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Toward a Successful NPT Review Conference: A Report from Washington on the Prospects for Action on Nuclear Disarmament

Remarks of Daryl G. Kimball, Executive Director
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Nearly a year ago, President Barack Obama's campaign to confront global nuclear weapons threats started with a bang. In April in Prague, Obama reiterated the U.S. commitment to "seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons" beginning with renewed U.S. leadership to reduce the role and number of nuclear weapons, permanently outlaw nuclear testing, strengthen the NPT, and accelerate U.S. and global efforts to secure vulnerable nuclear materials.

The Prague speech marked a significant shift from the strategy of the George W. Bush administration that has put progress toward fulfilling the promise of NPT Article VI back on track. Just weeks after Obama's Prague address and days after the U.S. delegation reiterated that it recognizes commitments made at past nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conferences, including the 1995 Resolution on the Middle East, States Parties agreed on an agenda for the RevCon.

Nearly a year later, it is clear that implementing the concrete steps necessary to move toward a world without nuclear weapons and strengthening the NPT system is difficult and will require leadership not just from Washington but all responsible states.

These and other developments have created the opportunity for progress, but it is clear that there is more left to be done:

- After nearly a year of negotiations, the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) talks have not yet been completed and the Obama team must win 2/3 Senate approval for treaty ratification;
- After committing to "immediate" and "aggressive work" for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), the administration set into motion technical studies to explain the case for U.S. approval of the CTBT. In September Secretary of State Hillary Clinton addressed the Article XIV Conference on Facilitating CTBT Entry Into Force and called on others who have not done so to ratify. Yet efforts to persuade undecided Republicans have just begun and it is clear that a positive Senate vote for U.S. CTBT ratification is at least a year away;
- President Obama has said that his administration's top-to-bottom Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), which was due by March 1, "will reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy and open the door for further reductions." That review is now in its final stages and will likely be published by April.

In the next few minutes I'm going to review the situation on these and other major disarmament-related priorities that have an impact on the upcoming NPT Review Conference deliberations, highlight what we can expect and when, and offer some thoughts about how the RevCon can maintain positive momentum.

The New START

Let's start with START. This month, U.S. and Russian negotiators entered their ninth round of talks on a new strategic nuclear arms reduction deal that would build upon and update the highly successful 1991 START, which expired Dec. 5.

Lower, verifiable limits on still-bloated U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear arsenals are long overdue. Today, the United States and Russia each deploy more than 2,000 strategic warheads, most of which exist only to deter a massive nuclear attack by the other.

Unfortunately, the Bush administration did not seek to extend START or replace it with a new treaty before leaving office. To their credit, Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev decided to pursue a new pact that will reduce deployed strategic warheads to somewhere between 1,500 and 1,675 warheads each. The United States currently deploys approximately 2,100; Russia in excess of 2,200.

The two sides also agreed to reduce strategic delivery vehicles to a level between 500 and 1,100 with the final number likely between 700 and 800. Washington currently possesses approximately 900 strategic nuclear delivery vehicles, while Moscow deploys an estimated 600-700.

The new agreement will carry forward the most essential of START's verification and monitoring provisions and will put in place new and innovative verification systems to monitor compliance with the new deployed strategic warhead ceilings.

The New START will also open the way for more comprehensive U.S.-Russian arms reduction talks, which the Obama administration says should address all types of nuclear warheads: deployed and nondeployed; strategic and nonstrategic.

As a candidate, Obama also pledged to "work with other nuclear powers to reduce global stockpiles dramatically by the end of my presidency" and "initiate a high-level dialogue among all the declared nuclear-weapon states on how to make their nuclear capabilities more transparent, create greater confidence, and move toward meaningful reductions and the eventual elimination of all nuclear weapons."¹

While it is frustrating that the treaty is not yet signed and ratified, the negotiators have made tremendous progress in just a short time. This is not a simple 3-page treaty like the 2002 Moscow Treaty.

The two sides have been very close to finalizing the new treaty for weeks as negotiators have worked through the final technical details of the new verification and monitoring system. In late-January, the two sides reached agreement on a revised system for exchanging telemetric data on missile flight tests that had been a source of friction.

