

## Prague as the Nonproliferation Pivot

The Prague Agenda outlined by the U.S. President Barack Obama four years ago appears marginal at best to the emerging nonproliferation challenges. This is especially true in the world's most important strategic theaters—East Asia and the Middle East. Obama's speech was indeed an inflection point in the U.S. foreign policy debate on nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation.

At its heart, the debate is about the nature and relevance of the arms control framework that emerged in the late 1960s and reached its apogee in the 1970s. This framework mainly aimed at stabilizing the nuclear relationship between the two superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—by laying down mutually acceptable rules of nuclear deterrence and regulating their competition. It also had a regional focus in managing the atomic dynamic in post-War Europe by getting most advanced European nations, especially the divided Germany, to renounce the nuclear weapon option. In Asia, the main regional focus was convincing Japan to accept a non-nuclear weapons status.

If the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) of 1972 undergirded the framework of deterrence between Washington and Moscow, the 1970 Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) sought to freeze the spread of nuclear weapons to the rest of the world. The former two agreements, of course, were seen as far more important than the latter to Washington's security calculus during the Cold War. The end of the Cold War saw the United States shift from the threat of a nuclear arms race, confrontation between the two superpowers, and avoiding a war in Europe to

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**O**abama's speech was an inflection point in the U.S. debate on nonproliferation.

focus on the dangers of nuclear proliferation to states in non-European regions, especially Asia and the Middle East. This regional transition is part of a broader structural change over the last generation that some have defined the “second nuclear age.”<sup>1</sup>

Several new trends mark this new phase in the history of nuclear weapons. They include,

to name a few: a presumed “second-mover” advantage that has allowed states with a relatively backward industrial base to assemble nuclear weapons and their delivery systems, thanks to technological diffusion and the existence of a nuclear gray market; the new techno-nationalism in the developing world which is driving these programs; the nuclearization of regional conflicts in South Asia, the Middle East, and Northeast Asia; the increased risk of their use attributed to the different strategic culture of non-Western societies;<sup>2</sup> and the prospect of terrorist and extremist organizations acquiring weapons of mass destruction. This is not the place to critique these formulations but to note that they have had a significant impact on nuclear thinking during the post-Cold War era, especially in the United States. Even limited amounts of proliferation are considered far more dangerous and threatening than the earlier expansive nuclear contest between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Thanks to intense U.S. policy and political attention, there have been sustained efforts to adapt the nonproliferation regime, built around the NPT, to the second nuclear age. Suggestions abound that the regime is in fundamental crisis. Pessimists in the U.S. nonproliferation community worry about the many threats which confront the regime. Some opponents of the Treaty argue that it has outlived its utility, can't manage its internal contradictions, and is irrelevant to the management of the current challenges.<sup>3</sup> Neither pessimism nor rejectionism, however, is helpful in considering the future of the nonproliferation regime.

Even a cursory examination of the post-Cold War record shows significant successes in sustaining nonproliferation. Nevertheless, major challenges do exist, especially in the inability of the NPT system to deal with proliferation in North Korea and Iran. This essay begins with a brief survey of the advances made in the nonproliferation arena and moves on to question one of the central assumptions of the Prague Agenda: that an inseparable link exists today between arms reductions among the great powers and WMD proliferation among non-nuclear states. The essay then discusses the domestic U.S. factors which have uniquely shaped both the Prague Agenda and the global discourse on nuclear weapons and arms control from the beginning, and finally concludes with a discussion of

the challenges that U.S. nonproliferation policy might face amidst a plausible reorientation of U.S. foreign policy.

### **Still Impressive in the Second Nuclear Age**

The 1990s and 2000s have seen a substantive advance in strengthening the NPT system. For one, formal great power consensus behind the NPT became complete. France and China, which chose to remain outside the system during the Cold War, despite the recognition of their legal standing as nuclear weapon states, joined the Treaty in the early 1990s. President George W. Bush facilitated a political accommodation between the nonproliferation regime and one of its trenchant and long-standing critics, India. Despite much criticism, Bush recognized that it was in the interest of the regime to have an emerging power like India inside the tent rather than outside it. U.S. political initiatives ensured that the collapse of the Soviet Union, one of the founding members of the NPT and arms control system, did not lead to a breakup of its large nuclear arsenal. Russia became the sole nuclear successor of the Soviet Union, and the other states were persuaded to renounce nuclear weapon ambitions and bring the variety of nuclear material and facilities under international control. Unified Germany's disavowal of nuclear weapons ensured one of the original intentions of the NPT, that Berlin would not become nuclear. U.S. diplomacy in the early 1990s thus guaranteed there were no more questions about proliferation in the old continent.

