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NPT 2010: Putting President Obama's Disarmament Rhetoric to the Test

Jacqueline Cabasso, Executive Director, Western States Legal Foundation

The May 2010 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference is widely seen as a make-it-or-break-it point for the long term viability of the nuclear nonproliferation regime. Non nuclear weapon states are rightly expecting the nuclear weapon states to finally make good on their NPT disarmament obligation, in force since 1970. The outcome of this Review Conference will put to the test the reality behind U.S. President Barak Obama's nuclear disarmament rhetoric.

Everywhere I've travelled, President Obama's April 5, 2009 Prague speech has been hailed as a world-changing event. I think this reflects our collective sense of relief that that Bush era is over, as well as our desperate desire for a breakthrough on nuclear disarmament. One thing is certain. Obama's Prague speech inspired a tidal wave of hope and opened up the space for a badly needed renewal of advocacy and action to abolish nuclear weapons. But Obama made conflicting statements in Prague, and his foreign policy is similarly characterized by contradictory positions, emphasizing the importance of diplomacy while relying heavily on the use of force.

In Prague, Obama made a welcome acknowledgement that "as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon, the United States has a moral responsibility to act" for their elimination. Encouragingly, he declared: "To put an end to Cold War thinking, we will reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, and urge others to do the same." But this was followed with, "As long as these weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies." This disclaimer reflects the influence of a massive powerful military-industrial complex that has perpetuated the role of nuclear weapons as the cornerstone of U.S. national security policy for nearly 65 years.

What does deterrence mean in U.S. doctrine? A typical definition appears in a September 2008 Defense Department report: "Though our consistent goal has been to avoid *actual* weapons use, the nuclear deterrent is 'used' every day by assuring friends and allies, dissuading opponents from seeking peer capabilities to the United States, deterring attacks on the United States and its allies from potential adversaries, and providing the potential to defeat adversaries if deterrence fails."

In other words, the U.S. uses the threat of nuclear attack the way a bank robber holds a gun to the head of a teller. In his 2007 book, "Empire and the Bomb: How the U.S. Uses Nuclear Weapons to Dominate the World," Joseph Gerson documented at least 30 occasions since the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki when every U.S. President has prepared or threatened to initiate nuclear war. In recent years, President Clinton made a covert nuclear threat against an alleged underground chemical weapons facility in Libya, and President Bush had contingency

plans drawn up for battlefield use of nuclear weapons in Iraq. The policy of nuclear deterrence is not passive and it is not benign.

While the personality at the top of the U.S. government has changed, the architecture and special interests that underpin it have not. Today, the U.S. spends nearly as much as the rest of the world's countries combined on its military. The Pentagon maintains some 1,000 overseas bases in over 130 countries and is building new bases in Colombia. As additional troops are sent to Afghanistan, it will build more bases there. And the U.S. is the only nation that deploys nuclear weapons on foreign soil, at NATO bases in five European countries.

Against this backdrop, influential members of the nuclear establishment are engaged in a full court press to ensure that even Obama's modest first steps to reestablish traditional arms control are doomed to fail. For example, the Commission established by Congress to give advice on the forthcoming Nuclear Posture Review, in May 2009 reported: "The United States requires a stockpile of nuclear weapons that is safe, secure, and reliable, and whose threatened use in military conflict would be credible... The conditions that might make the elimination of nuclear weapons possible are not present today and establishing such conditions would require a fundamental transformation of the world political order."

Almost as if to ensure that such conditions are not created, the Senate in 2009, with bi-partisan support, adopted an amendment to the 2010 Defense Authorization Bill calling on the President to assure that the U.S.-Russia START follow-on treaty does not limit U.S. ballistic missile defense systems, space capabilities, or advanced conventional weapons systems. Yet these are precisely the issues that Russia has raised as impediments to deeper nuclear arms reductions. Another amendment requires the President to deliver a plan to modernize the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Similar *anti-disarmament* conditions will likely be attached to Senate ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, rendering its historic intent mute and making it even more unlikely that other holdout states will ratify the treaty.

According to proponents, maintaining a "credible" U.S. deterrent will require a massive investment in the nuclear weapons infrastructure. In March 2008, General Kevin Chilton, Commander of Strategic Command, in charge of U.S. nuclear war planning, told Congress: "A revitalized infrastructure.... will allow us to sustain our nuclear capability and expertise throughout the 21st Century."