But progress slowed again due to Moscow's discontent about Washington's modified plan to deploy a limited number of theater missile interceptors in central Europe to counter Iran's short- and medium-range missiles. The two sides had already agreed in April that the New START agreement would not limit strategic defensive arms, but it would—as earlier bilateral nuclear arms control treaties have done—recognize that there is a relationship between strategic offensive and strategic defensive weapons.

¹ "2008 Presidential Q & A: President-elect Barack Obama," *Arms Control Today*, December 2008.

Moscow is understandably wary about how future U.S. plans to counter Iran's growing arsenal of ballistic missiles could affect its own deterrent forces. But it is clear that the United States simply does not and will not have the capability to deploy missile interceptors that could affect Russia's strategic ballistic missiles for at least a decade.

In the meantime, the two sides can and should realize their goal of engaging in joint missile threat assessments, beginning operation of a joint early-warning center, and exploring the use of Russian early-warning radars in a joint missile defense system.

While New START should acknowledge the principle that strategic missile defense can affect the offensive strategic balance, it is neither realistic nor necessary to burden this treaty with the task of limiting missile defense options that will not materialize for well over a decade. As it did in START, Russia could even assert it would exercise the supreme national interest withdrawal clause if it believes U.S. missile interceptors actually pose a risk.

There is widespread support for the New START deal in the Senate with key Republicans including Senator Richard Lugar and Senator John McCain expressing support in principle for the treaty. I expect that eventually the Senate will approve it by far more than the two-thirds majority needed.

If the treaty can be signed within the next month, we can expect that the Senate will begin its formal consideration of the New START deal by June and hold a vote before the end of the year. Ratifying treaties is never easy, but if the Obama administration devotes high-level effort to this common sense next step, it will be approved this year by the United States.

The NPT RevCon should recognize the progress achieved on New START as a major contribution to Article VI and call upon the recognized, NPT nuclear weapon states to engage in a multilateral dialogue aimed at achieving further, verifiable and irreversible reductions in all types of nuclear warheads.

“Immediate and Aggressive” Action on the CTBT

After the New START agreement, the Obama administration wants the Senate to take on the CTBT. While U.S. ratification of the CTBT is overdue, there is more work to get the job done.

The Obama administration's CTBT effort started off well with the President pledging “immediate and aggressive” action to win Senate support for the treaty. In May, Vice-president Biden was tapped to play a lead role in the effort.

As ACA's new briefing book on the CTBT documents,² the case for U.S. approval of the CTBT is stronger than ever. Since the Senate's rejection of the treaty in 1999, there have been technical advances in the U.S. stockpile stewardship program and verification and monitoring capabilities that should address earlier concerns that led many Senators to vote “no.”

As a result, with or without the CTBT, it is highly unlikely that the United States will ever conduct another nuclear explosive test. There is neither a technical or military need—nor political—will to do so.

² “Now More Than Ever: The Case for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty,” by Tom Z. Collina, Feb. 2010.

As of today there are at least 60 likely CTBT supporters in the Senate, putting the Obama administration within striking distance of a 2/3 majority. Through the course of 2009, we have seen a number of prominent national security experts express their support for Senate approval of the CTBT, including former George H. W. Bush National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft and former NNSA administrator Linton Brooks. It is a good list but it needs to grow longer.

However, because of the slow pace of the New START talks and the crowded legislative calendar, the White House is just beginning its effort to win the support of key Senators.

Again, it is deeply disappointing that the United States and other states including China have not yet ratified the CTBT. With new technical reports that make it clear that the treaty can be verified with high confidence and strong evidence that the U.S. stockpile can be maintained effectively without the resumption of nuclear explosive testing, the administration will have the tools it needs to make the substantive case for U.S. ratification, but it needs to organize the political campaign for the treaty and it must do so at a high-level.

To win, the nonproliferation and national security value of the CTBT must be clear and the prospect for securing other states' support for the treaty must be demonstrated.