The last two decades also saw the near universalization of the NPT membership. Many key nations joined the treaty, including Argentina, Brazil, and Saudi Arabia, all of which stayed out of the NPT during the Cold War. The support of the major developing states was critical in the 1995 indefinite extension of the NPT. Few international treaties have enjoyed this near-universal membership. The 1990s also saw the drafting of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which is one of the oldest goals of the disarmament agenda dating back to the 1950s. The last two decades also saw the successful roll-back of nuclear weapons programs via either internal political change (South Africa) or international pressure (Iraq and Libya). Many critical provisions of the NPT were significantly strengthened since the early 1990s including tightening international safeguards (Article III) through such measures as the Additional Protocol, which verifies the obligations of states not to acquire nuclear weapons and keep their strategic programs under international supervision. In 2013, only three major countries—North Korea, Israel and Pakistan—remain outside the nonproliferation system.

Outside the Treaty, the major industrial powers have utilized stronger coordination to tighten the transfers of dual-use and other technologies which

states could use for manufacturing WMD. The Nuclear Suppliers Group, the Missile Technology Control Regime, the Australia Group, and the Wassenaar Arrangement have become more broad-based. The first ever UN Security Council Summit declared in January 1992 that the proliferation of WMD is a threat to international peace and security. It has also taken a more active role in responding to violations of the NPT system and thereby addressing one of the most important weaknesses of the treaty—the absence of a mechanism to punish treaty violators. Another major reinforcement of the regime came through the development of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) that plugged the gap in the treaty about illicit transfers of technology and material between states. On the question of terrorism, the UN General Assembly in 2004 approved Resolution 1540, requiring states to legislate and enforce on their territory effective measures against proliferation of WMD, related material, and delivery systems. If implemented effectively, no state or non-state actor will become a source or beneficiary of proliferation. The Nuclear Security Summit, which has met in 2010 and 2012, has agreed on specific commitments from some key states to accelerate work on securing the most vulnerable nuclear material from terrorists.

**The prevailing gloom and doom about the future of nuclear nonproliferation is entirely unwarranted.**

By any standard, this score card, which is by no means comprehensive, is an impressive one. The prevailing gloom and doom, then, about the future of the nuclear nonproliferation regime is entirely unwarranted. Put in the longer-term perspective, the NPT was not conceived in the 1960s as a perfect fix against the further spread of nuclear weapons. Instead,

the objective was to limit and slow the proliferation of nuclear proliferation to additional states. The NPT's success in this regard has been remarkable. Compared to the projections of scores of countries acquiring nuclear weapons since the early years of the Kennedy administration, the NPT has successfully limited the total number of additional nuclear states to just four—Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea—since the time the Treaty went into force in 1970.

The satisfactory performance of the NPT regime to date does not mean there are no new challenges. A number of them stand out. First, the non-nuclear states have vigorously opposed the reform of the NPT system by insisting on the absoluteness of Article IV, which speaks of free access to peaceful nuclear technologies by those who have renounced nuclear weapons by joining the NPT. Second, the international system has found it difficult to compel North Korea and Iran to abide by the obligations of the Treaty. The former has walked out of the NPT and has conducted nuclear weapon tests in 2006, 2010, and most recently in February 2013. Iran, meanwhile, continues to defy the UN Security

Council by refusing to freeze its enrichment program. Countries have made little progress toward the widely cherished nonproliferation goals of implementing the CTBT and negotiating the Fissile Materials Cut-off Treaty (FMCT). Many non-nuclear states complain bitterly about the lack of progress by the nuclear weapon states, and cite it as a major setback to the implementation of balanced obligations under the NPT. One of these contestations—central to the Prague Agenda—is the nuclear disarmament agenda.

## The Linkage Illusion

Calling for strengthening the NPT, Obama declared in Prague that the “basic bargain is sound: Countries with nuclear weapons will move towards disarmament, countries without nuclear weapons will not acquire them, and all countries can access peaceful nuclear energy.”<sup>4</sup> This highlighted a linkage between vertical proliferation and horizontal proliferation. Vertical proliferation is when nuclear weapons states develop new types of nuclear weapons technology, and horizontal proliferation refers to the acquisition of nuclear weapons technology by previously non-nuclear weapon states.

