

Russia, the United States, and the Challenge of Global Nonproliferation

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Speaking to Russian students at the New Economic School graduation during his visit to Moscow in July, President of the United States, Barack Obama, succinctly expressed the greatest challenge facing us: the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

“The notion that prestige comes from holding these weapons, or that we can protect ourselves by picking and choosing which nations can have these weapons, is an illusion. In the short period since the end of the Cold War, we’ve already seen India, Pakistan, and North Korea conduct nuclear tests. Without a fundamental change, do any of us truly believe that the next two decades will not bring about the further spread of these nuclear weapons?”

“That’s why America is committed to stopping nuclear proliferation, and ultimately seeking a world without nuclear weapons. That is consistent with our commitment under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. That is our responsibility as the world’s two leading nuclear powers.”

Together, the United States and Russia hold 95 percent of the world’s nuclear weapons. We were the first nations to develop these weapons, and the first to reach agreements to limit their testing and restrict the size of our arsenals. Our two nations have a unique responsibility to maintain global strategic stability, and to lead the world’s efforts to stop global nuclear proliferation.

Stopping the spread of nuclear weapons and preventing their use has long been a central focus of the world community, but recent developments in Iran and North Korea have given this issue a new urgency. Greater Russian-American cooperation in both arms control and nonproliferation is both possible and essential for our nations to achieve our mutual goals. I believe our experience with Russia on arms control and nonproliferation can serve as a model and lesson about what we and the world can achieve together in the area of global nonproliferation.

Renewing the Russian-American Relationship: A Follow-On to START

Soon after President Obama took office, he launched a major effort to renew the Russian-American relationship, seeking to move from confrontation and rivalry toward a more cooperative and productive relationship focused on our common interests. At their first meeting in London in April 2009, Presidents Obama and Medvedev identified strategic stability as a priority and agreed that the United States and Russia would pursue new and verifiable reductions in our strategic arsenals, beginning by negotiating a legally binding follow-on to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty.

The two Presidents met again in Moscow this past July and established a Presidential-level Commission, including working groups on Arms Control and International Security and on Nuclear Energy and Nuclear Security, to advance our common agenda.

Just six months after the first meeting of the two Presidents, our negotiators were hard at work on the details of the START follow-on agreement, which we expect to be ready for signing in December 2009. Our rapid progress toward a substantial new START Treaty was possible because of our cooperation in arms control reaching back many decades—cooperation that continued even through the most difficult periods of the Cold War. Taken together, START and the Moscow Treaty on Strategic Offensive Reductions signed in 2002 constitute a remarkable accomplishment: a nuclear arms race was halted, and replaced by a regime of steady reductions in the nuclear arsenals of both countries, backed by unprecedented verification measures. Our negotiating experience established a legacy of pragmatism, common purpose and mutual confidence that we can put to good use in future agreements.

Reducing the Nuclear Threat

We can also be proud of what Russia and the United States accomplished together in the area of threat reduction over the last ten years. The Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) Program, conceived by Senators Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar, inaugurated a new era of cooperation in securing and dismantling weapons of mass destruction and their associated infrastructure in Russia and other independent states of the former Soviet Union. As of August 2009, more than 7,500 nuclear warheads have been deactivated, 754 ICBMs and 143 mobile ICBM launchers destroyed, and 643 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) eliminated. Thirty-one nuclear submarines capable of launching ballistic missiles have been destroyed, and 155 strategic bombers were dismantled. This was real threat reduction on an unprecedented scale.

Throughout the 1990s, we also increased security and reduced our stockpiles of weapons-grade materials. The United States and Russia cooperatively installed nuclear security upgrades at 93 percent of Russian nuclear material and warhead sites. We have verifiably downblended over 375 metric tons of former Soviet weapons-origin highly-enriched uranium (HEU), enough to produce nearly 15,000 nuclear weapons. The resulting low enriched uranium (LEU) is used for peaceful purposes as fuel in US nuclear power plants, providing about ten percent of all the nuclear power generated in the United States.

Working together, the United States and Russia have also succeeded in minimizing the use of HEU in civilian applications worldwide. The United States has converted 57 research reactors in 32 countries from HEU fuel to less proliferation-sensitive LEU. Since 2002, the United States and Russia have cooperated to return Russian-origin HEU fuel to Russia from third countries, and US-origin HEU fuel to the United States. More than two tons of HEU has been secured—enough for over 85 nuclear weapons. Our two countries are on track to meet the goal of returning to Russia and the United States all HEU spent fuel stored outside of research reactors by the end of 2010.

