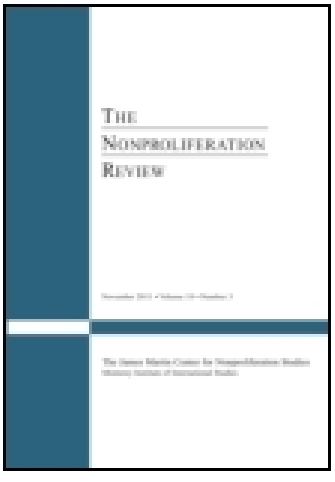

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ADVANCED US CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS AND NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT
Why the Obama Plan Won't Work

Andrew Futter and **Benjamin Zala**

The Obama administration has made a great effort to increase the role of advanced conventional weaponry in US national security thinking and practice, in part to help reinvigorate the global nuclear disarmament agenda by reducing the role played by nuclear weapons in the US defense posture. However, such a strategy is fundamentally flawed because increases in US conventional superiority will exacerbate US relative strength vis-à-vis other powers, and therefore make the prospect of a nuclear weapon-free world seem less attractive to Washington's current and potential nuclear rivals. Consequently, it is highly likely that the impact of efforts to increase US advanced conventional superiority through ballistic missile defense and a conventional "prompt global strike" program will ensure that the Obama administration is adopting a pathway to nuclear abolition on which it is the sole traveler for the foreseeable future.

KEYWORDS: Nuclear disarmament; conventional weapons; ballistic missile defense; prompt global strike; Barack Obama

Since taking office, President Barack Obama has appeared determined to reduce the salience and centrality of nuclear weapons in US defense posture, at least in part to help facilitate the achievement of a nuclear weapon-free world. A fundamental, but often overlooked, component of this plan (in relation to the US defense posture) is the gradual attempt to place a far greater reliance upon advanced conventional weaponry in US national security thinking as well as practice, specifically through a larger role for ballistic missile defenses, advanced conventional strike programs, and sophisticated command, control, and monitoring capabilities.[1] By doing this, the administration hopes to foster the domestic conditions favorable for further US nuclear reductions—thereby reigniting the push towards nuclear abolition internationally—while at the same time placating domestic global zero skeptics worried about a weakening of US security and the US global role. For the Obama administration, an increased role for advanced conventional weapons will allow for further US nuclear reductions, signaling to other nuclear powers an intent to eventually disarm. In this regard, the shift toward a greater role for advanced conventional weaponry may seem logical, both to increase the possibility of further nuclear reductions, and as a prudent response to the fluid requirements of US security.

Although the general trajectory toward establishing a greater role for advanced conventional weaponry in US defense and security planning can be traced to the George W. Bush administration, the rationale behind these programs has changed considerably

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under Obama. Instead of viewing advanced conventional weaponry primarily as a means to enhance US security and freedom of action in order to achieve "full spectrum dominance," the Obama team has shifted the focus of advanced conventional weaponry by linking the developments in ballistic missile defense (BMD) and Prompt Global Strike (PGS) with the renewed drive toward advancing the nuclear disarmament agenda.[2] In this respect, while the growth in BMD and PGS capabilities has continued largely unabated from the Bush administration to the Obama administration, the policy and thinking that underpins these programs has shifted considerably.

While the idea of increasing the role of advanced conventional weaponry as a component of US national security thinking and practice is not new, Obama is the first president to strongly link these plans with the goal of pursuing a world free from nuclear weapons.[3] As a result, the administration's domestic policy focus must also take into consideration the international impact of the disarmament agenda on the major military fault lines in key US nuclear relationships with Russia, China, and other nuclear weapon states. When the dynamics of these relationships are considered, the Obama plan to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons through—at least in part—a greater role for advanced conventional weaponry in order to foster larger nuclear reductions appears unlikely to succeed. The central problem is that US superiority in advanced conventional weaponry makes it very difficult for any US rival to agree to work toward a nuclear-free world when such a move—already made difficult by existing conventional imbalances—will magnify US power. More specifically, the close link between nuclear reductions and increases in conventional capabilities essentially works to decrease US vulnerability in a nuclear disarmed world, while at the same time increasing the vulnerability of its current or future rivals and adversaries. As the former US Secretary of Defense Harold Brown has written, "U.S. conventional power-projection capability and the concern that it may be used to intimidate, attack, or overthrow regimes" is far more important in terms of driving proliferation and increasing Russian and Chinese reliance on nuclear weapons than "fear of U.S. nuclear capability or the content of U.S. nuclear policy."[4] As such, a growing role for advanced conventional weaponry in US national security thinking—even if it helps to facilitate US nuclear reductions—appears likely to make Obama's quest for global zero far more difficult, and perhaps impossible.[5]

The Obama Plan: Advanced Conventional Weapons and Global Nuclear Zero

The Obama administration has surprised numerous commentators, critics, and supporters with its commitment to many of the advanced conventional weapons programs initiated and prioritized by the Bush administration. In particular, the administration's decision to retain high levels of funding for BMD, move ahead with a comprehensive missile defense plan for Europe, while at the same time expediting the development of a range of conventional strike programs including PGS, is in contrast to what many believed Obama would do when he took office.

The Obama administration's strong desire to retain and expand both defensive and offensive advanced conventional capabilities must be seen in light of the president's April

2009 Prague Speech on nuclear disarmament—in particular, the president's much-publicized intention to "seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons."[6] In this respect, Obama is the first president since Ronald Reagan to seriously discuss publicly the possibility of moving toward global zero, and in doing so has elevated the nuclear abolition agenda back into the mainstream US political debate. However, in pursuit of this agenda, Obama has faced several major hurdles, most notably, the strongly held belief in the United States that nuclear weapons are fundamental to national security, and that reducing their numbers below a certain level will lead to a decline in the ability of the United States to defend itself, its allies, and influence events around the world.[7] Because of this, the Obama administration has sought a way to achieve US nuclear reductions without diminishing actual or perceived security by relying more heavily on BMD and PGS. It is partly for this reason that Obama has placed so much emphasis on advanced conventional weaponry, and on the potential for such programs to fill the role currently played by nuclear weapons.

