

ATOMS FOR PEACE, THEN AND NOW

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In connection with the March 2012 Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul, South Korea, President Barack Obama addressed an audience at Hankuk University. Reprising the rhetoric of his 2009 Prague speech, he stated

“American leadership has been essential to progress in... taking concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons. As a party to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, this is our obligation, and it’s one that I take very seriously. But I believe the United States has a unique responsibility to act – indeed, we have a moral obligation. I say this as President of the only nation ever to use nuclear weapons.”

However, just as in Prague, Obama went on to reinforce the US commitment to the doctrine of deterrence and all that it implies.

“[We] have more nuclear weapons than we need. . . . I firmly believe that we can ensure the security of the United States and our allies, maintain a strong deterrent against any threat, and still pursue further reductions in our nuclear arsenal.”

After sternly warning Iran and North Korea that nuclear weapons aspirations on their parts would not be tolerated, without a trace of irony, Obama declared

“For the global response to Iran and North Korea’s intransigence, a new international norm is emerging: Treaties are binding; rules will be enforced; and violations will have consequences. We refuse to consign ourselves to a future where more and more regimes possess the world’s most deadly weapons.”

This was the transition to “[A] renewed commitment to harnessing the power of the atom not for war, but for peaceful purposes.” Obama explained

“After the tragedy at Fukushima, it was right and appropriate that nations moved to improve the safety and security of nuclear facilities....

As we do, let’s never forget the astonishing benefits that nuclear technology has brought to our lives. Nuclear technology helps make our food safe. It prevents disease in the developing world. It’s the high-tech medicine that treats cancer and finds new cures. And, of course, it’s the energy – the clean energy that helps cut the carbon pollution that contributes to climate change.... That’s why, in the United States, we’ve restarted our nuclear industry.... We supported the first new nuclear power plant in three decades.”

In a stunning expression of “magical thinking,” President Obama concluded by describing perfectly the inextricable link be-

tween nuclear power and nuclear weapons and then wishing it away.

“We all know the problem: The very process that gives us nuclear energy can also put nations and terrorists within the reach of nuclear weapons. We simply can’t go on accumulating huge amounts of the very material, like separated plutonium, that we’re trying to keep away from terrorists.

And that’s why we’re creating new fuel banks, to help countries realize the energy they seek without increasing the nuclear dangers that we fear.... And today I urge nations to join us in seeking a future where we harness the awesome power of the atom to build and not to destroy.”

The eerie similarities to President Eisenhower’s famous “Atoms for Peace” speech to the United Nations General Assembly in December 1953 – nearly 60 years ago – are striking. In that speech, Eisenhower acknowledged the terrible destructive power represented by the growing US nuclear arsenal.



“Today, the United States stockpile of atomic weapons, which, of course, increases daily, exceeds by many times the total [explosive] equivalent of the total of all bombs and all shells that came from every plane and every gun in every theatre of war in all the years of World War II. [Author’s note: There were 1,161 US nuclear weapons in 1953; today there are approximately 8,500 in total.]

Eisenhower warned of the dangers of a looming nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union, and that “the knowledge now possessed by several nations will eventually be shared by others, possibly all others.” Seeking a way out of this conundrum he declared

“[M]y country’s purpose is to help us move out of the dark chamber of horrors into the light, to find a way by which the minds of men, the hopes of men, the souls of men everywhere, can move forward toward peace and happiness and well-being.”

Calling for the elimination of nuclear weapons, he boldly proposed

“The United States would seek more than the mere reduction or elimination of atomic materials for military purposes. It is not enough to take this weapon out of the hands of the soldiers. It must be put into the hands of those who will know how to strip its military casing and adapt it to the arts of peace.

The United States knows that if the fearful trend of atomic military build-up can be reversed, this greatest of destructive forces can be developed into a great boon, for the benefit of all mankind. The United States knows that peaceful power from atomic energy is no dream of the future. That capability, already proved, is here, now, today. Who can doubt, if the entire body of the world’s scientists and engineers had adequate amounts of fissionable material with which to test and develop their ideas, that this capability would rapidly be transformed into universal, efficient, and economic usage?”

Nuclear weapons and nuclear power are preeminent examples of the irrationality of the whole. Nuclear energy risks destroying society in order to power it; nuclear weapons risk destroying the people to save the State. As global tensions rise over speculation about Iran’s and North Korea’s nuclear intentions, apparently we haven’t learned anything. If we are to achieve a world of human and ecological security, we must phase out and move beyond nuclear power, as well as fossil fuels.



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