



Obama's Nuclear Moment

The president has so far done little to back up his rhetoric on atomic weapons. The next few months may be the best chance he'll ever get.

BY DAVID E. HOFFMAN | FEBRUARY 23, 2010



Headline reads: "Soviet Proposal: On a program for the full global liquidation of nuclear weapons by the year 2000." Source: Hoover Institution and Archives, Stanford University.

In researching *The Dead Hand*, my book about the end of the Cold War arms race, I came across a memo that was drawn up to illustrate a global nuclear disarmament plan announced by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev on Jan. 15, 1986. Gorbachev's three-phase plan called for liquidation of all nuclear weapons in the world by the year 2000.

The plan was dreamy and propagandistic, but it immediately caught the attention of U.S. President Ronald Reagan. When Secretary of State George Shultz went to discuss it with his boss, Reagan turned to Shultz and asked, "Why

wait until the end of the century for a world without nuclear weapons?"

More than 24 years after Gorbachev's proposal, 18 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and 10 years beyond the deadline Gorbachev proposed for global zero, there are still 23,000 nuclear weapons remaining in the world.

Now President Barack Obama has a chance to make real headway in finally ending the Cold War arms race. So far, his rhetoric has been lofty, but actions few. In the next few months his promises and speeches will be tested by a series of key events and decisions. The Nuclear Posture Review, the first since 2001 and the third since the end of the Cold War, is to be sent to Congress soon; a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) is nearing completion with Russia; a nuclear materials security summit is to be held in Washington in April; a new push is to be made for ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty; and there's a review conference for the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty in May. And that's just what's on the calendar; there's no telling what unexpected nuclear proliferation and security challenges will arise from Iran, North Korea, South Asia, or elsewhere.

Obama's presidency has reached the point where his great ambitions -- articulated in his campaign, and a speech last year in Prague -- must be followed by bold actions. If Obama wants to really slash nuclear arsenals, he'll have to go well beyond the much-anticipated new START treaty, which appears to be just another incremental reduction, not a deep cut .

The status quo is not good enough. In the years since the Soviet collapse, we've been wandering in a Cold War fog, a mindset that someday we might need all those nuclear warheads, so let's keep them. The temptation is always to leave things as they are, or make only small changes on the margins.

But the fact is that the United States and Russia are saddled with thousands of warheads that have little practical use in the modern world. Today's real threats are more diffuse, more regional, and more asymmetrical than during the Cold War.

Russia is now a capitalist country. Sure, the Kremlin has been authoritarian and prickly. But in what sense is Russia's behavior deterred or changed by aiming U.S. missiles at Moscow? The only answer is: The Russians also have missiles aimed at the United States, so Americans must not let down their guard. Thus, if both sides together reduced the size of those arsenals, we would reduce the rationale for them.

It was Americans, we shouldn't forget, who advised the Russians on how to build those boisterous stock markets in Moscow after the Soviet collapse. Are Americans going to target those same exchanges now with our nuclear-tipped missiles? Of course not. The two countries no longer need to deter one another with missiles, yet they still do. This is why arms control is still relevant. We need legally binding contracts to allow both sides to put down their guns without fear of cheating or surprise.

Obama's rhetoric has fully acknowledged this shift. In his **speech in Prague**, he declared: "Today, the Cold War has disappeared, but thousands of those weapons have not. In a strange turn of history, the threat of global nuclear war has gone down, but the risk of a nuclear attack has gone up."

Obama promised to "seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons." But he added an important caution. "I'm not naive. This goal will not be reached quickly -- perhaps not in my lifetime." Also he promised to seek a new strategic arms treaty with Russia that is "legally binding and sufficiently bold."

But the big question is whether Obama's agenda for action will be sufficiently bold.

In his presidential campaign, he endorsed a good idea to make the world safer -- take missiles off of launch-ready alert. His campaign statement on defense issues included this:

"[W]e should take our nuclear weapons off hair-trigger alert.... Maintaining this Cold War stance today is unnecessary and increases the risk of an

accidental or unauthorized nuclear launch. As president, Obama will work with Russia to find common ground and bring significantly more weapons off hair-trigger alert."

Yet both countries remain poised to launch today. One of the most effective things we could do right now to make the world safer would be for Russia and the United States to simultaneously de-alert the land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, perhaps by creating a delay -- say a few hours or days -- before they could be launched.

