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Setting the Stage for a New Global Nuclear Order: The American Approach

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Abstract

The first in a series of three, this paper examines the changes in the global nuclear regime that can result from the agreement between the United States (US) and Russia on the size of their nuclear strategic weapons and the Nuclear Posture Review of the Obama administration. Although Barack Obama is not the first world leader attempting to rationalise the global nuclear order, he has made the same a part of his grand design. He had earlier promised that if elected, he will make a serious effort to create a nuclear-free world and has appeared to have embarked on fulfilling that promise. The paper argues that circumstances that have led the relative newcomers to the nuclear club - China, India, Israel, Pakistan and North Korea - to acquire nuclear weapons, are so different that it will be difficult to limit, let alone eliminate, their arsenals through a single global treaty.

Setting the Stage for a New Nuclear Order

Several Asian countries, China, India and Pakistan included, will be among the more than forty states participating in the nuclear summit convened by President Obama. The summit will be held in Washington on 13 April 2010. It will be held after the American President has signed a new and far-reaching arms control agreement with his Russian counterpart, President Dmitri Medvedev. The signatures were put on the new treaty on 8 April 2010 at Prague, where President Obama laid out his vision for a nuclear-free world. Addressing a large crowd in Prague on 5 April 2009, he had said that “the existence of thousands of nuclear weapons is the most dangerous legacy of the Cold War....Today the Cold War has disappeared but thousands of those weapons have not. In a strange turn of history, the threat of global nuclear war has gone down, but the threat of nuclear attack has gone up. More nations have acquired these weapons. Testing has continued. Black trade in nuclear materials abound. The technology to build a bomb has spread. Terrorists are determined to build, buy

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or steal one. Our efforts to contain these dangers are centred on a global non-proliferation regime but as more people and nations break the rules, we could reach the point where the centre cannot hold. Now understand that this matters to people everywhere. One nuclear weapon exploded in one city – be it in New York or Moscow, Islamabad or Mumbai, Tokyo or Tel Aviv, Paris or Prague – could kill hundreds of thousands of people. And no matter where it happens, there is no end to what the consequences might be – for our global safety, our security, our society, our economy, to our ultimate survival.”² The President was not prepared to accept this situation as being inevitable. “And as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon, the US has a moral responsibility to act. We cannot succeed in this endeavour alone, but we can lead it, we can start it.”³

In his attempt to usher in a new nuclear order, the American president chose to proceed in four steps. The first was to contain the arsenals possessed by the US and Russia. The two were armed to teeth during the Cold War and had threatened to blow the other up, if attacked. It was only the threat of “mutual assured destruction” that saved the world from annihilation. Even after the end of the Cold War and disintegration of the Soviet Union, US and Russia continued to hold on to most of their nuclear weapons. The US, for instance, has 10,000 weapons, of which 5,000 are deployed. The second step, as already indicated, was to sign a new strategic arms reduction treaty with Russia. The third was to call a summit of the large world powers, some of whom possess nuclear weapons, some who can develop them if the occasion so demanded, and some others determined to prevent the fate the President had outlined in his Prague speech. The Washington conference will also prepare the way for a major United Nations (UN) non-proliferation conference – the fourth and final step in President Obama’s approach. This is scheduled for May 2010, at which the parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) would review the same with the expectation of updating it. India and Pakistan are unlikely to be present at this meeting as they have not signed the NPT.

Nuclear Posture Review

The Washington summit will use the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) as a background. The document was issued by the White House on 6 April 2010, six days before the Washington summit.⁴ This was the third NPR to be prepared by the administration since the end of the Cold War. The preparation was ordered by the US Congress. It took longer than expected to prepare as there were sharp differences within the administration about the size of the US arsenal and its possible upgradation.⁵ The final draft of the review calls for major new investments in nuclear weapons laboratories and facilities to maintain the ageing arsenal. However, these weapons would not be upgraded as recommended by the strategy developed by President George W. Bush in 2002. Pursuing that approach would have gone against the basic purpose behind the current Obama approach. It would have started another arms race.

² The White House, “Remarks by in Prague as delivered” http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office, Accessed on 6 April 2010.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ United States Department of Defense, *The Nuclear Posture Review (NPR)*, Washington DC, 6 April 2010. The NPR was presented at a news conference attended by Secretaries Robert Gates (Defense), Hillary Clinton (State), Chou (Energy) and Admiral Michael Mullen (Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff).