The importance placed on advanced conventional weaponry across the Obama administration's policy agenda is conspicuous. Most notable is the president's commitment to ballistic missile defense, which, before he took office, he had hinted at limiting.[8] Instead, the administration has supported levels of BMD funding far higher than that under Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, or Bill Clinton; it unveiled an ambitious and flexible BMD plan for the defense of Europe; it published the wide-ranging Ballistic Missile Defense Review which states the administration's determination to push ahead with BMD around the globe; and finally, the Obama team fought hard to keep limitations on BMD out of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) signed with Russia in April 2010.[9] In a similar vein, the administration has expedited research and development of three main conventional global strike programs: the "Hypersonic Technology Vehicle 2," the "Advanced Hypersonic Weapon," and the Air Force's existing "Conventional Strike Missile," although more recently, the focus of this lattermost program has shifted away from ballistic missiles and towards the use of boost glide systems, and, potentially, drones.[10] Current annual funding for PGS is around $240 million, and around $7 billion for BMD. Moreover, while funding remains a contentious issue for both programs, particularly for PGS, by linking their development at least in part to the long-term goal of nuclear reductions, the administration has increased the momentum toward full-scale deployment (regardless of the short-term challenges both programs will inevitably encounter).[11] Of course, it is likely that, in the coming years, both of these current offensive and defensive conventional programs will face technical and short-term funding hurdles (particularly in light of current US financial difficulties). In particular, PGS relies on extensive (and therefore costly) intelligence and command and control support in order to be successful, which increases the burden on budgets and multiple government departments, particularly in the early stages of deployment before systems have become embedded and effective. However, Russian, Chinese, and other defense planners are very unlikely to count on these hurdles to offset the negative effects of the emphasis (both rhetorically and in practice) on an ever-greater reliance on conventional weaponry as progress on nuclear disarmament increases.[12]

The Obama plan is also underpinned by a conscious attempt to placate domestic audiences concerned that reducing US nuclear weapons will lead to a weakening of US security, and undermine the US ability to project power across the globe. President Obama has argued publicly that his administration's efforts to reduce the US reliance on nuclear weapons are specifically linked to efforts to ensure that "our conventional weapons capability is an effective deterrent in all but the most extreme circumstances."[13] In this sense, the administration hopes to convince disarmament skeptics that advanced conventional weaponry can provide an important addition—if not substitute—for some strategic roles currently performed by the nuclear arsenal. As the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) puts it, "Fundamental changes in the international security environment in recent years—including the growth of unrivalled U.S. conventional military capabilities, major improvements in missile defenses . . . enable us to fulfill . . . objectives at significantly lower nuclear force levels and with reduced reliance on nuclear weapons . . . without jeopardizing our traditional deterrence and reassurance goals."

Consequently, one of the main arguments from the Obama administration as to why the time is right to put nuclear disarmament back on the international agenda is that technological developments have created new conditions in which disarmament need not equal a loss of security. Despite the administration's apparent predisposition for building trust with nuclear rivals such as Russia or China, it appears to dodge the most difficult aspect creating of a trusting relationship—accepting a high degree of mutual vulnerability on both sides—via advanced conventional weapons programs.[14]

The developments in BMD and the addition of new programs such as PGS to the already globally superior US conventional arsenal has, the administration argues, augmented the conditions for renewing talks first with Russia and then with others aimed at reducing the levels of current nuclear stockpiles.[15] Although this is largely an argument aimed at a domestic audience in order to counter criticisms that the nuclear abolition agenda is not in the interests of the United States, the Obama administration also hopes it will send out a strong signal of its intentions internationally. Yet as will be discussed below, across three categories of nuclear relationships—whether they be great powers such as Russia and China or adversaries such as Iran and North Korea—these actions aimed at silencing domestic critics and reigniting international interest in global zero have significant implications for building multilateral support for nuclear abolition.

Further Russian Nuclear Reductions

Despite more than two decades since the Cold War ended, the nuclear relationship with Russia continues to dominate US nuclear weapons thinking, and remains both the centerpiece and launch pad for any new nuclear disarmament effort. Fundamentally, this is because Moscow retains many more nuclear warheads than any other potential US nuclear rival, which in turn means that any future push toward nuclear disarmament will have to begin with further nuclear reductions agreements with Moscow, before other smaller nuclear powers can be expected to join a wider program of multilateral disarmament. As a

result, it is natural to consider the implications of the Obama plan for this key strategic relationship.

The first important dynamic to consider is the fact that the nuclear relationship with the United States remains at the heart of Russian security thinking. In this respect, many Russians view their nuclear deterrent as integral to the nation's "great power" claim. In addition to this, Russian policy makers are acutely aware of their conventional inferiority to the United States, which essentially compounds both the symbolic and strategic importance of nuclear weapons for Moscow. As the Hudson Institute's Richard Weitz points out, "Russian policymakers see nuclear weapons, including the tactical ones, as serving a variety of valuable and often unique security functions that Russian policymakers will not soon surrender."[16] It is therefore unsurprising that Russia has always been suspicious of US attempts to deploy ballistic missile defenses or advanced offensive conventional weaponry, both of which, Russian planners assume, are likely to undermine Moscow's ability to retain credible mutual vulnerability with Washington; ballistic missile defenses challenge the efficacy of the Russian nuclear deterrent force, and advanced conventional weapons increase the uncertainty and the "specter of the future" associated with rearmament (i.e. that these missiles can be rearmed with nuclear warheads in the future).[17] In this regard, Russian leaders are concerned that reducing nuclear weapons numbers will benefit the United States by increasing the importance and salience of Washington's considerable advantage in conventional weaponry, and particularly BMD. Thus, at first glance, advances in both defensive and offensive non-nuclear US weaponry would appear to present major stumbling blocks to US-Russian nuclear reductions.

