

FOREIGN AFFAIRS



Obama's Nuclear Future

The Battle to Reduce the U.S. Nuclear Stockpile Begins

By: Joseph Cirincione – March 6, 2013

After two years of making steady progress in reducing the nuclear risks to the United States, President Barack Obama stalled in those efforts in the second half of his first term. Recent speeches and press reports indicate, however, that he is trying to revive the endeavor. With a new national security team in place, an emerging consensus forming around the need to reshape the nuclear arsenal, and budget realities forcing a reassessment of the size of the U.S. stockpile, Obama may well be positioned for success.

When Obama came into office in 2009, he was ready to move beyond the United States' Cold War nuclear posture, which calls for stockpiles that "are much larger than required for deterrence today and that have scant efficacy in dealing with the main contemporary threats to U.S. and global security," as a 2012 report from Global Zero put it. His first nuclear policy review, finalized in April 2009, thus focused on preventing nuclear proliferation, securing all existing stockpiles (to prevent them from falling into the hands of terrorists and other nonstate actors), and reducing global arsenals. Each element of the policy was designed to reinforce the others: drawing down obsolete arsenals would help foster international cooperation, which the current nuclear powers needed to stand united against new nuclear states and to secure existing bomb materials. These developments, in turn, would promote a security environment comfortable enough for the current nuclear states to continue reducing their stockpiles.

At first, the new policy seemed to work. In his first two years, Obama negotiated an arms reduction treaty with Russia (New START), spearheaded several UN Security Council resolutions on nuclear weapons, and gathered 50 world leaders in Washington for a Nuclear Security Summit that forged an action plan for securing nuclear stockpiles. In doing this, he rebuilt U.S. credibility and leadership on nuclear issues. In April 2010, *Washington Post* columnist Jim Hoagland wrote that "President Obama has turned the once utopian-sounding idea of global nuclear disarmament into a useful tool for U.S. foreign policy."

But then, toward the end of 2010, Obama's plans stalled as Republicans waged a fierce battle against ratifying New START. The pact was eventually approved, but not until the last day of the Senate's session that December. His staff, complaining about arms control fatigue, urged the president to devote his energies in the next year to other issues, including his own re-election.

As a result, the United States made scant progress on nuclear policy in 2011 and 2012. Even the task of producing presidential guidance to implement the Nuclear Posture

Review lagged. (This is the set of instructions the president gives the military to guide it in preparing nuclear war plans and forces. Even small changes in the instructions can result in swings of thousands of warheads in the arsenal.) The drafting dragged on for nearly two years, even though it was supposed to take six months. The Defense Department led the interagency team that finally finished the guidance in the summer of 2012, but the president never signed it. Today, therefore, U.S. nuclear forces are still sized to fight a Soviet foe that disappeared two decades ago.

Now, with re-election behind him, Obama appears determined to finish the job he started. In December, he devoted his first national security speech after the election to nuclear policy. In his remarks, which coincided with the twentieth anniversary of the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program (projects that have led to the disposal of thousands of nuclear weapons and hundreds of tons of bomb materials in former Soviet states), Obama honored the two legislative founders of the initiative, former U.S. Senators Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) and Richard Lugar (R-Ind.). "Missile by missile, warhead by warhead, shell by shell, we're putting a bygone era behind us," Obama promised. "We're moving closer to the future we seek."

To help him in that task, Obama has now forged an experienced nuclear policy team. In December, he tapped former Massachusetts Senator John Kerry to be his next secretary of state. During his years in the Senate, Kerry proved a formidable advocate of nuclear security initiatives, serving, most recently, as an outspoken supporter of New START. Former Nebraska Senator Chuck Hagel -- whom Obama installed as secretary of defense -- also has a notable nuclear policy record: in 2007, he co-authored sweeping nonproliferation legislation with then Senator Obama, and has since led several major reviews of Iran policy and nuclear posture, including the Global Zero study. Vice President Joe Biden, meanwhile, is a master of nuclear treaties and programs from his years on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Finally, if Obama nominates Rose Gottemoeller to stay on as undersecretary for arms control and international security, he will send a crucial signal about his seriousness on new reductions. Gottemoeller negotiated the New START treaty and has already traveled to Moscow to explore a new round of talks.