In November 2009, Chilton predicted the United States will need nuclear weapons 40 years into the future, stating: "The President himself has said such a world [without nuclear weapons] will not be reached quickly and perhaps not in his lifetime and I agree with that.... It's not because we couldn't physically cut up every weapon in the world in 40 years. *We could...* The question is would it be a safer world if we did." Quoting from Obama's Prague speech, General Chilton said his Command must focus on "the President's confirmation that as long as nuclear weapons exist the United States will maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary and to guarantee that defense to our allies."

To this end, in September 2009, Congress voted to spend \$6.4 billion in Fiscal Year 2010 –

slightly more than in 2009 – to maintain and enhance the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile. This includes an upgrade to the W76 warhead carried aboard the 14 U.S. Trident submarines currently patrolling the world’s oceans. It also includes funding to study modernization of the B61 bomb and plan for a “long-term 21st century weapon.” And it increases funding for production of plutonium pits – the cores of hydrogen bombs.

Perhaps even more dangerous than nuclear warhead modifications, are upgrades to delivery systems for conventional weapons. According to General Chilton: “We *have* a prompt global strike delivery capability on alert today, but it is configured *only* with nuclear weapons, which limits the options available to the President and may in some cases reduce the credibility of our deterrence.”

In response, the Pentagon is poised to begin development of a new generation of long range delivery systems capable of carrying conventional warheads that would allow the United States to strike any target in on earth within an hour. Those at the receiving end would have no way of knowing if the incoming missile was nuclear or conventional, and if they had a nuclear capability they would probably unleash it.

Russian security analysts have raised concerns that these conventional U.S. “alternatives” to nuclear weapons might pose an obstacle to U.S. – Russian nuclear arms control negotiations. According to Alexi Arbatov, a scholar at the Carnegie Moscow Center: “There are very few countries in the world that are afraid of American nuclear weapons. But there are many countries which are afraid of American conventional weapons. In particular, nuclear weapons states like China and Russia are primarily concerned about growing American conventional, precision-guided, long-range capability.” Arbatov added that “threshold states” with potential for developing nuclear weapons are similarly concerned about U.S. conventional capabilities.

Paradoxically, Robert Einhorn, Special Advisor for Nonproliferation and Arms Control to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, remarked in 2007: “We should be putting far more effort into developing more effective conventional weapons. It’s hard to imagine a president using nuclear weapons under almost any circumstance, but no one doubts our willingness to use conventional weapons.” This statement, unfortunately, is all too true. But an even more overpowering conventional U.S. military threat surely is not the desired outcome of the nuclear disarmament process. Moreover, how would potential adversaries with fewer economic resources respond? Wouldn’t they have an incentive to maintain or acquire nuclear weapons to counter U.S. conventional military superiority? And wouldn’t that, in turn, entrench U.S. determination to retain and modernize its own nuclear arsenal, thus rendering the goal of nuclear disarmament nearly impossible? This conundrum is one of the biggest challenges we face.

In a profoundly disturbing speech to the U.S. Institute of Peace on October 21 2009, Secretary of State Clinton said: “We are sincere in our pursuit of a secure peaceful world without nuclear weapons. But until we reach that point of the horizon where the last nuclear weapon has been eliminated, we need to reinforce the domestic consensus that America will maintain the nuclear infrastructure needed to sustain a safe and effective deterrent without nuclear testing. So in addition to supporting a robust nuclear complex budget in 2011, we will also support a new Stockpile Management Program that would focus on sustaining capabilities.” Citing General

Chilton she added: “This is what the military leaders, charged with responsibility for our strategic deterrent, need in order to defend our country.”

Adding insult to injury, Clinton said: “As the President has acknowledged, we might not achieve the ambition of a world without nuclear weapons in our lifetime or *successive* lifetimes.”