Despite these remarkable achievements, much more remains to be done to reduce the threat of proliferation. The United States is committed to seek a new treaty that verifiably ends the production of fissile materials for making weapons. The Geneva Conference on Disarmament, after ten years of gridlock, has adopted a work program that includes the negotiation of a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT) that provides for international verification. We are seeking Russia's cooperation to help us create a consensus with other countries so that the FMCT can come into force.

To set an example, the United States has reaffirmed its own decades-long moratorium on the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons. The Obama administration is also calling for ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which was signed by both the United States and Russia, but has not been ratified by the US Congress.

The Biggest Challenge: Global Nonproliferation

Arms control and threat reduction are success stories, but they involve primarily Russia and the United States. The greatest and most urgent threat of all is global: how to deal with states that willingly defy the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). As President Obama stated in his address in Prague in April, "Rules must be binding. Violations must be punished. Words must mean something. This world must stand together to prevent the spread of these weapons."

Today's security challenges present ample opportunities for cooperation. With the recent disclosure of a covert uranium enrichment facility in Iran, we are increasingly concerned that the Iranian government is failing to abide by its responsibilities under the nonproliferation regime. The strong statements made by the United States, France, the United Kingdom and Russia after this disclosure underscore the common voice of the international community on this issue. We have repeatedly reaffirmed Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy—but Iran must first fulfill its international obligations. As the President made clear at the G-20 Summit in Pittsburgh, and as President Medvedev announced in a Kremlin statement the same day, we remain committed to serious engagement with Iran. The October 1 meeting in Geneva with Iran of the P5+1 group—the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany—was a constructive beginning. But it must be followed by constructive action by the Iranian government.

Nonproliferation is not just about sanctioning those who break the rules—it also involves helping those countries that want to develop peaceful nuclear energy. Developing nuclear power is important to the economic development of many countries, and as a response to climate change, energy security and the promotion of sustainable development. We support the right of any country to peaceful nuclear energy, provided they adhere to their international obligations. Russia and the United States are leaders in these areas, and we can share our expertise and technology.

Finally, there is the need to work together against nuclear terrorism, which President Obama has called "the most immediate and extreme threat to global security."

This is not an imaginary threat; al-Qaeda has said that it is seeking a bomb, and would have no compunction about using it. We also know that nuclear material remains vulnerable in many countries around the world. In Prague, President Obama announced a new international effort to secure all vulnerable nuclear material around the world within four years, and declared that we would set new standards, expand our cooperation with Russia, and pursue new partnerships to lock down these sensitive materials.

The world community took an important step forward in support of non-proliferation at the United Nations Security Council Summit on September 24, when President Obama convened and chaired a meeting of heads of state at the United Nations Security Council. With the unanimous passage of UNSC Resolution 1887, Security Council members committed themselves to strengthening the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, reducing nuclear arsenals, and taking stronger measures to secure nuclear materials. The resolution strengthens the implementation of UNSCR 1540, passed in 2004, which requires governments to establish domestic controls to prevent the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons and their means of delivery. Russia and the United States have committed to working together to strengthen the ability of other nations to carry out their nonproliferation obligations under both of these important declarations.

As yet another concrete next step in implementing our nuclear agenda, the United States will host a Global Summit on Nuclear Security in April 2010, where Russia, the United States and other nations can share best practices and develop joint steps to secure vulnerable nuclear materials, combat nuclear smuggling, and deter, detect, and disrupt acts of nuclear terrorism. We must not wait for an act of nuclear terrorism before working together to raise our collective standards for improving nuclear security.

Russian-American Partnership: Essential to our Success

All of these important steps are encouraging signs of the international community's unity and determination to reduce the proliferation threat. The President's speech in Prague reaffirmed the commitment of the United States to keep nuclear nonproliferation at the top of the global agenda for years to come. Russia will remain an essential partner in this effort. Our years of cooperation on arms control and nonproliferation have shown that, when Russia and the United States have strong mutual interests, we can overcome our differences and work successfully together. Our cooperation is based not just on treaties and promises, but upon proven systems of verification and a level of trust and cooperation developed over the course of half a century. But we also have learned that, unlike fifty years ago, the vital issues of arms control and nonproliferation can no longer be resolved by Russia and the United States alone. Together, we need to develop and maintain a global approach to arms control and nonproliferation. Russia and America, as the world's leading nuclear powers, have a moral obligation to lead this effort. We may not see a world free of nuclear weapons in our lifetime, but if we all work together, our children or grandchildren may see it in theirs.