This linkage thesis was also central to the argument of four wise men—George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, William Perry, and Sam Nunn—who wrote a piece in the *Wall Street Journal* that has given the intellectual impetus for a reinvigorated nuclear arms reduction process:

The Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) envisioned the end of all nuclear weapons. It provides that states that did not possess nuclear weapons as of 1967 agree not to obtain them, and that states that do possess them agree to divest themselves of these weapons over time. Every president of both parties since Richard Nixon has reaffirmed these treaty obligations, but states without nuclear weapons have grown increasingly skeptical of the sincerity of the nuclear powers.<sup>5</sup>

The hope underlying this proposition—that the dangers of nuclear proliferation significantly lessen by accelerating nuclear arms control among the major powers—is entirely unrealistic. If the notion that the treaty inextricably linked disarmament and nonproliferation is somewhat dubious, the belief that proliferation occurs because of the lack of significant movement on the disarmament front is not borne out of facts.

The NPT was, in essence, about preventing horizontal nuclear proliferation. A close reading of the Treaty would seriously challenge the proposition that nonproliferation and disarmament have equal salience in it. The three sponsors of the treaty—the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union—agreed somewhat grudgingly to make a vague reference to general and complete disarmament in the treaty (Article VI). It has always been fanciful to suggest that there was a grand bargain on the issues of nonproliferation and

disarmament. Despite the new enthusiasm for nuclear abolition in the last few years in the United States, it requires, from a practical perspective, a suspension of disbelief that the nuclear weapon states would abandon their nuclear arsenals because of their commitments to the NPT. Equally implausible is the proposition that North Korea and Iran will disarm if the United States and Russia make significant progress in reducing their own nuclear arsenals. As analysts Josef Joffe and James W. Davis argued, “the premise that the [“have-nots”] will arm because the [“haves”] have not disarmed does not hold. It reflects neither history nor present-day realities. The truth is that the decision-making of aspiring nuclear powers is only remotely related, if it is related at all, to the strategic choices of the existing nuclear powers and that the two top nuclear powers have indeed cut back, with little effect on proliferation.”<sup>6</sup>

The four wise men as well as Obama were careful enough not to make rash promises about a “time-bound abolition” of nuclear weapons that enthusiasts often talk about. Instead, they talk about making it a process, walking toward the long-term objective of nuclear zero rather than emphasizing it as a near-term policy goal. To be sure, Washington and Moscow have made much progress on reducing nuclear weapons, but that is unlikely to persuade those seeking nuclear weapons to give up their quest. There is nothing to suggest any of the current nuclear aspirants believe that great progress toward nuclear zero can be achieved in the near term. Even if there was significant movement, it is unlikely to ensure a change of course among potential proliferators.

Nuclear disarmament (Article VI of the NPT) has long been a useful political stick for the non-nuclear countries to beat the big powers with in multilateral debates on nonproliferation and disarmament. Indeed, India took up the issue of Article VI in the NPT negotiations and popularized the linkage argument after the treaty came into force. Delhi initiated its emphasis on total abolition in the specific context of its circumstances in the mid-1960s—of defining a response to the acquisition of nuclear weapons by China. India hoped somewhat naively that the United Nations would develop a treaty that would roll back China’s nuclear weapons and obviate the need for an effective Indian riposte. In the end, Delhi’s decision to build nuclear weapons was linked to its specific circumstances of China aiding Pakistan’s nuclear and missile programs, not any absence of progress on nuclear disarmament.<sup>7</sup>

More than the presumed failures to implement Article VI, it is the U.S. attempt to restrict the terms of civil nuclear energy cooperation with the non-weapon countries under Article IV that has become a real source of conflict. The “inalienable” right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy was indeed an important issue in drafting the NPT, and the issue was of considerable concern to the leading nations of the developing world, including India and many others; but their civil nuclear plans were largely aspirational in the 1960s. Article IV was of

much greater concern to many European states and Japan, which had the technical capability and political intent to build large programs for atomic power generation. Some in the West were quick to suspect that states could use the civilian nuclear path to develop military nuclear capabilities. Yet, it was also quite clear that it may be much simpler to develop a nuclear weapons program through smaller research reactors producing plutonium and reprocessing facilities to convert the spent fuel into weapons-grade material. Building a large civilian nuclear power program is a longer and more expensive process if the objective is to use it to build atomic weapons.

