not only is that the right policy for the moment, but it is rather long overdue.

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