Nevertheless, the Obama administration appears far more cognizant of this dynamic than the Bush administration, and has embarked on a policy of strategic engagement to explicitly allay Russian concerns as part of the administration's wider "reset" of the US-Russian relationship. As the NPR made clear: "A strategic dialogue with Russia will allow the United States to explain that our missile defenses and any future U.S. conventionally-armed long-range ballistic missile systems are designed to address newly emerging regional threats, and are not intended to affect the strategic balance with Russia."[18] The centerpiece of the reset has been the New START, which limits the number of strategic nuclear warheads that each side can deploy to a maximum of 1,550.

However, analysis of the debate in the Russian Duma over the New START's ratification suggests that the nuclear-conventional link is already flagged as a potential cause of treaty abrogation.[19] The key question is whether the unintended effect of deploying new long-range conventional weapons and BMD aimed primarily at other states and non-state actors will destabilize the strategic relationship between the two countries to the extent that it jeopardizes trust-building efforts. Even if this is mitigated in terms of the current commitment to the New START, this does not mean that follow-on treaties and other efforts to further reduce levels of strategic nuclear weapons in both countries will be immune. Russia's conventional forces still face enormous challenges in terms of modernization and maintenance, which makes every step of progress in the number and scope of advanced US conventional forces a potential barrier to deeper nuclear cuts. In a succinct reflection of this, in the days preceding the announcement of the NPR,

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov publicly aired his unease about the role of conventional long-range missiles in the US defense posture saying, "World states will hardly accept a situation in which nuclear weapons disappear, but weapons that are no less destabilising emerge in the hands of certain members of the international community."[20] Moreover, while the concessions won by Moscow in New START—notably the mention of both offensive and defensive conventional weapons—are important symbolically, independent analyst Pavel Podvig has noted that, "It could be argued that although Russia accepted the revised US approach to missile defense and the Prompt Global Strike programs outlined in the New START, these programs have not been limited in a substantive way. There are no legally binding constraints on missile defense deployment, and the New START does not preclude development of dedicated conventionally armed delivery vehicles that could be used for Prompt Global Strike missions."[21] Consequently, there are still plenty of reasons for Russia to be concerned about US conventional capabilities.

With this in mind, the Obama team sought to alleviate this problem by attempting to include Russia in its European missile defense plans. More specifically, Obama and leading NATO officials in Europe have begun talks on US/NATO-Russia missile defense cooperation. However, reaching an agreement on BMD cooperation is far from a straightforward task. As one analyst has argued, "Many long-standing barriers to NATO-Russian cooperation, including impediments to information sharing and limited capacity for rapid decision making, persist . . . western commanders could never rely on an architecture that required urgent Russian authorisation for its use."[22] Moreover, the Stimson Center's Barry Blechman and Jonas Vaicikonis are right to suggest that BMD cooperation is arguably the prerequisite of any follow-on treaty in the future.[23] In a recent op-ed article in a Russian newspaper, a group of former Russian political and military leaders argued that for future reductions, the Obama administration's emphasis on multilateralism and diplomacy in its approach to nuclear weapons will also need to apply to: "Anti-ballistic missile defense, conventional weapons and strategic non-nuclear weapons, as well as space militarisation plans. New far-reaching measures to boost confidence will soon be needed in these and other areas of arms reduction."[24] Possibly to address these concerns, the Obama team has redirected global strike programs away from ballistic missiles and towards other means of delivery; still, and despite repeated reassurances that US BMD deployments—especially in Europe—are not aimed at Russia, both programs look likely to remain spoilers in future negotiations.[25]

Further diversification in US defense planning towards non-nuclear weaponry seems unlikely to calm the nuclear rivalry with Russia. There is much to suggest that further moves to speed up the deployment of BMD and PGS systems will make things less stable, and less conducive to future efforts at confidence building, and therefore for the possibility of further nuclear reductions. As a result, the growth in both systems appears to make a relationship based on mutual vulnerability or trust less likely. As the Carnegie Endowment's James Acton suggests, "more than mere words will be required" to reassure Russia.[26]

A ''Great Leap'' of Faith for China

Over the past few decades, China has appeared comfortable retaining a rudimentary nuclear deterrent force consisting of just a few hundred nuclear weapons as part of a policy of ''minimum nuclear deterrence.'' In the current context, leaders in Beijing believe that just a small number of nuclear weapons are sufficient to ensure Chinese security and freedom of action via a guaranteed second strike option (i.e. the ability to cause overwhelming damage in retaliation for a nuclear attack on China). In this context, the Chinese belief that a small number of nuclear weapons are sufficient for deterrence purposes will almost certainly be bolstered by any further reductions in US and Russian nuclear weapons. Notwithstanding a potential Chinese ''rush to parity''—a concern of some conservative commentators—such a move should be beneficial to all parties and create a strong platform for future trust building, cooperation, and further nuclear reductions.[27] In this respect, it would be conceivable to see progress on a number of key issues, including jointly timed Sino-US ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, further cooperation on North Korea, and more widespread regional stability. As a result, reducing the salience of US nuclear weapons in this nuclear rivalry—initially through unilateral US reductions—would appear to offer much to both sides through the realization of a more trusting and cooperative relationship.