Today, Iran asserts its “rights” under the NPT to develop a full-blown enrichment program. From a legalistic perspective, Tehran is indeed justified in its claim. Asserting that legalistic right, however, has run into a confrontation with the international community. The United States has led the international effort to restrict the interpretation of Article IV by seeking to deny the non-nuclear weapon states access to enrichment and reprocessing technologies that are critical to the production of weapons grade material. In other words, international actors are trying to plug the “civilian route” loophole.

In recent years, many non-aligned members of the NPT have vigorously argued against any restrictions on the transfer of uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing, generating much anxiety in the United States.<sup>8</sup> From a practical perspective, the conflict between the attempts to prevent Iranian proliferation and Tehran’s nuclear ambitions cannot be resolved on the basis of the first principles of the NPT and restructuring the nonproliferation regime. It could only be done on the basis of a political accord between Tehran and Washington. That in turn takes us to nonproliferation politics within the United States, which have had the biggest role in setting the terms of global nonproliferation discourse and action.

## **Nonproliferation as a U.S. Phenomenon**

The Prague speech by Barack Obama had considerable international impact, demonstrated by the Nobel Committee’s decision to award him the 2009 Peace Prize. It energized the global disarmament movement and revived the ideas of arms control between the major nuclear powers as well as for nonproliferation. In retrospect, though, the speech was as much about U.S. domestic politics on these issues as it was about shaping the international discourse. Obama’s speech rejected the George W. Bush arms control policy, which had little time for the inherited conventional wisdom.<sup>9</sup> For instance, the Bush policy tore up the ABM Treaty, long-considered the cornerstone of arms control between the United States and Russia. If the Bush ideologues dismissed the ABM Treaty as a relic of Cold War, they had even greater contempt for the NPT, which seemed to combine all the weaknesses of multilateralism and utterly failed to address the real challenges to



U.S. security arising from proliferation. The Bush administration focused instead on muscular confrontation of the rogue regimes, using force to engineer regime change, and looked beyond the NPT to create ad hoc arrangements like the Proliferation Security Initiative. This approach produced deep discontent within U.S. nonproliferation traditionalists (who also tend to coalesce around the Democratic Party's foreign policy establishment).

The election of Barack Obama was the moment for restoration of the traditional framework for nuclear arms control. The Prague speech, as some opponents of Obama might say, was about putting the humpty-dumpty of arms control together again. In Prague, Obama listed all the old objectives of arms control: energizing talks with Moscow to reduce the bloated U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals, reviving engagement with Moscow on a mutually acceptable framework to limit missile defenses, persuading the U.S. Senate to ratify the CTBT, seeking negotiations on drafting the FMCT, and strengthening the NPT. But the revival of the pure arms control agenda of the 1970s came with a new twist: Washington endorsed the linkage between disarmament and nonproliferation. Obama also underlined the U.S. intent to turn Bush's Proliferation Security Initiative into a genuine multilateral institution.

For Europe, the speech was a breath of fresh air heralding renewed American commitment to multilateralism. Moscow welcomed Obama's restoration of traditional arms control and the U.S. readiness to negotiate an accord on missile defense, for it seemed to put Russia back in the center of global affairs and give it the leverage it missed in the Bush years. That arms control was part of a broader reset of U.S. ties with Russia seemed to recreate the illusion of a bipolar world in Moscow. In China, India, Japan, and East Asia in general, there was no great expectation that Obama might succeed or that the new agenda in any way addressed their own larger security concerns relating to nuclear weapons. For some in East Asia, Obama's rhetoric on nuclear abolition raised questions about the credibility of American extended deterrence.<sup>10</sup>

**Few Asian nations rank nonproliferation as highly among their national security objectives.**

The speech brought into sharp relief the persistence of arms control inertia among the United States, Europe, and Russia, and considered indifference or concerns about the credibility of the American nuclear umbrella in Asia. Within the Euro-Atlantic world, the United States has long defined the terms for the international arms control and nonproliferation debate. Few among the Asian nations—which live much closer to the

arena of proliferation—rank nonproliferation as highly as Washington on their list of national security objectives. Is the extreme concern with nonproliferation an essentially U.S. phenomenon?



