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Obama on nuclear disarmament

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The election of Barack Obama as President of the United States offers genuine hope that real change is in the offing for US approaches to nuclear weapons and the treaties and agreements that are intended to control and eventually eliminate them.

In September the Washington-based Arms Control Association published an extensive set of responses from then Democratic candidate Barack Obama to a series of arms control questions. The complete questions and answers are available at the ACA website.¹ The following reviews some of the key nuclear disarmament measures which he addressed.

Support for Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the elimination of nuclear weapons

The basic commitment to nuclear disarmament was clear: “As president, I will set a new direction in nuclear weapons policy and show the world that America believes in its existing commitment under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to work to ultimately eliminate all nuclear weapons.” He reaffirmed the call by George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, William Perry, and Sam Nunn, issued in January 2007 and again in 2008, to begin working for a world without nuclear weapons. He also declared support for the specific measures they propose (Shultz et al. 2008), which include calls to:

- Extend the monitoring and verification provisions of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty of 1991, which is scheduled to expire on December 5, 2009;
- Increase the warning and decision times for the launch of all nuclear-armed ballistic missiles, thereby reducing risks of accidental or unauthorized attacks;
- Discard any existing operational plans for massive attacks that still remain from the Cold War days;
- Accelerate work to provide the highest possible standards of security for nuclear weapons, as well as for nuclear materials everywhere in the world, to prevent terrorists from acquiring a nuclear bomb;
- Start a dialogue, including within NATO and with Russia, on consolidating [non-strategic] nuclear weapons designed for forward deployment to enhance their security, and as a first step toward careful accounting for them and their eventual elimination.

Prevent use/ maintain deterrence

He said that “the most important objective with respect to nuclear weapons is doing everything we can to prevent the use of any such weapons, anywhere in the world.” In that context he declared the importance of deterrence: “So long as nuclear weapons exist, the United States needs to retain nuclear weapons to prevent this from happening.” But he also went on to say that “a world free of nuclear weapons is a world in which the possibility of their use no longer exists.”

New arms control/reduction measures

Obama promised to “seek real, verifiable reductions in all U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons—whether deployed or nondeployed, whether strategic or nonstrategic—and work with other nuclear powers to reduce global stockpiles dramatically by the end of my presidency.” The reference to reductions in “nondeployed” weapons at least implies a commitment to irreversible reductions inasmuch as reductions in nondeployed warheads would mean taking them out of stockpiles and dismantling them. This would be a significant break from the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), which takes systems out of deployment but does not require their destruction and thus keeps them in stockpiles and available for redeployment. He went on to state his commitment “to working with Russia and other nuclear weapon states to make deep cuts in global stockpiles by the end of my first term.” He also said that, “as president, I will also immediately stand down all nuclear forces to be reduced under the Moscow Treaty [SORT] and urge Russia to do the same.”

Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START)

Senator Obama said that a good beginning to the development of new arrangements to reduce arsenals would be to “seek Russia’s agreement to extend essential monitoring and verification provisions of the START I before it expires in December 2009.”

De-alerting

Obama said that “keeping 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. I believe that we must address this dangerous situation....” Hence, he said, “I will work with Russia in a mutual and verifiable manner to increase warning and decision time prior to the launch of nuclear weapons.”

Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)

The Obama presidency should be a major boost to CTBT ratification efforts, a move that would generate extensive and positive ripples throughout the nonproliferation community in general and for the 2010 NPT Review Conference in particular. He said: “I will reach out to the Senate to secure the ratification of the CTBT at the earliest practical date and will then launch a diplomatic effort to bring onboard other states whose ratifications are required for the treaty to enter into force.”

Fissile Materials Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT)

Obama was similarly positive on the FMCT: “I will lead a global effort to negotiate a verifiable treaty ending the production of fissile materials for weapons purposes.”

New nuclear weapons

While not referring directly to the controversial reliable replacement warhead (Medalia 2008) program, Obama said that he “will not authorize the development of new nuclear weapons.”

This position is in stark contrast to the one argued by Defense Secretary Robert Gates. Since Obama has asked Gates to stay on, at least in the early months of an Obama administration, this difference is all the more significant. At issue is the concern that, over time, both nuclear and non-nuclear elements of a warhead can deteriorate and thus create uncertainty about the “reliability” of warheads in the arsenal. This uncertain reliability could be perceived to create a need to test warheads in the arsenal (hence the opposition to CTBT ratification) or to build new or replacement warheads.

Here is how Gates put it in a recent speech at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: “To be blunt, there is absolutely no way we can maintain a credible deterrent and reduce the number of weapons in our stockpile without resorting to testing our stockpile or pursuing a modernization program” (Grossman 2008). So the choice, says Gates, is either to test the old warheads, which would mean further refusal to ratify the CTBT, or to build new warheads. President-elect Obama, on the other hand, rejects both options. There will be no testing, he says, and no building of a new warhead.

The nuclear fuel cycle

Obama promised to work toward a “new nuclear energy architecture” that would include “an international nuclear fuel bank, international nuclear fuel-cycle centers, and reliable fuel supply assurances.” He said that “our nuclear security and that of our allies requires that the expansion of nuclear reactors for electricity generation is not accompanied by the expansion of sensitive nuclear fuel-cycle facilities that can produce bomb-grade plutonium and uranium.” He said, “An international system that ensures access to reasonably priced fuel will encourage developing countries that they do not need sensitive nuclear fuel-cycle facilities to grow their economies, while ratcheting up pressure on any states seeking to disguise their nuclear weapons ambitions.”

Multilateral control over technologies for the production of nuclear fuel for reactors, which can also be used to produce fissile materials for weapons, will have to become a key feature of nonproliferation efforts. The general idea is to centralize fuel production under multilateral controls and to provide states with nuclear power plants assured access to such fuel (that is, to guarantee that access will not be interrupted for political or strategic purposes). The assumption, apparent in the Obama reference to developing countries, that such centralized production facilities should only be in advanced industrialized countries, will certainly be challenged.

Nuclear terrorism

While not rejecting missile defence systems, and while supporting more effective missile controls through the Missile Technology Control Regime, Obama pointed out that “we spend more than \$10 billion a year on missile defense, but far too little on securing nuclear materials around the world and improving security (including detection) at our ports and borders. We must focus our defenses on the most likely threats.”

Toward that end, he said, “[I] will lead a global effort to secure all nuclear weapons materials at vulnerable sites within four years—a critical way to prevent terrorists from acquiring a nuclear bomb. I will work with Russia in this effort and with other countries to develop and implement a comprehensive set of standards to protect nuclear materials from theft.” He also promised actions that would “strengthen policing and interdiction efforts; build state capacity to prevent theft, diversion, or spread of nuclear materials; and convene a summit on preventing nuclear terrorism.”

The pressures on the new President will of course be extraordinary. It is obviously not yet clear what priority these nuclear disarmament commitments will enjoy in an Obama Administration, but the agenda which the president-elect has set out is built around key actions that the disarmament community has been urging for a long time. The very fact that these action imperatives will now find sympathy in the new White House is worth celebrating.

Note

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes from President-elect Obama are taken from this document.

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