In reality, however, the growth of US conventional capabilities is unlikely to aid the possibility for nuclear reductions in Beijing. In particular, if as seems likely, the United States continues to augment the existing missile defense architecture, which already consists of some thirty long-range interceptor missiles at sites in the Western United States, over a dozen Aegis capable ships assigned to the US Pacific fleet, and several more that are operated by Japan—all ostensibly to bolster deterrence against North Korea—it is highly likely that China may seek to increase its nuclear capability both qualitatively and quantitatively. In this regard, and when these developments are combined with the growing US advanced offensive capability, the changing nature of US nuclear deterrence thinking and practice is arguably a bigger worry for China than it is for Russia. More specifically, while Russia sees such moves as a potential challenge to its status as a great power, China fears they could undermine the credibility of its nuclear deterrent in its entirety. Fundamentally, Beijing has far more to fear from the combined impact of advanced US command, control, and surveillance capabilities with global strike and missile defense assets than its counterparts in Moscow. As political scientists M. Taylor Fravel and Evan Medeiros point out, ''The combination of these three capabilities in the eyes of the Chinese provides the United States with the ability to eliminate China's nuclear deterrent in a crisis without crossing the nuclear threshold, re-opening the door to US coercion of China.''[28]

The Chinese fear that during a crisis, US monitoring technologies could be used to locate Chinese nuclear assets; the PGS system could then be used to destroy them, while missile defenses would soak up any subsequent retaliation. Such fears are also heightened by the strong belief in Beijing that ''China is the real target for U.S. missile defense and space planning.''[29]

In terms of Chinese policy, the relationship is equally unaided by public statements about this context, many of which focus on the question of Taiwan. As recently as 2005, a leading military strategist in China shocked a foreign press conference by his frank assessment of the most appropriate Chinese response to the use of US conventional weapons in a dispute over Taiwan. Major General Zhu Chenghu, dean of the Defense Affairs Institute at China's National Defense University, claimed that Beijing would have no choice other than to respond to a US conventional strike with nuclear missiles that would destroy "hundreds of US cities."[30] To retired rear admiral of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy and former director of the National Defense University's Institute for Strategic Studies, Yang Yi, the recent US arms sale to Taiwan and the decision to hold military exercises with South Korea and Japan in the Yellow Sea was like having "poured oil on the flames of Sino-US relations, which were already in a dissonant state."[31] This is echoed by China scholar David Lampton, who characterizes US-Sino relations as having deteriorated to a situation of "mutual strategic suspicion."[32]

Unlike with Russia, there are currently no concrete official US plans to engage China in missile defense cooperation projects, or, for that matter, on the dynamics of their nuclear relationship more broadly.[33] As such, the United States might have to consider initiating a range of trust and confidence-building measures with China, perhaps in the form of explicit statements that Taiwan will not join the US-Japanese missile defense architecture, or even an unambiguous declaration that the system is not aimed at China. In addition to this, the Obama administration might also consider entering into negotiations with China about limiting missile defense plans in the region more generally, or on curtailing certain space and anti-satellite weaponry that may be of concern to Beijing. The decision by South Korea not to join the growing US-led regional missile defense architecture is a positive move in this direction, although this could be revisited in the future.[34] Either way, it is difficult to see how the United States can prevent the deployment of these assets from becoming a major obstacle to the trust building required in the US-China relationship for nuclear reductions. A further problem, raised by Stanford University's Thomas Fingar, is Beijing's concern that increases in US conventional weapons in a nuclear disarming world will suck China into a "trap" that would "require Beijing to engage in an expensive and potentially ruinous conventional arms race with the United States that would harm China's image and prospects for continued rapid economic growth."[35]

Such dynamics mean that the Sino-US strategic relationship sits at the heart of what British international relations theorists Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler have called "the new age of uncertainty," in which the "chief danger is a new cold war between the United States and China."[36] China's power ambitions—whether they be part of a much analyzed "hegemonic transition" in East Asia or, as Booth and Wheeler envisage, some kind of return to bipolarity where the United States and China achieve rough parity in overall strategic terms—and, importantly, how the United States responds, are likely to dictate the extent to which trust-building efforts are successful in this particular nuclear rivalry.[37] Nevertheless, the dynamics of this relationship are also likely to be shaped by technological and political developments at key points over the coming years. In summary, while the United States continues to work toward a world free of nuclear

weapons contextualized by overwhelming US conventional superiority, it would require an unlikely leap of faith for Chinese decision makers to accept the vulnerability required in a truly trusting relationship with the United States.

The barriers to US-Chinese nuclear trust building and nuclear reductions are arguably more challenging than those confronted with Russia, predominantly because Beijing has far more to lose from the growth of US non-nuclear capabilities. China is more concerned about US conventional superiority than Russia because leaders in Beijing are fearful that such a move may provide the United States with the theoretical conditions necessary for a non-nuclear first strike capability, or, more likely, a fundamental challenge to Chinese freedom of action in the region. In this regard, it is difficult to see how China and the United States can maintain either a credible mutual vulnerability upon which to base their nuclear relationship, or indeed establish cooperative agreement towards nuclear reductions, if the United States continues to expand its advanced non-nuclear capability. The implications for trust building, and for the shape of nuclear abolition agenda, therefore, look deeply gloomy.

Nuclear Aspirants

In many respects, the idea that the growth in US conventional weaponry will be a key tool in reducing the threats from states such as Iran, North Korea, and other potential adversaries is paradoxical. Indeed, it is arguably the concern about US conventional strength—rather than nuclear weapons—that makes the acquisition of nuclear weapons seem so appealing for these states. Because of this, and while BMD and PGS are essentially a response to nuclear proliferation by such states, their deployment can play an equally important role in driving this proliferation in the first place.

The Obama administration has fundamentally kept with the assessment of its predecessor that the growth in advanced conventional weaponry to complement other US deterrence and national security programs represents a prudent response to new nuclear rivalries. Although this is particularly the case with ballistic missile defense—which the administration appears to view as integral to strengthening regional deterrence and assurance architectures in East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East—it is also central to thinking about PGS, which the administration is keen to develop as a rapid means of hitting suspected missile launch sites before weapons can be fired, or hit terrorist targets within one hour of receiving intelligence of their exact location. Both programs would offer greater flexibility of response, and place less emphasis on using ground troops in complex theaters around the world. As such, the move toward more reliance on non-nuclear weaponry to manage these rivalries would appear to have little to do with nuclear reductions, and more with how the United States might construct a credible disarming or eliminating strike on these rogue states or provide a better means by which they can be contained.