Within the United States, both Democrats and Republicans repeatedly reaffirm the centrality of the proliferation threat. On Iraq, for example, while the two sides differed on the strategy, both were insistent that Iraq's presumed (and non-existent in 2003) WMD posed a real and present danger to the United States. The liberals were as vehement as the neo-conservatives in demanding strong responses to Iraqi proliferation. While Bush's war in Iraq came under much criticism, there has been insufficient introspection from liberal arms controllers on their role in inflating the threat in Iraq and creating the conditions for the disastrous U.S. occupation. As an intellectual discipline or policy discourse, the U.S. debate on nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation tends to be largely self-referential with little dissent on the fundamentals. It is a rare voice that questions this absolute consensus and points to the "atomic obsession" that has distorted the U.S. worldview and its national security priorities since the Second World War.<sup>11</sup>

**An "atomic obsession" has distorted the U.S. worldview and national security priorities since WWII.**

Taking a broader view of the Cold War and the U.S. responses to the first nuclear age, scholarship has pointed to the tendency of "threat inflation" in the United States, and the tradition of paranoid politics which has repeatedly pushed Washington into developing deep anxieties and unleashing responses that were way out of proportion.<sup>12</sup> A recent critique of the assumptions underlying the U.S. nonproliferation debate points to this familiar threat inflation: "by overreacting to current dangers while mischaracterizing those of the past, however, nuclear alarmists drive misguided policies that could threaten international stability and U.S. interests today and in the future."<sup>13</sup>

The pressure for moderation and restraint in assessing nonproliferation threats is unlikely to come from within the arms control debate itself. It must necessarily come from the political leadership in Washington, who must adapt to the new circumstances confronting the United States today, especially the fiscal crisis at home and the imperatives for external retrenchment. That in turn sets up a challenge for the United States: for good or bad, the United States has largely devised the nonproliferation framework, and U.S. power has encouraged its universalization, amendments, and implementation. Given the widespread sense of the United States' relative decline, the nonproliferation debate in the United States as well as the world will

**Nonproliferation will have to come to terms with the new constraints on the exercise of U.S. power.**

have to come to terms with the new constraints on the exercise of U.S. power. For nearly two decades, the U.S. nonproliferation community has had the unprecedented luxury of focusing on ambitious objectives. That luxury will no longer be available for the U.S. discourse on nonproliferation.

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### **Adapting to U.S. Retrenchment**

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At the beginning of Obama's second term as president, it is not clear if nuclear arms control and nonproliferation will enjoy the kind of political salience they did in the first. In his first inaugural speech, Obama declared that "[w]ith old friends and former foes, we will work tirelessly to lessen the nuclear threat, and roll back the specter of a warming planet."<sup>14</sup> In his second inaugural address, Obama mentioned climate change again but omitted any reference to nuclear arms control. While this might not necessarily imply a change in policy, the bold focus of the speech on a transformative domestic agenda and the president's emphasis throughout his re-election campaign on nation-building at home suggests that Obama is unlikely to expend political capital on such big ideas as nuclear abolition or the ratification of the CTBT in his second term.<sup>15</sup> If Obama's Prague speech gave a big boost to hopes for radical nuclear arms control measures, the second term might see a more measured focus on a few pressing issues, especially dealing with the hard cases of Iran and North Korea. As U.S. power weakens, even for a short duration, securing U.S. interests in the Middle East and Asia might take precedence over pursuing the Prague Agenda.

The possibility of deep cuts in U.S. and Russian arsenals was one of the central themes of the Prague Agenda, which the New START quickly realized in 2010. But further movement, quite easily conceivable from a technical point of view, has been hampered by new tensions in U.S.–Russian relations especially since the return of Vladimir Putin as president. Besides the differences on missile defense, the rapid changes in the internal orientation of Russia and U.S. concerns about a resurgence of authoritarian tendencies in Russia has undermined the support in Washington for deeper political partnership with Moscow.

For all their tensions, U.S.–Russian relations do not threaten international peace and security. But deteriorating relations between the United States and China *have* begun to shake the very foundations of the Asian security order.

Indeed, the absence of a U.S. nuclear arms control framework with China raises some important questions: Is nuclear control a discrete technical issue about sizes of arsenals and their management, or is it merely a part of managing a broader political-military relationship with other powers? China does not have a large nuclear arsenal and is unwilling to join any nuclear arms reduction process until U.S. and Russian arsenals come down to much lower levels. Meanwhile, China's advances in space weapons and cyber warfare capabilities are threatening the U.S. ability to maintain its long-standing primacy in Asia. There is little in the Prague Agenda that addresses the consequences of China's rise and the implications of its growing military capabilities for the peace agenda in Asia. It has become increasingly difficult in Asia to separate the discussion of nuclear arms control, space weaponry, and regulating conventional arms control. At the same time, talk of nuclear abolition has raised questions about the nature of extended deterrence and whether U.S. security commitments to its allies in Asia are still credible.