In their most recent Wall Street Journal editorial, published on January 19, the now-famous “four horsemen,” Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn, warned that, “the deadliest weapons ever invented could fall into dangerous hands,” and called for a substantial increase in funding for the nuclear weapons laboratories and a modernized nuclear weapons infrastructure. Stating that: “Maintaining high confidence in our nuclear arsenal is critical as the numbers of these weapons goes down,” they argue, “The United States must continue to attract, develop and retain the outstanding scientists, engineers, designers and technicians we will need to maintain our nuclear arsenal, whatever its size, for as long as the nation’s security requires it.”

In a January 29 editorial, also published in the Wall Street Journal, U.S. Vice-President Joe Biden, citing President Obama’s Prague vision, endorsed the “four horsemen’s” analysis and recommendations. He announced that the Administration’s Fiscal Year 2011 budget request to Congress increases spending on the nuclear weapons stockpile, complex and related nuclear weapons programs to \$7 billion, 10% above spending in 2010. Biden also revealed that over the next 5 years, the Administration intends to boost funding for what he characterized as “these important activities,” by more than \$5 billion.

Some of my younger colleagues in the next generation of nuclear abolition activists have coined a term for this kind of circular reasoning. They call it “anti-nuclear nuclearism.”

Unfortunately, this anti-nuclear nuclearism is very short-sighted. Investing in a modernized nuclear weapons infrastructure will be viewed as hypocritical by other nations. It will provide the next President -- quite possibly an even more militaristic Republican -- and future Presidents, the means to design and build new nuclear weapons if they want to, and thus spark new arms races.

As the Hans Blix-led WMD Commission stated in their 2006 report: “The Commission rejects the suggestion that nuclear weapons in the hands of some pose no threat, while in the hands of others they place the world in mortal jeopardy.” As they wisely observed: “Governments possessing nuclear weapons can act responsibly or recklessly. Governments may also change over time.” In short, nuclear weapons are dangerous in *anyone’s* hands.

Some commentators have characterized Obama’s pledge to “to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons,” as unprecedented. Yet in the NPT itself, the U.S. and the other original nuclear weapon states pledged to negotiate *in good faith* the elimination of their nuclear arsenals. So, 40 years later, and 20 years after the end of the Cold War, why are nuclear weapons still with us? Who benefits from them? If the most powerful military force in history insists that it still needs nuclear weapons to defend itself, how can we realistically expect less powerful states to forgo them? These are the difficult questions we must ask in order to figure out what it will take to get rid of the ultimate weapons of mass destruction.

While I don't have all the answers, I've come to believe that we can no longer approach the abolition of nuclear weapons as a single issue. In order to succeed, we'll need to address interconnected issues of militarization, globalization, and the economy. And we'll need to build a movement that brings together the very diverse constituencies that make up the vast majority of the world's population that does not benefit from the permanent war system. In order to attract these constituencies we'll need to develop a universally applicable vision of "human" security, centered on meeting the basic needs of individuals everywhere, to replace the outmoded, unsustainable and fundamentally undemocratic concept of "national" security ensured through overwhelming military might.

In a time of twin global economic and environmental crises and growing competition over natural resources, the dangers of conflicts among nuclear-armed states are increasing. We can't afford to wait decades more for the elimination of nuclear weapons. Seriously moving toward abolition of nuclear weapons will require taking on other challenges as well, but this is not a reason to delay any longer *delegitimizing deterrence* and eliminating the role of nuclear weapons in national security policies.

"Nuclear disarmament should serve as the leading edge of a global trend toward demilitarization and redirecting resources to meet human needs and restore the environment." This is the mission statement adopted by a growing international civil society campaign preparing for the May 2010 NPT Review Conference. Initiated by Japanese non-governmental organizations, and supported by Mayors for Peace, hundreds of groups around the world are collecting millions of signatures on petitions calling on NPT members to commence negotiations on a treaty to eliminate nuclear weapons within a timebound framework, and making plans to converge in New York City for a major international conference, "For a Nuclear Free, Peaceful, Just and Sustainable World," April 30 - May 1, and a mass March, Rally and Peace and Justice Fair, May 2.

President Obama needs our help to earn his Nobel Peace Prize! It is up to *all* of us to create the political will that will make meaningful progress on disarmament possible.

The Mayors and citizens of Nagasaki and Hiroshima are petitioning President Obama to visit their cities. I hope he will come to the A-bombed cities to learn for himself the terrible reality of nuclear weapons and to truly understand the urgent need to abolish them now – in his lifetime!