

## Nuclear disarmament disarmed

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*US President Barack Obama's foreign-policy landscape is littered with deflated balloons. Soaring speeches, high hopes, and great expectations have yielded minimal returns.*



Illustration by Paul Lachine

Across the Islamic world – from North Africa to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan – we see fragile relationships, unhappy transitions, unresolved conflicts, and outright attacks on the United States, despite Obama's case for a new beginning, movingly articulated in his June 2009 speech in Cairo. Israel, deaf to Obama's urging, is further from reconciliation with Palestine, and closer to war with Iran, than it has ever been.

Likewise, for all the effort put into improving America's most important bilateral relationships – those with China and Russia – ties with both countries have become increasingly tense, owing most recently to the Kremlin's intransigence over Syria and official Chinese behavior in the South China Sea.

But the balloon that has deflated the most may be the one that Obama sent aloft in Prague in April 2009, when he made the case for rapid and serious movement toward a world free of nuclear weapons.

A good start was made with the US-Russia New START treaty to limit significantly strategic-weapon deployments, the largely successful Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, and the productive, US-hosted Nuclear Security Summit. But, over the last year, the spirit of optimism that energized these developments has, sadly, gone missing.

This month, a group of former prime ministers, foreign and defense ministers, and military, diplomatic, and scientific leaders from 14 countries met in Singapore as the Asia Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (APLN). They expressed their profound disappointment at what they described as the "evaporation of political will" evident in global and regional efforts toward nuclear disarmament.

Apart from another reasonably productive Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul in March 2012, the news on the disarmament front over the last year has certainly been bleak. Further US-Russia arms-reduction negotiations ground to a halt long before the American presidential election season began. Meanwhile, no other nuclear-armed state has expressed the slightest interest in bilateral or multilateral reduction negotiations until the two major powers, which currently hold 95% of the world's stockpile, make further major cuts.

Cautious initial moves by the US to modify its nuclear doctrine – toward accepting that nuclear weapons' "sole purpose" is to respond to nuclear threats, and not any other kind – have gone

nowhere. Negotiations to “de-alert” the 2,000 nuclear weapons that remain at absurdly dangerous, Cold War-era launch readiness have never really started.

There are also no signs of movement on bringing into force the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). And there has been zero progress on breaking the negotiating stalemate on a new treaty to ban production of fissile material for nuclear weapons; negligible progress on a conference to create a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the Middle East (a key outcome of the 2010 NPT Review Conference); and actual acceleration of nuclear-weapons programs in India, Pakistan, and China.

So who is to blame? Some charge the Obama administration itself with sending mixed signals or worse: The US, they note, has modernized its own nuclear arsenal, developed new ballistic-missile defense and conventional weapons systems, and been too willing to accommodate its European and Northeast Asian allies’ nervousness about limiting the nuclear dimension of the extended deterrence umbrella under which they shelter.

But it is hard to ignore the huge constraint that an intensely partisan and negative political environment in the US has imposed. Republican intransigence has precluded US ratification of the CTBT, which would be a big international circuit-breaker; almost killed the New START treaty at birth; and has caused the bar for further negotiations with Russia and China to be set almost impossibly high.

Nor is there any sign that any of these positions would be modified should Mitt Romney, the Republican challenger, become president. International concerns have been compounded – certainly for the APLN leaders – by the shrillness of Romney’s statements on China and Taiwan, as well as his extraordinary identification of Russia as America’s “number one geopolitical foe.”

There are those who will say that it is naïve to want a world free of nuclear weapons, much less to think that it can be achieved. But it is not naïve to be concerned about the most indiscriminately inhumane weapons of destruction ever invented – 23,000 of which still exist – with a combined destructive capability of 150,000 Hiroshima bombs. And it is not naïve to believe that non-proliferation and disarmament are inextricably connected: that so long as any state retains nuclear weapons, others will want them.

The genuinely naïve – or ignorant – position is to believe that statesmanship and foolproof controls, rather than sheer dumb luck, have enabled the world to go almost seven decades without a nuclear-weapons catastrophe. It is not naïve to believe that nuclear deterrence is both fragile operationally, and of thoroughly dubious utility in sustaining the peace. Nor is it naïve to believe that even if nuclear weapons cannot be un-invented, they can ultimately be outlawed.

Obama cannot be faulted for trying. Even deflated balloons are better than a devastated planet.

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