In 1995, the NPT Review and Extension Conference gave a strong push for the completion of multilateral CTBT talks by September 1996. Now, with the U.S. again supportive and only eight other Annex II states left for entry into force, the promise of the CTBT is within sight. This year's review conference can and should call on all states "to observe the de facto global nuclear test moratorium and help secure the ratifications necessary to achieve CTBT entry into force no later than 2015."

The Nuclear Posture Review

While not fully completed, the broad outlines of the changes we can expect from the Obama administration's Nuclear Posture Review are becoming clear. The review will, as Obama promised, reduce the role of U.S. nuclear weapons and open the way for even deeper U.S. stockpile reductions. The question is how far it will go in that direction and how quickly.

Current U.S. nuclear doctrine calls for the deployment of more than 2,000 strategic nuclear warheads mainly to counter a Russian nuclear attack and, if necessary, defend U.S. forces and allies against conventional attack or to counter chemical and biological threats. A similar number of nondeployed strategic warheads are kept as a strategic reserve.

The President is considering whether to narrow the role of U.S. nuclear weapons to deterring the use of nuclear weapons by another country against the United States or its allies, or possibly declaring that this is the "primary" or "core" purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

It is also likely the NPR will lead to a more straightforward negative security assurance for nonnuclear states parties to the NPT from the United States.

A core nuclear deterrence posture would allow the United States to drastically reduce its nuclear inventory—to no more than a few hundred deployed strategic warheads on a smaller triad of delivery systems within the next few years. Our sources suggest that the NPR will lead to significant reductions in the United States' "hedge" arsenal of nondeployed warheads.

The review will also leave open the possibility of a joint U.S.-NATO decision to withdraw the militarily obsolete stockpile of an estimated 200 U.S. tactical bombs from Europe. If the NATO Strategic Concept leads to the removal of these Cold War relics, it would help draw Russia into discussions leading to the consolidation of all tactical nuclear warheads. It is past time to eliminate these obsolete Cold War relics, which have no practical military value and are a nuclear security liability.

The NPT Review Conference provides an opportunity to encourage accelerated action on tactical nuclear warhead accounting and elimination.

Even though Obama said during the campaign that “[K]eeping nuclear weapons ready to launch on a moment’s notice is a dangerous relic of the Cold War. Such policies increase the risk of catastrophic accidents or miscalculation,” it is not clear whether and to what extent the NPR will lead to changes to operational procedures that give the commander-in-chief far more time to consider his response to a nuclear attack or provocation.

Finally, in marked contrast to the 2001 Bush NPR, Obama’s NPR will likely clarify that the United States will not authorize the development of “new” nuclear warheads or pursue new nuclear weapons capabilities. In this context, “new nuclear weapons” are defined as nuclear warheads with “pits” or “canned subassemblies” not already in the U.S. arsenal. As a result of the U.S. programs to extend the service lives of existing warheads without testing, U.S. nuclear testing and new design replacement warheads are unnecessary.

Conclusion

Some will argue that these developments fall short of the high expectations set by President Obama last spring in Prague and may be tempted to criticize the United States for failing to meet its Article VI obligations.

Action is indeed more powerful than words alone, but it is important to recognize the significant shift in U.S. thinking that has already occurred and appreciate the progress on disarmament that the Obama administration is trying to put into motion.

While many of us would surely like to have seen faster progress on disarmament over the past year, it is unreasonable to expect that within a year any U.S. President could negotiate a new, substantive strategic arms reduction agreement with Russia, ratify that treaty, resuscitate the CTBT after a decade of neglect, and effect sweeping changes in outdated Cold War thinking.

To ensure that Washington follows through it is important that NPT states parties recognize the Obama administration’s disarmament goals, efforts, and accomplishments call upon the United States and the other nuclear armed states follow-through on their disarmament commitments in the years ahead.

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*The Arms Control Association (ACA) is a nonpartisan membership-based organization established in 1971 to promote greater public understanding and effective policy solutions to address the security challenges posed by the world’s most dangerous weapons. ACA publishes the monthly journal **Arms Control Today**.*