But Obama's promise was forgotten -- by Obama. He has not talked about it as president. Naturally, there is opposition among military commanders. Their mission is readiness, so it makes perfect sense that they would want to be ready to launch at a moment's notice.

A legitimate concern is that in a crisis, re-alerting would cause panic. The head of the U.S. Strategic Command, Air Force Gen. Kevin Chilton, **said** at a conference a year ago that existing weapons are well protected, and "in the holster," while dealerting would be like "taking the gun apart and mailing pieces of it to various parts of the country. And then when you're in a crisis, deciding to reassemble it. And we have to ask ourselves: Can we afford that time period for the delivery of the pieces to put it back together?"

Yet if the world is to be safer, perhaps having the cocked pistols disassembled is better than having them ready at a minute's notice. Obama should tell the commanders that he will negotiate a joint, bilateral, verifiable system of de-alerting with Russia and then we can all stand down, safely. This is not up to the commanders, but the commander in chief.

Another opportunity for Obama to show leadership will come with the replacement strategic arms treaty. The previous one was signed in 1991 by Gorbachev and President George H. W. Bush. It expired last December and a new treaty appears close to completion. The indications are that both sides will agree that operationally deployed warheads will decline from 1,770 to 2,200 on each side to 1,500 to 1,675, and the number of launchers may be cut from 1,600

to 800 or less. Although Russia has attempted to throw off some of the intrusive verification measures that were included in the last treaty, it is expected that updated methods will be included in this pact. Locking in the lower levels of warheads and creating some predictability and verification will be better than no treaty at all.

But is this treaty really "sufficiently bold," as Obama promised, or just incremental? Would U.S. security suffer with 600 warheads on each side, instead of 1,500? Also, some of the most urgent nuclear weapons issues will not be addressed in this treaty, such as the question of tactical or short-range nuclear weapons. The United States has about 500, some of them in Europe, and Russia has about 2,050. In a pair of dramatic initiatives in 1991, many of these weapons were pulled back by Gorbachev and Bush, but the class of weapons has never been covered by a treaty or any verification. And they won't be after the new START treaty is signed. The treaty is also likely to totally duck the issue of nuclear warheads that are in storage. Once again, will a significant part of the Cold War arsenals be left for another generation to deal with, another day? Given the political situation in Russia, we can't count on another treaty coming anytime soon -- this could be the last chance for many years.

Separately, the U.S. administration will soon issue the congressionally mandated Nuclear Posture Review. This document is designed to help set the role of nuclear forces in U.S. military strategy, planning, and actual programs. In the last two reviews since the end of the Cold War, early in both the Clinton and Bush presidencies, the basic nuclear posture of the Cold War was not seriously changed, though the size of the arsenals **did decline** over the years.

Obama should use this moment to break with the past and issue a document that reflects the reduced role nuclear weapons have in today's global politics. In a **letter to Obama** Feb. 1, a group of prominent experts and former government officials sensibly urged the president to seek "transformational rather than incremental changes" in several key areas. Among them, they recommend that the United States should officially narrow the purpose of nuclear weapons: only to deter *nuclear* attacks on the United States or its allies.

At present, there is an ambiguity in America's declared policy about the use of nuclear weapons to deter a non-nuclear attack. They also called for deeper reductions in nuclear stockpiles, and said that keeping a large number of weapons ready to launch on a few-minutes notice "does not serve the purpose of making war less likely."

Yet another opportunity for Obama will be April's nuclear security summit in Washington. More than 40 heads of state are expected to attend to discuss the need to prevent nuclear terrorism and secure all loose fissile materials in four years, as Obama has promised. It's common at these summits to be all talk and no action. Obama must cajole the others to set new standards and best practices that will actually be implemented.

Finally, Obama must build a domestic political case for both the START treaty and the test-ban treaty, which was rejected in the 1990s. Will the president, in an election year, invest the political capital? Last week, Vice President Joe Biden made a **useful foray** into the politics of the issue, appealing to both parties for a consensus and pledging large budget increases for the nuclear weapons complex, including the laboratories, while at the same time vowing to pursue ratification of the agreements.

Nonetheless, the forces of inertia are still there, and strong. Obama has articulated the most ambitious agenda in many years for putting the Cold War behind us. But he must move beyond the status quo, or just a little better than the status quo. Otherwise, someone will be holding up his speeches in the next generation, asking why more was not done.

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*David E. Hoffman is a contributing editor to the Washington Post and the author of **The Dead Hand: The Untold Story of the Cold War Arms Race and Its Dangerous Legacy.***

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