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Obama's Nuclear Agenda: The Next Four Years

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At a recent international conference on nonproliferation and disarmament, a colleague asked, somewhat irreverently (but not irrelevantly), "Now that Obama has been re-elected, will he finally earn his Nobel Prize?" It's a fair question.

Hopes were high within the international disarmament community after President Obama's 2009 Prague speech when he pledged to move toward a nuclear weapons-free world. But those who cheered the loudest then are among the most disappointed now, frustrated over the slow progress toward this goal.

To be fair, there were a few other challenges on his plate: an economy and financial system in disarray; two messy, unfinished wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; the United States' international authority at a record low; an increasingly polarized and politicized domestic scene; other pressing priorities (universal health care being not the least); and more.

Despite these challenges, some important steps were taken. The 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) devoted an entire chapter to "Reducing the Role of US Nuclear Weapons" while stating "the objective of making deterrence of nuclear attack on the United States or our allies and partners the sole purpose of US nuclear weapons." For those hoping for a "no first use" pledge, this fell far short, but it was a significant step in that direction. The NPR also states unequivocally that the United States "will not develop new nuclear warheads" and "will not support new military missions or provide for new military capabilities."

The Obama administration also expended political capital to achieve ratification of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty ("New START") with Russia, which reduced both nations' operational nuclear weapons inventories.

However, the administration's willingness to "immediately and aggressively" seek ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) proved in vain, as did efforts to work toward the start of negotiations for the conclusion of a fissile material cut-off treaty. The administration can pride itself in the achievements of the Nuclear Security Summit process it established, but its initial goal to secure all vulnerable nuclear materials in four years has not materialized; at home the administration stepped back from the spent fuel repository at Yucca Mountain without any alternative in sight, allowing high-level nuclear waste to accumulate at power stations country-wide. Finally, the North Korean and Iranian nuclear crises remain unresolved.

It would be unfair to solely blame President Obama and his team for failing to find solutions to all these problems. But now that he is re-elected, it is important to reflect on what we can realistically expect his administration to accomplish over its next four years. Such an analysis is particularly relevant in the Asia-Pacific context as Washington "rebalances" its foreign and national security policies toward this region.

Any analysis of US nuclear policy begins with a description of the main nuclear challenges for the United States in today's international security environment. According to the 2010 NPR, they are threefold: promoting positive trends in major power relations, i.e. to enhance cooperation and reduce competition among them; strengthening regional deterrence and reassuring US allies and partners; and, arguably most urgent, combating nuclear terrorism and nuclear proliferation.

In the Asia-Pacific, the major power agenda consists of two sets of relationships: one among the United States, Russia, and China, the other among China, India, and Pakistan. The United States, Russia, and China essentially deter one another. While the United States (and Russia) may worry that deeper reductions may tempt Beijing to "sprint to parity," China's "minimal deterrence" strategy provides the necessary second-strike capability to provide strategic stability.

China, for its part, worries not only about the US (and Russian) nuclear arsenal, but also increasingly about India's. And Pakistan has been rapidly building up its own arsenal in response to India's nuclear and conventional capabilities. So far, New Delhi has not countered Pakistan's moves, but if it did, a nuclear arms race in South Asia would likely drive China to respond, which would in turn impact the United States and Russia (and could stall nuclear reductions).

One observation is immediately apparent from this overview: the United States has limited power and influence to shape the major power agenda in the Asia-Pacific. The future of this agenda will be determined mainly by decisions made in Beijing, New Delhi, and Islamabad – not in Washington.

Similarly, the United States' ability to strengthen deterrence and reassure its Asian allies and partners is increasingly under stress. China's slow but steady nuclear and conventional modernization and North Korea's nuclear weapon development are transforming the Asian security environment. These developments and the proclaimed reduction of roles and numbers of nuclear weapons in US security strategy and military doctrine have raised concerns among US Asian allies and partners about the US commitment to their security and, in particular, the reliability of the US

extended deterrent. Despite the US "pivot strategy" or rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific, those Asian allies and partners have questions about the role that the United States intends to play in the region and about how much this role is sustainable over the long term in a fiscally constrained environment. In our discussions with them, many claim to be "reassured but not convinced" by US policy.

