

Obama's Second Chance

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[Daryl G. Kimball](#)

In a dramatic speech in Prague less than 100 days after his 2009 inauguration, President Barack Obama warned that “the threat of global nuclear war has gone down, but the risk of a nuclear attack has gone up. More nations have acquired these weapons. Testing has continued. The technology to build a bomb has spread.”

Like other U.S. presidents, Obama said the United States has a “moral responsibility” to prevent nuclear weapons use and proliferation. In his address, he outlined a step-by-step plan to move closer to “the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.”

In relatively short order, Obama and his team negotiated the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia and won Senate approval of the pact, helped secure an action plan to strengthen the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, accelerated global efforts to prevent nuclear terrorism, completed a top-to-bottom review of the U.S. nuclear weapons posture, and took steps to engage Iran in negotiations and build international pressure on Tehran to meet its nonproliferation commitments.

But following the significant progress achieved during Obama's first two years in office, the administration's nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation effort has lost energy and focus. Talks with Russia on deeper nuclear cuts have not begun, implementation of the new U.S. nuclear posture review has been delayed, plans to seek Senate approval for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) were never pursued, and the off-and-on talks on Iran's nuclear program have not produced results.

To move the United States and the world farther away from the nuclear precipice, Obama and his team should focus on three high-priority nuclear risk reduction initiatives. First, the White House needs to move with greater urgency to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran through sustained multilateral diplomacy. Iran apparently has not yet made a decision to build nuclear weapons, but its capabilities are improving.

In the coming rounds of talks, the U.S. negotiators must adjust their tactics and focus on the most important nonproliferation goals: restricting (not permanently suspending) Iran's uranium enrichment and securing Iranian agreement to more-intrusive international inspections to ensure that Tehran has halted all weapons-related work. A near-term deal to halt Iran's accumulation of 20 percent-enriched uranium, which is closer to weapons grade, in exchange for supplies of medical isotopes and a phased rollback of some international sanctions is within reach. This could buy time and build momentum for a more comprehensive deal that limits Iran's ongoing uranium-enrichment work to normal power reactor-grade levels.

Second, Obama can follow through on his 2009 pledge to “end Cold War thinking” and further reduce the role and number of nuclear weapons. To do so, the White House should implement a saner, “nuclear deterrence only” strategy that eliminates outdated targeting assumptions and removes U.S. weapons from prompt-launch status. In addition, the White House should delay plans for more-advanced but still unproven U.S. missile interceptors in Europe, which are leading the Kremlin to resist further cuts in offensive nuclear weapons.

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Published on Arms Control Association (<https://www.armscontrol.org>)

These adjustments in U.S. policy would help clear the way for far deeper Russian strategic nuclear reductions. As a 2012 report from the secretary of state's International Security Advisory Board suggests, with New START verification tools in place, further reciprocal U.S.-Russian nuclear reductions need not wait for a formal follow-on treaty.

To jump-start progress, Obama could announce that he is prepared to accelerate reductions under New START and, along with Russia, move below the treaty's ceiling of 1,550 deployed warheads. This would help reduce the enormous cost of planned strategic force modernization by both countries in the coming years. Such actions would put pressure on China to abandon its slow increase in nuclear forces and open the door for serious, multilateral disarmament discussions.

U.S. ratification of the CTBT should also be a major nuclear nonproliferation objective for Obama's second term. As the president said in 2009, "After more than five decades of talks, it is time for the testing of nuclear weapons to finally be banned." U.S. ratification of the treaty would advance prospects for global entry into force; increase Washington's leverage with Iran, North Korea, and other states of concern; build momentum ahead of the 2015 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference; and improve capabilities to detect and deter nuclear testing.

As with any treaty, securing Senate approval will not be easy. But with a sustained campaign like the one the administration waged for New START, approval of the CTBT is within reach before the end of 2014. Advances in stockpile stewardship and improvements in nuclear test monitoring make the technical case for U.S. ratification stronger than ever. There is substantial bipartisan support for the treaty, including from a number of former skeptics.

By taking these bold steps, President Obama would advance U.S. and global security, reinforce the beleaguered nuclear nonproliferation system, and establish a lasting nuclear security legacy. Doing nothing in the face of persistent nuclear dangers is not an option.

Posted: January 14, 2013

Source URL: https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2013_01-02/Focus