In the next few months, it is very likely that Obama will deliver another major speech on nuclear policy, perhaps timed to mark the fourth anniversary of his April 2009 Prague address or the 50th of President John F. Kennedy's famous plea for nuclear disarmament in June 1963. That speech will fully articulate Obama's new nuclear strategy, which could, according to reliable press reports, include reductions in deployed strategic warheads from the current 1,720 counted under New START to perhaps 1,000 (a one-third cut below the New START ceiling of 1,550 that goes into effect in 2018). It could also include cutting the number of tactical and reserve weapons by half, from roughly 3,000 to about 1,500. Kerry and Hagel, once firmly in office, may also weigh in with additional recommendations for the address and guidance.

Even after the speech, of course, questions would remain on how to meet these goals: by negotiating a new treaty, by agreeing to reciprocal cuts with Russia, or simply by using executive authority to enact long-overdue adjustments to the U.S. nuclear force. For Obama, the third approach may be the most attractive option. Although the aging Russian strategic arsenal is now smaller than that of the United States (and will fall even

further by the end of this decade), Russian officials have balked at new arms talks. They have a long list of concerns that they want the United States to address beforehand, including limitations on U.S. anti-missile programs and NATO's conventional forces. Meanwhile, in Washington, ideological infighting has crippled the Republican Party as a reliable partner in national security discussions and ground government business to a halt. A party split between budget hawks and defense hawks and fueled by a base suspicious of any treaty that might compromise American "sovereignty" has fallen back on blocking proposals rather than shaping policy.

No president should allow another country or a handful of senators to force the United States to keep weapons it does not need and cannot afford. In 1991, President George H.W. Bush cut thousands of nuclear weapons unilaterally, without treaties or agreements of any kind. "The President wanted to take the initiative in arms control," explained Brent Scowcroft, then national security adviser. "He saw intuitively that there was a new world forming, and didn't want to be behind the power curve and be driven either by the Congress and the budget, or by the Pentagon's resistance." President George W. Bush also cut thousands of nuclear weapons unilaterally, including by quietly withdrawing hundreds of tactical weapons from Europe without Russian quid pro quo.

Similarly, Obama could implement the reductions required by New START now, rather than wait until 2018, cutting several hundred from the deployed arsenal. He could also announce that 1,000 strategic warheads are more than enough for a reliable nuclear deterrent, regardless of the size of the Russian force, and delay or cancel plans for new warheads and delivery systems. After all, as the Department of Defense explained in a classified report to Congress last year, Russia "would not be able to achieve a militarily significant advantage by any plausible expansion of its strategic nuclear forces, even in a cheating or breakout scenario."

Even if Obama is more politically cautious than expected, and decides to look for bipartisan consensus on cutting the nuclear stockpile, budget pressures might force the issue. Current plans and programs would require the government to spend hundreds of billions of dollars over the next ten years and every decade thereafter to overhaul its entire nuclear arsenal -- submarines, bombers, missiles, and warheads -- while simultaneously slashing the defense budget. Conventional forces would suffer. As the reality of defense budget cuts sinks in, Congress could lose its appetite for costly nuclear modernization programs. Support for reshaping and reducing the arsenal will thus likely grow.

Democratic leaders in Congress are already there: Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin (D-Mich.) has said that the nuclear budget "is ripe for cuts." Representative Adam Smith (D-Wash.), the ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee, said after the president's recent address, "We can reduce the size of our nuclear arsenal, potentially saving billions of dollars and strengthening national security." Now Republican budget hawks have also shown themselves willing to allow the sequester to bite into the defense budget, despite the pleas of their defense-minded colleagues. The libertarian Cato Institute has identified cuts to the nuclear budget that could save almost \$90 billion over the next ten years. Conservative columnist David

Brooks notes, "Support for high defense spending is probably decreasing in the Republican Party."

To be sure, major obstacles lie ahead, including recalcitrant regimes in Iran and North Korea, an entrenched nuclear bureaucracy, and fierce Republican opposition. But all the gears are in motion for the development of a sensible, modern nuclear policy, and Obama has the backing of the Joint Chiefs and much of the American security establishment to achieve it. If he succeeds in finally breaking the grip of Cold War thinking on this central pillar of national security, he will leave a legacy that few presidents have matched.