Significantly, despite Tokyo's and Seoul's proclaimed continued faith in US security assurances, a growing number of voices in both countries (especially Korea) have argued for the development of independent nuclear weapon capabilities. And while Canberra has continued to stress the centrality of the US alliance (and accepted additional US forces on Australian territory on a rotational basis), a growing number of Australian security analysts and politicians have begun to contemplate a reduced US presence in the region: some support the US strategic presence but reject the nuclear dimension of that presence; others (a much smaller group) are ambivalent about whether the United States and by definition its extended deterrent posture are good for Australia.

Finally, the US ability to combat the proliferation-terrorism nexus has proved limited. Although the US endorsement of nuclear disarmament has improved the atmospherics, little tangible progress has been achieved on the nonproliferation and nuclear security fronts. Many Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) members in Asia (and beyond) continue to argue that the United States and the other nuclear weapon states have "not done enough" to advance nuclear disarmament and that the "baby steps" undertaken by the United States and Russia through New START do not justify more efforts from them on nonproliferation and nuclear security, even as they are developing nuclear power programs. This seems remarkably shortsighted since proliferation and especially acts of nuclear terrorism will have a much greater impact on their societies and economies than most seem willing to acknowledge. But the quid pro quo mentality remains nonetheless.

Given the Obama administration's difficulties in rallying domestic support behind New START and Russia's reluctance to conclude any other arms control agreement for the time being, it is difficult to envision what the administration could do next to show NAM states that there is progress toward nuclear disarmament and that they should therefore enhance their nonproliferation and nuclear security credentials.

This analysis points to an important conclusion: be it to address the major power agenda, to reassure its allies and partners, or to combat nuclear terrorism and nuclear proliferation, US power and influence to respond to these challenges is much more modest than is often assumed.

Let us be clear, however: the United States remains a critical player to generate the forces of change and to set the broader example. This was illustrated last week, when on the occasion of Obama's landmark visit to Myanmar, its president, Thein Sein, announced that his country would sign an Additional Protocol with the International Atomic Energy Agency and allow nuclear inspectors on its territory. Just a few months earlier, at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Myanmar's defense minister indicated that although Myanmar had abandoned all nuclear activity and military cooperation with North Korea, it would not allow nuclear inspectors on its territory. The recent policy shift is not only a measure of how much (and how quickly) Myanmar wants to change, but also of how much it felt Obama's visit needed to be acknowledged with a tangible deliverable.

Likewise, however apprehensive they may be about US commitment to their security and the reliability of the US deterrent, our Asian allies and partners continue to actively seek protection from the United States. And it would be foolish to think that the evolution of major power relations in the Asia-Pacific will not depend on US policy choices. The United States still is, and continues to be regarded as, "the indispensable nation."

As his next (and last) four years begin, it is important to have realistic expectations about what President Obama can achieve in the nuclear domain (as elsewhere). This is an area where US leadership is essential and much faith and goodwill has already been generated.

One hopes that at a minimum, we will see a resumption of serious bilateral US-Russia discussions aimed at further reductions in nuclear arsenals and that the P-5 process initiated three years ago will begin to bear fruit in a more tangible way and, hopefully, be expanded to include all nuclear-armed states to help stabilize the arms build-up in China and South Asia. An earnest effort to bring the CTBT into force would also be a major step, as would the opening of meaningful dialogues with Iran and North Korea to turn around nuclear programs in both nations. Finally, US allies need to better understand and embrace the non-nuclear dimension of extended deterrence and the non-aligned world needs to better appreciate and throw its weight behind all international efforts to combat the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and enhance the security of sensitive materials and technologies.

If President Obama can help move the world in this direction, he will have earned his Nobel Prize. It will prove a worthy down payment on the promise of greater progress.

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