In this respect, it is arguable that a growing US reliance upon advanced conventional weaponry to dissuade new nuclear challengers will further undermine the possibility for nuclear reductions. It is difficult to see how such states could feel secure without building

and developing at least a rudimentary nuclear weapons capability to act as a ''great equalizer'' to US conventional superiority. This has been very publicly demonstrated in diplomatic engagements with both North Korea and Iran, whereby neither state has felt inclined to trade away its actual or potential nuclear programs for a US-backed security guarantee. Nevertheless, it is at least conceivable that a move away from nuclear weapons by the United States will reinforce the norm of nonproliferation and theoretically make it harder for these countries to acquire their own nuclear weapons. Moreover, the deployment of these capabilities in Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East may provide a more credible US commitment to the region, assuring other nations of US support, and thus making them less inclined to pursue their own weapons programs. In this regard, it may be that the major positive impact of a move towards US conventional superiority is that it reinforces international non-nuclear norms and thereby makes it both politically and militarily harder for these states to acquire and develop nuclear weapons.

While advanced conventional weaponry is arguably a necessary and prudent response to the challenges posed by new nuclear aspirants (and even terrorist groups), in particular by protecting against a surprise missile launch, it is unclear that such developments will assist the abolition agenda. More specifically, advanced US conventional weaponry appears to be one of the drivers of rogue state nuclear proliferation (amongst other factors), and it would seem that both North Korea and Iran fear the combination of missile defense and global strike programs in much the same way that China does. This is arguably why nuclear weapons appear to have such utility for these regimes. When these dynamics are taken into consideration it is hard to see how the Obama plan can lead to a situation where either current or future ''rogue states'' are less likely to pursue the acquisition of nuclear weapons. The same requirement to accept some degree of vulnerability applies to trust building, no matter how limited—even with nuclear aspirants—and therefore the invulnerability provided by BMD and PGS works against future progress.[38]

The Nuclear-Conventional Disarmament Paradox

The analysis above suggests that there are two major inconsistencies in the Obama administration's current plan that will need to be addressed in order to set the nuclear disarmament agenda on a sustainable and achievable path. First, in order for the move toward a greater reliance upon advanced conventional weaponry to be workable, the Obama administration must consider the balance between the requirements of these capabilities against rogue states, and the necessity of retaining workable relationships with strategic competitors such as Russia and China. Second, Obama must strike this international balance while simultaneously placating domestic opponents who view a move away from reliance on nuclear weaponry as jeopardizing US security. Taken together, these two dynamics represent the complex puzzle that the Obama administration must successfully address if its nuclear disarmament agenda is to remain credible.

The first major hurdle that the Obama administration will have to negotiate is the problem arising from the distinction between the intended targets of much of advanced

US conventional weaponry (particularly BMD and PGS) that fall into the category of new nuclear state actors (which could, in theory, include non-state actors such as terrorist groups), and the unintended consequences for rivalries with great powers. In particular, the residual nuclear rivalry with Russia and the rising nuclear rivalry with China cannot be neatly separated from developments in BMD and PGS (largely aimed at new proliferators) that have the overall effect of increasing US conventional superiority. Decision makers in Washington are going to have to come to terms with the fact that for Moscow and Beijing, future possibilities matter just as much as current US intentions.[39] As nonproliferation expert Dennis Gormley puts it in relation to BMD, "absent legal constraints on future American missile defense plans, Russian fears, however relaxed today, are likely to re-emerge."[40] In this regard, even if both Russian and Chinese policy makers are open to accepting the risks of a nuclear weapon-free world in which the United States enjoys a massive conventional superiority with the Obama administration at the helm, the unknown intentions of future US administrations make this risk unacceptable. If President Obama is therefore serious about raising levels of cooperation with both these states in order to encourage them to join the United States and its nuclear-armed allies in a coordinated multilateral disarmament agenda, then arguments that BMD and long-range conventional missile systems are a response to rogue state aggression will not be enough. If Washington is unable to recognize the danger that its conventional superiority poses to Russia and China in a nuclear weapon-free world—or at least one where numbers of nuclear weapons have been significantly reduced—then there is little hope that the New START will be the first step on the path to global nuclear disarmament.[41] It is important to note here that despite the arguments of Washington officials who claim that BMD and PGS systems are not a threat to Russia or China, it is the perceptions of policy makers in Moscow and Beijing, just as much as the material realities of these imbalances, that will be decisive in whether BMD and PGS developments help or hinder progress on nuclear disarmament.[42]

The second major inconsistency that will need to be addressed is the problem of the competing imperatives of domestic and international stakeholders. It is clear that one of the reasons the Obama administration has placed such an emphasis on improving both offensive and defensive advanced conventional capabilities is to create room domestically for progress on nuclear reductions. It is equally clear that many foreign and defense policy hawks and elements of the defense industry have strong reservations about President Obama's enthusiasm for nuclear disarmament. In fact, such reservations were a fundamental reason why the New START—which made relatively modest reductions to nuclear weapons numbers and did not inhibit US missile defense plans—took such a long time to ratify.[43] Even now, Republican members of Congress continue to challenge the administration's post-New START plans by trying to lock in future funding for the US nuclear weapons complex in the president's budget requests, and challenging anything that they perceive as undermining US security, particularly freedom of action on future missile defense deployments.[44] In this regard, the problem that Obama faces domestically is one where at a minimum he must assure lawmakers that any nuclear reductions will not come at the expense of conventional weaponry—especially ballistic missile defense.

