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Analysis: N.Korea crisis latest blow to Obama's nuclear agenda

1:01am EST

By [Matt Spetalnick](#)

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - President Barack Obama has set the goal of eventually ridding the world of nuclear arms as a central theme of his presidency, but North Korea's defiance and other recent setbacks have raised fresh doubts about whether he can turn his vision into reality.

With Obama's broader nuclear agenda seemingly imperiled at home and abroad, he now faces a test of whether he can salvage credibility for U.S. leadership in dealing effectively with more immediate threats like the one posed by Pyongyang.

"It won't be enough to just hope for the best," said Christopher Preble, a foreign policy expert at the Cato Institute in Washington. "He's going to have to start prioritizing."

North Korea has suddenly jumped to the top of Obama's list with the disclosure of new advances in uranium enrichment at its main atomic complex and its shelling of a South Korean island on Tuesday.

Obama's is expected to try to balance hard rhetoric to intimidate and contain the North with diplomacy aimed at avoiding military escalation as he seeks to rally the international community to ratchet up the pressure on the reclusive communist leadership in Pyongyang.

Some analysts question whether such a nuanced approach will be enough to bolster his longer-term push for global nuclear disarmament.

Those hopes have already suffered setbacks as Iran continues to flout international demands to curb its nuclear program and Obama's signature arms reduction treaty with Russia remains bogged down in the U.S. Senate.

Obama set expectations high last year in Prague when he declared it was time to end "Cold War thinking" and committed the United States to seeking a nuclear weapons-free world.

He acknowledged it was an achievement he was not likely to see in his lifetime, but his lofty oratory was enough to help him win the Nobel Peace Prize.

Obama followed in April with the unveiling of a new U.S. policy that renounced development of new nuclear weapons and restricted use of those already in Washington's arsenal.

CONSERVATIVES SAY LOFTY GOALS ENDANGER U.S.

Aides said it set an example for other nuclear nations, which just days later attended a nuclear security summit hosted by Obama at which he secured agreement to work toward locking down loose bomb-making material.

But the new U.S. doctrine drew condemnation from conservatives who said it would compromise national security.

Critics say Obama's approach has also helped embolden Iran and North Korea, which have largely spurned Obama's diplomatic outreach and pressed ahead with their nuclear programs.

"The notion that self-weakening wins us foreign friends is flawed," said Joseph Carafano, a military expert at the conservative Heritage Foundation. "The (nuclear-free) vision was unrealistic then and is just as unrealistic now."

While Obama has been credited with forging greater international solidarity on sanctions against Pyongyang and Tehran, such pressure has done little to halt their efforts.

North Korean officials recently took a U.S. nuclear scientist to a plant at its Yongbyon nuclear complex where he saw hundreds of centrifuges.

It was the first public disclosure of the uranium enrichment facility -- the second source of atomic bomb material in Pyongyang's program -- and sparked fresh questions about the effectiveness of the Obama administration's carrot-and-stick approach.

But Obama's options are limited.

International sanctions are believed to have run their course with impoverished North Korea, leaving China -- the closest thing North Korea has to an ally but also wary of a crisis on its borders -- the sole power with any influence over Pyongyang.

Iran, which denies Western accusations it is seeking nuclear weapons capabilities, also continues to pose a daunting challenge for Obama.

Although Tehran has tentatively agreed to meet a representative of six world powers early next month, a new U.N. nuclear watchdog report has concluded that Iran's uranium stockpile has continued to grow.

The Obama administration has warned that failure to win Senate ratification of the new START nuclear arms treaty, held up by Republican opponents, would not only hurt an attempt to "reset" relations with Russia but also undermine its cooperation on Iran sanctions and the Afghanistan war.

With the 2012 presidential campaign approaching, Obama will have to handle Iran and North Korea with an eye to his re-election bid, when he can ill afford to give Republicans ammunition for depicting him as soft on America's foes.

(Editing by [Todd Eastham](#))

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