

# What's behind Obama's rhetoric of nuclear restraint?

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**The discourse of concern about nuclear non-proliferation by the biggest and most obscene of all nuclear culprits - the US - serves admirably as one line of attack on countries like Iran and as a disguise for the US's deeper and wider motives in West and East Asia.**

On nuclear restraint, non-proliferation and disarmament, President Obama has made one bold declaration after the other. He has scrapped plans to place radars (Czech Republic) and interceptors (Poland) effectively shelving (though not formally renouncing) his predecessor's Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) programme aimed at giving the US nuclear dominance in space. Obama clearly intends to bring into force the CTBT and to revive the NPT. He has talked of moving ahead to finalise a fissiles materials cut-off treaty (FMCT) and of significantly reducing along with Russia respective strategic arsenals. After Iran's declaration that it has been building another uranium enrichment plant, he has come out with a strong warning against Teheran taking the path of future weaponization but stated his willingness for talks to help Iran's leaders see reason.

To properly assess the significance of these various moves, we must situate Obama's behaviour in the context of the US's broader geopolitical perspectives and nuclear ambitions and the relationship between the two. What changes between Republican and Democratic administrations (and the variant personalities of their Presidents) is not the basic geopolitical goals but how best to go about achieving them. After 9/11 the US was able to militarily-politically implant itself as never before in Central Asia and it is not about to give this strategic gain up no matter how uneasy Russia feels about this US presence in its 'near abroad'. To stabilize US influence in Central Asia and the success NATO has already achieved in pushing towards Russia's frontiers, Obama needs to 'Afghanise' his control over Kabul and thus assuage a domestic constituency fed up with the existing stalemate and the rising body count of American soldiers. And he needs to reassure Russia that he will respect its now quite attenuated 'sphere of influence'.

Shelving the BMD project in its earliest stages is partly a quid pro quo for Russian logistical support for US activity in Afghanistan and partly a signal to Moscow that it can gain from greater cooperation with Washington in West Asia where the latter plays for much higher stakes. It is partly a sensible abandonment of a project whose long term technical feasibility was anyway highly dubious but whose existence was seriously worrying to Russia and China though it was rationalized dishonestly as directed against Iran - a cover-up Obama cannot even now admit to.

There are genuine positives from Obama's actions. The scuppering of the BMD project is to be welcomed and also creates the possibility of deeper cuts in Russian and American arsenals. Making the entry into force of the CTBT more likely is welcome since it is a genuine restraint measure on the qualitative advancement of the nuclear arsenals of all existing NWSs. But Obama's purpose is primarily to strengthen in a selective and targeted manner the global non-proliferation regime. The START agreements carried out reductions in the missiles to be operationalised and deployed but did not touch those stored. The new anticipated agreements on bilateral reductions will be the same, so

the US and Russia will still have together anything between 15,000 to 20,000 warheads. Obama (complete disarmament is “not in our lifetime”) has no intention to bring down the totals (deployed and stored) to something like 500 each which would still be more than France or China but would generate a major momentum towards complete global disarmament via progressive steps of proportionate arsenal reductions among all NWSs.

Obama clearly has his eye on strengthening the non-proliferation but not the disarmament thrust of the NPT in its Review Conference of next year. He is paving the way for bringing about ‘international’ (i.e. suborned) control regimes that will address an inherent weakness of the NPT, namely its promotion of civilian nuclear energy whose dual use character helps generate the capabilities to make the bombs otherwise renounced by the its non-nuclear signatories. This means seeking to deprive countries like Iran of what was hitherto respected, namely full control over their civilian nuclear fuel cycle. Of course these control mechanisms are to be selectively applied. US allies like Pakistan, India and Israel have nothing to fear and the nuclear elite in India in particular need not get as bothered as sections of it have been by the latest Obama sponsored UN resolution (1887) calling for outliers to join the NPT. The commitments behind the Indo-US Deal and behind the NSG waiver for India, is the price his government has willingly endorsed to cement the strategic partnership with India.

On the issue of the FMCT the Indian thinking is that by the time any such treaty is finalized the country should have, like the other NWSs, a sufficient stockpile of weapons grade fuel to meet all future needs. All the NWSs are united in wanting only a production cut-off not progressive reduction and elimination of stockpiles. In effect an FMCT that refuses to address the issue of stockpiles is essentially a farce. Pakistan used to be the one NWS that insisted correctly that stockpiles had to be addressed but now seems to have resiled from this stand perhaps because it is currently uncertain about adequately balancing against India’s rising stockpiles if an FMCT is finalized too quickly.

Even after 1998 the Indian government showed some concerns about the dangers of further nuclear arms racing and opposed the US’s space shield programme. When Bush Jnr. repudiated the ABM Treaty with Russia and initiated the BMD, India quietly dropped its opposition. Now that Obama has shelved the BMD India will quietly go along with this new line. On the CTBT if push comes to shove by the US (which has to first build the necessary domestic Congressional majority) India will again quietly go along to sign and ratify it.

West Asia lies at the heart of the US’s informal global empire project. No long term control here, no possibility of securing the desired global geopolitical eminence that Obama as much as any of his predecessors believes is America’s mission not just for its own good, but given its supposedly unique democratic and other virtues, is also an international public good. Stabilizing West Asia means ‘Iraqiizing’ control over Baghdad; sustaining Israeli dominance which if necessary may require imposing an utterly unjust settlement on the Palestinians; decisively weakening the one state in the region which is its major opponent and which also connects to its major two non-state opponents of Hamas and Hezbollah - Iran. The US and Israel certainly don’t want Iran to even have the option to weaponize, hence the determination to use whatever avenues are available to justify squeezing it, preferably with whatever degree of political support it can get from other powers like Russia, China, Japan, India, etc.

But the reasons for wanting to isolate and weaken Iran go well beyond the specifically nuclear issue involving much larger geopolitical ambitions. The use of a dishonestly partial and hypocritically crafted discourse of concern about nuclear non-proliferation by the biggest and most obscene of all nuclear culprits - the US - serves admirably as one line of attack on countries like Iran (and North Korea) and as a disguise for the US’s deeper and wider motives in West Asia (and East Asia). India will go along.

**P.S.**

\* From the TNI:

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