A recent report on the views of the strategic communities in East Asia argues:

The disarmament agenda will have a chance of advancing in East Asia only if closely informed by and integrated with the realities of strategic change in the region and the role of extended deterrence in managing those changes. And transcending all of the debates about capability, posture and doctrine is the question of strategic intent. Deep-seated doubts about strategic intentions will need to be dispelled, especially between the United States and China, before East Asia can take its place in any vision of a world without nuclear weapons.<sup>16</sup>

Extended deterrence and U.S. alliances in Asia have been critical in limiting the spread of nuclear weapons. Emerging doubts about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence do not rest in technical solutions, but in the Asian perceptions of U.S. power and their understanding of the implications of Sino-U.S. relations to their own security.

In the end, East Asia's nuclear future might be inextricably linked to the sustainability of U.S. primacy in Asia. Although the issue of North Korea has drawn considerable political and policy attention for more than two decades, the problem pales in comparison to China's rise. Furthermore, the inability of the international system to restrain North Korea from testing nuclear weapons and delivery systems reinforces the pressures on Japan and South Korea to consider alternatives to relying on U.S. power and extended deterrence. Although China strongly endorses the NPT and the region has bet its hopes on Beijing restraining North Korea, it is not clear if Beijing has the capacity or the political will to move Pyongyang toward moderation. Assuming good faith on the part of Beijing, China's policy toward a region so vital to its national security is

nevertheless unlikely to be driven by the first principles of the nonproliferation regime, but will be by its own interests in the Korean Peninsula.

As permanent members of the UN Security Council, Moscow and Beijing have given grudging support to the multilateral sanctions against North Korea and Iran. But both differ with the United States by holding more hope for negotiation and peaceful resolution of the issues with these two nations. Although Obama emphasizes multilateralism and seeks legitimacy from the UNSC to act against proliferators, Moscow and Beijing have growing concerns that Washington tends to use that legitimacy in ways very different from the original intent of UN resolutions. Furthermore, Russia and China have strong interests in Iran that diverge deeply from those of the United States.

As U.S. power wanes, its ability to produce the all-important great power consensus on nonproliferation will begin to diminish, and costs of getting others on board will continue to rise. This in turn makes building domestic U.S. consensus on any specific course of action much more difficult. Meanwhile, North Korea and Iran have shown both determination and resilience to withstand the international pressure mobilized by Washington. With both these regimes, the United States must consider direct bilateral engagement while simultaneously navigating a path between castigating them as part of an axis of evil and mobilizing collective international pressure against them.

If the U.S. moderates its nonproliferation objectives, it might find interesting options to alter the dynamics in Iran and North Korea. Amidst the growing U.S. weariness with expansive international commitments and Obama's emphasis on nation-building at home, the U.S. nonproliferation debate must finally avoid the temptations of alarmism, move away from the prolonged demonization of the regimes in Tehran and Pyongyang, and deploy its declining power resources and enduring political advantages to pursue limited goals. Above all, the United States must dovetail its nonproliferation objectives with more important and consequential efforts to construct a stable balance of power in the Middle East and Asia.

For more than two generations, the United States has led, quite successfully, the efforts to build and sustain the global nonproliferation regime. Its extraordinary international weight in the mid-twentieth century and the unipolar moment that straddled the transition to the twenty-first provided the basis for American leadership. Within the United States, the liberals and the neoconservatives shared an inflated view of the threat from the proliferation of nuclear weapons, but differed sharply on the means to deal with it. The internal debate turned deeply divisive during the tenure of George W. Bush. The Prague Agenda was about restoring the more familiar nuclear arms control agenda of the

twentieth century with the added twist of a linkage between disarmament and nonproliferation. It was the last gasp of arms control theology from another era.

If Bush gave unilateralism a bad name, Obama could end up highlighting the limitations of multilateralism in dealing with the hard cases of proliferation. Washington, instead, must recognize that the rest of the world does not view proliferation of WMD in as dire terms as the more geographically remote United States does. At a time when the United States must necessarily focus on domestic challenges, it must make the best use of its limited foreign policy resources to achieve modest and narrowly focused nonproliferation objectives. U.S. arms control strategy must put politics back in command and focus on promoting a stable balance of power in East Asia and the Middle East. Such an approach might be more successful in limiting the spread of nuclear weapons than the illusion that U.S.–Russian nuclear reductions will help fix the huge changes in the distribution of power in Asia.

**The Prague Agenda was the last gasp of arms control theology from another era.**

## Notes

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