Attempting to placate domestic critics by *increasing* the degree to which the United States towers over all other states in terms of conventional capabilities effectively works to undermine the administration's nuclear reductions agenda internationally. In particular, such moves work to weaken the degree to which nuclear rivals will enter into relationships of trust in which they will agree to give up their one avenue for equalizing some of the massive military superiority enjoyed by the United States. What the current approach of the Obama administration demonstrates is the uncomfortable truth that domestic audiences will need to be persuaded that nuclear reductions require *mutual* vulnerability, even in non-nuclear terms. This is a daunting but unavoidable task, although arguments about mutual vulnerability (albeit of a very different kind) were largely accepted during the Cold War by domestic audiences through the policy of mutually assured destruction. The Council on Foreign Relations's Independent Task Force on US Nuclear Weapons Policy (chaired by former Secretary of Defense William Perry and former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft) concluded in its 2009 report that, "mutual vulnerability—like mutual vulnerability with Russia—is not a policy choice to be embraced or rejected, but rather a strategic fact to be managed with priority on strategic stability."[45] Until this argument can be won, the president's hands will be tied domestically, forcing ever greater increases in US conventional superiority as the United States (and perhaps the world) moves to lower numbers of nuclear weapons, which will in time bring the momentum on nuclear reductions to a crashing halt. To put it simply, there is no incentive for the US adversaries to relinquish their "great equalizers" for a nuclear weapon-free world with an even greater military inferiority than exists today.

The wider implications of this are equally problematic. Specifically, without trust building and further nuclear reductions with Russia—which will be based on US conventional superiority—it is hard to see how the United States can credibly multilateralize the disarmament agenda. It therefore appears that the United States will need a more nuanced and balanced international nuclear strategy—which takes into account the dynamics of both US domestic politics and international stability—if it wishes to move the disarmament agenda forward. Central to this will be the timing of defensive deployments such as BMD, which can be delayed in order to be linked with reductions in offensive capabilities.[46] In practical terms, this will likely mean placing limits on the deployment of BMD in the short-term given the extent of current deployments (particularly at the theater level) in order to synchronize abolition and defensive efforts.[47] As James Acton and fellow Carnegie Endowment colleague George Perkovich have noted, "as long as the US, Russia and China have no shared conception of whether and how they might regulate their competition in strategic weaponry, the deployment of ballistic-missile defenses increases rather than decreases the salience of nuclear weapons."[48]

Conclusion

At first glance, the decision taken by the Obama administration to increase the role of non-nuclear weaponry in the US defense posture appears to be synchronized with the administration's wider agenda of reducing the threat from nuclear weapons, and possibly

eliminating them altogether. Under this plan, less emphasis on nuclear weapons in US security thinking and practice will make it easier for the Obama administration to reduce US weapons, which in turn will make it easier to reach agreement with other states to reduce theirs, or not to develop them in the first place. Moreover, such a move would also appear to make nuclear reductions more palatable to hawkish domestic audiences unconvinced about the prudence of nuclear disarmament. For this vision and attempt at bold action, the Obama administration should be commended.

However, the evidence suggests that such logic is fundamentally flawed, because it fails to properly take into account the levels of trust between current and would-be nuclear weapon states required to achieve a nuclear-free world. Given the importance of mutual vulnerability for trusting relationships (some argue that a trusting relationship only occurs when two actors open themselves to vulnerability vis-à-vis the other), the current strategy seriously underestimates the negative impact of tying nuclear reductions to increases in conventional superiority. In this regard, by highlighting the fundamental imbalance in conventional forces, a greater reliance by the United States on both offensive and defensive advanced conventional weapons may actually decrease prospects for nuclear reductions by key US nuclear rivals. The closer that all powers get to nuclear zero, the more important conventional forces will become, and with the United States possessing overwhelming superiority in conventional—and especially advanced conventional—weaponry, this raises an important question of how US nuclear rivals can be convinced that reducing numbers of nuclear weapons will not make them less secure. Consequently, if this path is to be pursued, it will be up to the Obama administration to seek to alleviate these concerns through other methods of confidence and trust building. The immense challenge this poses does not negate the need for alternatives to the current approach.

The net result is that if reducing the role of nuclear weapons in US defense and security thinking cannot be de-linked from qualitative and quantitative advances in programs such as BMD and PGS, the Obama approach may actually make the goal of nuclear disarmament more difficult. Accordingly, future nuclear reductions agreements must take into account conventional imbalances as well as numbers of nuclear weapons. Despite the fact that many obstacles to the full and effective deployment of BMD and PGS systems remain, the overall trend towards a greater reliance on these weapons systems creates concern in the capitals of other nuclear powers.[49] Increasing constraints on the US defense budget that are likely to limit spending, particularly on PGS, in the short-term, are insufficient to counter the image of a nuclear disarmed world decades into the future defined by overwhelming US conventional superiority. In short, future uncertainty and vulnerability are more important factors for Moscow and Beijing than whether a particular component of advanced conventional weaponry is funded in this year's defense budget.[50]

As such, it may well be more useful for the Obama administration to think beyond the current focus on nuclear weapons reductions as a means of ensuring international security, and instead toward much more nuanced agreements covering a much wider range of weaponry. Although this will be more difficult than focusing explicitly on numbers of nuclear weapons, it is arguably the only way to build trust with nuclear rivals to the extent needed to make deeper nuclear reductions possible. If including

conventional programs in future strategic arms limitations negotiations (not just with Russia) proves too difficult, then Washington will face no choice but to dramatically scale back the deployment of PGS and significantly delay the deployment of BMD, or to abandon efforts at further nuclear reductions altogether. As Gormley puts it, ''If there is a solution to the conventional superiority issue, it lies less in'' arguments about whether current systems are capable of achieving what the Russians or Chinese fear ''and more in conceiving of options that might allay those concerns over the long run.''[51] The overwhelming conventional superiority of the United States is certainly not the only barrier to achieving global nuclear disarmament, but it is poised to become one of the hardest to surmount.