⁵ Some of these were detailed in several newspaper reports including David E. Sanger and Peter Baker, “Obama to limit scenarios to use nuclear weapon”, *New York Times*, 6 April 2010, pp. A1 and A12.

The review also recommends tighter penalties on nuclear rogue states, a matter that would be taken up at the forthcoming NPT conference in New York.

The Obama Approach

As a presidential candidate, President Obama had made some promises in the hard-fought contest. These include making the world a safer place by reducing the number of nuclear weapons available for use around the globe, making it difficult for countries that did not have weapons to acquire them, and specify circumstances in which the US would use them. This was a difficult posture to adopt for a presidential candidate who faced experienced opposition in the fight for his party's nomination as well as in the Presidential election itself. Both Hillary Clinton, his Democrat challenger, as well as John McCain, the Republican Party candidate, was supposed to have better appreciation of the US strategic interests than the inexperienced neophyte Barack Obama. After winning the election, devising a new nuclear strategy not only for the US, but also for the world at large, become a key concern for President Obama. Indeed, his commitment to reducing the nuclear threat was emphasised by the Nobel Peace Prize Committee in granting him the award for 2009.

On 5 April 2010, President Obama met the press to throw light on the way he wished to conduct his country's nuclear policy as well as how he would be pushing other nuclear powers and those close to crossing the nuclear threshold to follow suit. He said that he was revamping the American nuclear strategy to narrow the conditions under which the US would use nuclear weapons. The country would abjure the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear countries. But Obama included a major caveat: "The countries must be in compliance with their non-proliferation obligations under international treaties. That loop hole would mean Iran would remain on the potential target list."⁶ Iran could be attacked if it developed nuclear weapons since that would be in defiance of the NPT it had signed decades ago.

President Obama further elaborated the nature of threats faced by his country. "I think what is clear is that the nature of Cold War conflict which saw either mutually assured destruction or a series of low level proxy wars around the world has been replaced with a multilateral or a multipolar world where the US is a singular military power, but our relationship with Russia has changed for the better, our relationship with other nuclear powers are ones in which tensions are managed effectively. And the big threats are now threats of nuclear terrorism, forms of asymmetrical warfare, state sponsorship of terrorism, all of which I think require more than a nuclear option or no option that can be realistic, serious deterrent."⁷

The new policy will also specify that the US weapons were for the purpose of deterrence. However, the policy has not gone as far as the left wing of his Democratic party wished him to proceed. It wanted him to take out the option of 'first strike' altogether; the weapons would be used only if the US was under threat of attack or actually attacked. Going as far as some other democrats would have wanted him to go would have unnerved some of America's European allies, who lived under the US protective nuclear umbrella.

⁶ Mary Beth Sheridan and Walter Pincus, "New nuclear policy takes middle course", *Washington Post*, 6 April 2010, p. A1 and A5.

⁷ From the transcript in the *New York Times*, <http://nytimes.com/world>. Accessed on 6 April 2010.

Can one nuclear strategy work for all?

How should the recognised minor nuclear powers react to the questions raised in the US review? It is possible to divide the countries that are nuclear powers, or are now recognised as such, into several categories. The US stands alone a country that has more interests around the globe and more non-state enemies than any other. It has declared that it would not use nuclear weapons against any of the recognised nuclear powers including the original five as well as India, Israel and Pakistan. The last three are not NPT signatories. As such, they did not violate any international treaty in going nuclear. However, North Korea which has developed nuclear weapons, and Iran, which seems to be keen on doing so, are NPT signatories and subject to sanctions. It is highly unlikely that the three European countries, Britain, France and Russia that have nuclear weapons will use them against one another. They wish to have weapons not for reasons of national security, but because of the prestige associated with being nuclear. The original reason for developing this kind of weaponry was the threat posed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. There is a move in Europe that the US should remove the weapons it maintains in Europe, a demand towards which President Obama is also sympathetic.

The real threat of use exists among the late-comers to the nuclear game – India, Israel, China, Pakistan and North Korea. Each of these five nations believe that circumstances might arise that would force them to use the weapons in self-defence. South Asia presents the greatest challenge to the viability of the new nuclear order that will emerge following the deliberations on 13 April 2010. The most important question before the international community is how to create a level of comfort concerning these countries that nuclear de-escalation becomes a viable option here as well. This will be discussed further in the next paper in the series following the Washington summit.

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