

A Daunting Nuclear Agenda for 2010

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- By David Santoro

In nuclear affairs, President Obama did very well in 2009. Will he do better in 2010? His agenda is daunting.

2009 will be remembered as the year when President Obama articulated an ambitious vision for the world. A year ago, President Obama took office with the stated goal of making the elimination of all nuclear weapons a central element of its nuclear policy. In a landmark speech delivered in Prague on April 5, 2009, he further detailed his vision of a world free of nuclear weapons and he outlined an ambitious arms control agenda for the next decade.

Five months later, on September 24, 2009, the President chaired a historic meeting of the U.N. Security Council that was attended by the heads of state or government of all but one (Libya) of the 15 members. This led to the unanimous adoption of Resolution 1887 that focuses on important issues concerning nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. The resolution enshrined the Council's commitment to the goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world and laid the groundwork for the Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that will take place in New York next May.

President Obama's good intentions and strong personal involvement in nuclear issues played a key role in securing his place as the Nobel Peace Prize recipient. In hearing of the news last October, the President declared that "it is an award that speaks to our highest aspirations" and he added that he would accept the award "as a call to action, a call for all nations to confront the challenges of the 21st century."

The task of translating this vision into action is now upon him. This process will be initiated in 2010, which counts a series of important interim steps that will put the feasibility of his ambitious goals to severe test.

First will come the agreement with Russia on a successor to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) that expired early last month. Negotiations for a follow-on treaty, underway since the first part of 2009 and initially intended to be complete before the expiration of START, now seem to be nearing a conclusion. This is despite Russia's continued concerns over U.S. deployments of missile defense systems, even following President Obama's decision to abandon the controversial plans in Eastern Europe proposed by his predecessor.



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Although the new treaty will not make deep cuts in the large U.S. and Russian arsenals, it will send a strong signal to the world that the disarmament machine is functioning. The new treaty is expected to set limits on U.S. and Russian strategic warheads down to the 1,500-1,675 range. Unlike the latest disarmament treaty signed by the United States and Russia (the so-called “Moscow Treaty” which only set limits on strategic warheads), this treaty is also expected to set limits on delivery vehicles (down to the 800-500 range) and include relatively strong verification measures.

Second, the release of a new Nuclear Posture Review (NPR)—an updating of U.S. declaratory nuclear weapons policy—will be of crucial importance. Expected before the end of 2009, its release date was pushed back to February 2010, and the Department of Defense recently announced that it would now be out on March 1.

The NPR is anticipated to further reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. defense policy and lay the foundations for moving toward a world free of nuclear weapons. But due to the United States’ place and role in the world, notably to its security alliances in Europe and Asia (and, to a lesser extent, to the possible influence of more conservative figures involved in the NPR process), it is still uncertain how far the NPR will really go in pushing the role of U.S. nuclear weapons into the background.

Third will be the Global Nuclear Security Summit to be held in Washington, DC in April. Called by President Obama in his Prague speech, the summit, which will include leaders from approximately 30 countries, will focus on safeguarding against nuclear terrorism by enhancing international cooperation and improving the security of nuclear materials throughout the world.

The results of the summit will determine the feasibility of the President’s pledged campaign to secure all vulnerable nuclear material across the globe within four years. Perhaps to a lesser extent, the summit results will also speak to the possibility of negotiating an end to the production of fissile materials for weapons purposes, which will be framed into a so-called “fissile material cut-off treaty” (FMCT) that President Obama also insisted he would strive to pursue during his term in office.

Fourth, in May, the important NPT Review Conference will take place in New York. Review Conferences, which happen every five years, are an opportunity to measure the health of the nuclear nonproliferation regime and, if possible, consolidate confidence among states through agreement on action plans on each of the Treaty’s three core pillars of nonproliferation, disarmament, and peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

Clearly, the outcome of the Review Conference will be indicative of whether or not President Obama’s vision is really within reach—or at least how quickly. Although it can take several forms, real success would be the achievement of a consensus final document that identifies ambitious yet realizable steps to be taken on the Treaty’s three pillars over the course of the next five years, that is, until the 2015 NPT Review Conference.

The likelihood of such an achievement is unclear. The 2009 NPT Preparatory Committee solved the procedural problems that prevented any real progress at the previous Review Conference. But substantive issues remain possible, if not probable.

A seemingly inextricable divide between nuclear weapons states (NWS) and non-nuclear weapons states (NNWS) may well endure. NNWS may be reluctant to agree on further nonproliferation obligations until NWS take more substantial steps forward on the disarmament front. And of course further barriers to progress include the thorny issue of the NPT holdouts (India, Israel, and Pakistan) as well as the entrenched North Korean and Iranian crises, to which there is currently no end in sight.

The ultimate major step that President Obama may take this year in the nuclear field is the resubmission of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) to the Senate. CTBT is a treaty that bans all types of nuclear explosions, and therefore complicates the development of nuclear weapons, notably advanced nuclear weapons. But the Senate rejected it in 1999 and, subsequently, the Bush Administration refused to resubmit it for ratification.

President Obama vowed to seek a new Senate vote on CTBT, notably because U.S. ratification is expected to have a snowballing effect on some of the other states whose ratification is conditional to the Treaty's entry into force (China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, North Korea, and Pakistan). Nevertheless, opposition to ratification by the United States remains rampant in the Republican Party and it is unclear whether the Administration will be able to get sufficient votes to make it successful.

Timing for CTBT resubmission to the Senate will be problematic. Seeking ratification before the November mid-term elections will be politically difficult because the issue is very controversial. At the same time, a push for CTBT after the mid-term elections could prove more difficult if Democrats lose Senate seats, which is highly likely based both on historical trends and on President Obama's waning popularity.

In a nutshell, President Obama's coming nuclear agenda is daunting. Last year, he successfully managed to articulate a strong and ambitious vision for the world. But now he is faced with the more challenging task of driving that vision to completion. And the scores will be kept.

Biography:

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Background: About the Liu Institute for Global Issues

Named after Dr. Jieh Jow Liou, the Liu Institute conducts and facilitates research on global issues, mobilizing knowledge into solutions and policy. One of sixteen research units in the College for Interdisciplinary Studies (CFIS), the Institute takes an interdisciplinary problem-solving approach to explore new ideas and ways of learning to catalyze innovative thinking and positive societal change. Its current focus is on advancing sustainability, security, and social justice: understood as moving toward economic, social, and environmental interactions that promote the well-being of people in ways that are just, equitable, and sustainable.

Founded in 1998 by Professor Ivan Head and opened in 2000, the Institute acts as a hub for global research and emerging issues at the University of British Columbia (UBC).

A hallmark of the Institute is to provide innovative learning and research opportunities for UBC graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, faculty, and community members that help to bridge the gap between academics and practitioners.

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