NOTES

1. In one of the few pieces of analysis that has highlighted this point, analyst Dennis Gormley has noted that ''Indeed, the Obama administration's 2010 NPR readily admits that it can afford to diminish the role of nuclear weapons in satisfying its fundamental security requirements due to the 'growth of unrivalled US conventionally military capabilities, major improvements in missile defenses, and the easing of Cold War rivalries.'' Dennis Gormley, ''Nuclear Disarmament and Russian Perceptions of US Conventional Superiority,'' *Security Challenges* 6 (Summer 2010), p. 83.
2. See for example, US Department of Defense, ''Nuclear Posture Review Report,'' (April 2010), pp. 6–7, 15–16, 25, 32, 45. See also US Department of Defense, ''Quadrennial Defense Review Report,'' February 2010, p. 14 and US Department of Defense, ''Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report,'' February 2010, p. 23.
3. President Ronald Reagan did discuss pursuing a nuclear weapon-free world through increases in conventional capabilities, most notably through the Strategic Defense Initiative, but was never able to put this into practice. See Paul Lettow, *Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Random House, 2006).
4. Harold Brown, ''New Nuclear Realities,'' *Washington Quarterly* 31 (Winter 2007–8), p. 20.
5. It is important to note that while we are arguing that US conventional superiority (and in particular the trajectory toward *future increased* superiority due to the close link between PGS and BMD developments and reductions in nuclear weapons in the Obama administration's current approach) acts as a barrier to progress on nuclear disarmament, we are not necessarily adopting Brown's argument that conventional imbalances are the most important factor in continued possession and further proliferation of nuclear weapons around the world. See ibid.
6. See Barack Obama, ''Remarks by President Barack Obama'', Prague, April 5, 2009, <www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered/>.
7. On this, see for example Bruno Tertrais, ''The Illogic of Zero,'' *Washington Quarterly* 32 (Spring 2010), pp. 125–38.
8. ''Presidential Q&A: President-elect Barack Obama'', *Arms Control Today,* December 2008, <www.armscontrol.org/2008election>.
9. See US Missile Defense Agency, ''Historical Funding for MDA FY85-10,'' <www.mda.mil/global/documents/pdf/histfunds.pdf>. For more on the final point, see Andrew Futter, ''The Elephant in the Room: US Ballistic Missile Defense under Obama,'' *Defense & Security Analysis* 28 (2012) pp. 3–16.
10. Tom Collina, ''U.S. Alters Non-nuclear Prompt Strike Plan,'' *Arms Control Today,* April 2011, <www.armscontrol.org/act/2011_04/PromptStrike>.
11. Dennis M. Gormley, ''The Path to Deep Nuclear Reductions: Dealing with American Conventional Superiority,'' Institut Français des Relations Internationales Proliferation Papers, No. 29, Fall 2009; Amy F. Woolf, ''Conventional Prompt Global Strike and Long-Range Ballistic Missiles: Background and Issues,'' Congressional Research Service, April 2011, <www.ifri.org/?page=contribution-detail&id=5575&id_provenance=97>.

12. While PGS may be under considerations for so-called ''niche missions'' at present, some military analysts are already reportedly saying that these could ''eventually substitute for assignment against 10 to 30 percent of today's nuclear target list.'' Elaine M. Grossman, ''Jury Out: Do Advanced Conventional Weapons Make Nuclear War More Likely?,'' Global Security Newswire, August 22, 2012, <www.nti.org/gsn/article/jury-out-do-advanced-conventional-weapons-make-nuclear-war-more-likely/>.
13. David E. Sanger and Thom Shanker, ''US Faces Choice on New Weapons for Fast Strikes,'' *New York Times*, April 22, 2010, p. 1.
14. On the importance of mutual vulnerability for trust building, see Nicholas J. Wheeler, ''Beyond Waltz's Nuclear World: More Trust May be Better,'' *International Relations* 23 (2009), pp. 428–45; Geoffrey Hosking, ''Terrorism and Trust,'' *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 2 (2009), pp. 482–96.
15. On this, see Jan Ruzicka and Nicholas J. Wheeler, ''The Puzzle of Trusting Relationships in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty,'' *International Affairs* 86 (January 2010), p. 72.
16. Richard Weitz, ''NATO's non-proliferation challenges in the Obama era,'' The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Transatlantic Paper Series No. 4, October 2010, p. 10.
17. Dinshaw Mistry, ''Correspondence: Going Nowhere Fast: Assessing Concerns about Long-range Conventional Ballistic Missiles,'' *International Security* 34 (2010), p. 176.
18. US Department of Defense, ''Nuclear Posture Review Report,'' April 2010, p. x.
19. Nikolai Sokov, ''New Start Ratification in Russia: Apparent Smooth Sailing Obscures Submerged Drama and Revelations,'' James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, January 25, 2011, <http://cns.miis.edu/stories/110125_russia_new_start_ratification.htm>.
20. Quoted in David Usborne, ''US Moves from Nuclear Arms to Conventional Missiles with Global Reach,'' *Independent*, April 9, 2010, <www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/us-moves-from-nuclear-arms-to-conventional-missiles-with-global-reach-1939876.html>.
21. Pavel Podvig, ''Instrumental Influences: Russia and the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review,'' *Nonproliferation Review* 18 (March 2011), p. 46.
22. Richard Weitz, ''Illusive Visions and Practical Realities: Russia, NATO and Missile Defense,'' *Survival* 52 (April-May 2010), p. 100.
23. Barry Blechman & Jonas Vaicikonis, "Unblocking the Road to Zero: US-Russian Cooperation on Missile Defenses," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 66 (November-December 2010), pp. 25–35.
24. Yevgeny Primakov, Igor Ivanov, Evgeny Velikhov, and Mikhail Moiseyev, ''Nuclear disarmament: the end of the atomic option,'' *Telegraph*, December 8, 2010, <www.telegraph.co.uk/sponsored/russianow/opinion/8188782/Nuclear-disarmament-the-end-of-the-atomic-option.html>.
25. Global Security Newswire, ''Pentagon Revises Prompt Global Strike Effort,'' April 7, 2011, <www.globalsecuritynewswire.org/gsn/nw_20110407_4669.php>; Global Security Newswire, ''Gates Makes Missile Defense Offer to Russia,'' March 22, 2011, <http://gsn.nti.org/gsn/nw_20110322_2880.php>.
26. James Acton, *Deterrence During Disarmament: Deep Nuclear Reductions and International Security*, Adelphi Paper 417, Routledge: 2011, p. 64.
27. Peter Brooks, ''New START Treaty's China Challenge,'' *New York Post*, September 20, 2010, <www.nypost.com/p/news/opinion/opedcolumnists/new_start_treaty_china_challenge_5niHZQbbup6tknXsyjN2II>.
28. M. Taylor Fravel & Evan Medeiros, ''China's Search for Assured Retaliation: The Evolution of Chinese Nuclear Strategy and Force Structure,'' *International Security* 35 (Fall 2010), pp. 48–87.
29. Hui Zhang, ''China's Perspective on a Nuclear Free World,'' *Washington Quarterly* 33 (Spring 2010), pp. 139–56.
30. Bruce G. Blair, ''General Zhu and Chinese Nuclear Preemption,'' *China Security* 1 (2005), p. 15; Stephanie Lieggi, ''Going Beyond the Stir: The Strategic Realities of China's No-First-Use Policy,'' Issue Brief, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies, December 2005.
31. Yang Yi, ''Navigating Stormy Waters: The Sino-American Security Dilemma at Sea,'' *China Security* 6 (2010), p. 3.
32. David M. Lampton, ''Power Constrained: Sources of Mutual Strategic Suspicion in U.S.-China Relations,'' *NBR Analysis*, National Bureau of Asian Research, June 2010.
33. Jing-dong Yuan ''Sino-US Military Relations: The Need for Deep Engagement,'' *SITREP* 66 (2006), pp. 14–16.
34. Global Security Newswire, ''South Korea to Study Missile Defense Needs with US,'' April 18, 2011, <www.nti.org/gsn/article/south-korea-to-study-missile-defense-needs-with-us/>.

35. Thomas Fingar, ''How China Views US Nuclear Policy,'' *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, May 20, 2011, <www.thebulletin.org/web-edition/features/how-china-views-us-nuclear-policy>.
36. Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan: 2008), p. 270.
37. Mark Beeson, ''Hegemonic Transition in East Asia? The Dynamics of Chinese and American Power,'' *Review of International Studies* 35 (2009), pp. 95–112.
38. This may be more accurately described as short-term confidence building in order to arrive at a degree of stability rather than fully-fledged ''trust building.'' Gormley goes even further arguing that the strategic stability that is ''so central to achieving the goal of a nuclear-free world'' is upset by these developments in US conventional weaponry and directly affects ''regional competitions in Northeast Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East.'' Gormley, *Nuclear Disarmament and Russian Perceptions,* p. 84.
39. The importance of future uncertainty is recognized by most theories of international relations but is especially emphasized by offensive realism. See John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York & London, W. W. Norton & Company: 2001) p. 31, and Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca & London, Cornell University Press: 2000) p. 245.
40. Gormley, *Nuclear Disarmament and Russian Perceptions,* p. 86.
41. For more on this, see Andrew Futter, ''Getting the Balance Right: Ballistic Missile Defense and Nuclear Non-Proliferation,'' *Comparative Strategy* 30 (2011), pp. 254–67.
42. In analyzing Russian perceptions in this regard, Gormley is clear in finding that the Obama administration's current approach is having a decidedly negative effect. See Gormley, *Nuclear Disarmament and Russian Perceptions.*
43. Tom Collina, ''Senate Approves New START,'' *Arms Control Today,* January/February 2011, <www.armscontrol.org/act/2011_01-02/NewSTART>.
44. Global Security Newswire, ''House Approves Bill with Treaty-Limiting Provisions as Veto Bait,'' May 27, 2011, <http://gsn.nti.org/gsn/nw_20110527_6150.php>.
45. Council on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy,* Independent Task Force Report No. 62, (New York: Council on Foreign Relations 2009), p. 45.
46. On this point, David Cortright and Raimo Väyrynen argue that Russian and Chinese concerns about missile defense must be genuinely addressed in order to achieve progress towards nuclear zero, and they argue for a ''return to Reykjavik'' and the discussion about the timing of BMD deployment and abolition that took place on the second day of the historic summit between Reagan and Gorbachev. David Cortright and Raimo Väyrynen, *Towards Nuclear Zero*, IISS Adelphi Paper No. 410, Routledge: 2010, pp. 152–4.
47. Ibid., pp. 165–6.
48. George Perkovich and James Acton, *Abolishing Nuclear Weapons*, IISS Adelphi Paper No. 396 (London, Routledge: 2008), p. 27.
49. Global Security Newswire, ''China Lashes Talk of Asian Missile Shield,'' April 12 2012, <www.nti.org/gsn/article/china-lashes-talk-asian-missile-shield/>; Global Security Newswire, ''Chinese Missile Push Seeks to Counter U.S. Protections, Experts Say,'' April 24, 2012, <www.nti.org/gsn/article/chinese-missile-push-seeks-counter-us-protections-experts/>.
50. For more on the problems of future uncertainty and strategic decision making, see Evan Braden Montgomery, ''Breaking Out of the Security Dilemma: Realism, Reassurance, and the Problem of Uncertainty,'' *International Security* 31 (Fall 2006), pp. 151–85, and Booth and Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma*.
51. Gormley, *Nuclear Disarmament and Russian Perceptions*, p. 100.