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Incompatible Pronouncements on the Future of the U.S. Nuclear Force

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In an April 5 speech in Prague, President Barack Obama reiterated his campaign commitment to “seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.”¹ Unfortunately, he also made two completely incompatible pronouncements regarding the future of the U.S. nuclear force.

First, President Obama stated, “As long as these [nuclear] weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure and *effective* arsenal to deter any adversary and guarantee that defense to our allies—including the Czech Republic.”²

However, President Obama went on to state that “to achieve a global ban on nuclear testing, my administration will immediately and aggressively pursue U.S. ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.”³

These two pronouncements are incompatible because the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) is a treaty of unlimited duration that imposes a “zero yield” ban on the testing of nuclear weapons.⁴ The ban on testing imposed by the treaty prohibits the maintenance of an effective nuclear arsenal in the context of a wide variety of changing circumstances. These include the adoption of new strategies and postures for governing nuclear weapons and changes in targeting requirements because of the emergence of new targets that require new nuclear warheads or the need for new delivery systems that also demand new warheads.

Put succinctly, the CTBT will prohibit—essentially forever—the development of new nuclear

weapons that are necessary to maintain an effective nuclear force under changing circumstances.

The Clinton Administration’s Science-Based Stockpile Stewardship Program. The actions taken by the Clinton Administration in its failed attempt to obtain Senate ratification of the CTBT demonstrate the incompatibility of President Obama’s Prague pronouncements. The Clinton Administration, prior to Senate consideration of CTBT ratification, explained how a Science-Based Stockpile Stewardship (SBSS) program and an associated series of “safeguards” would support the U.S. nuclear arsenal, stockpile, and weapons infrastructure under all conceivable circumstances and that if some unforeseen scenario called into question the “safety and reliability” of nuclear weapons, the U.S. would withdraw from the CTBT and resume explosive testing.

The SBSS program and the safeguards were designed to convince the Senate that the entry into force of the CTBT for the U.S. would not force U.S. nuclear disarmament or otherwise incur undue risks. The Clinton Administration, however, also asserted only that the SBSS program would preserve the safety and reliability of U.S. nuclear weapons.⁵

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It was careful neither to assert that the SBSS program would assure the effectiveness of U.S. nuclear weapons nor to indicate that a lack of effectiveness would institute future withdrawal from the CTBT under the safeguards.

The Clinton Administration's omission likely resulted from a well-grounded assessment that the U.S. could not maintain an effective nuclear weapons force for an indefinite period of time absent explosive testing. Thus, it essentially admitted that establishing a clear standard of effectiveness under the SBSS program was incompatible with U.S. entry into the CTBT.

The Senate Votes to Reject the CTBT. The CTBT suffers from a number of fatal flaws.⁶ Among them is the fact—admitted by the Clinton Administration—that the CTBT is incompatible with the maintenance of an effective nuclear arsenal over the long term. The argument regarding the long-term effectiveness of the U.S. nuclear arsenal under the CTBT raised important questions about the wisdom of U.S. ratification the last time the ban was considered.⁷

In response to this concern, as well as others, the Senate voted to reject the treaty on October 13, 1999.⁸ Leaving aside the fact that Senate rejection of the CTBT represents its definitive judgment on the issue of U.S. ratification, the questions regarding the

long-term effectiveness of the U.S. nuclear arsenal under the terms of the treaty are at least as valid today as they were in 1999.⁹

President Obama, as stated in his Prague speech, is now insisting on a U.S. nuclear arsenal that is effective, as well as safe and secure, for as long as nuclear weapons exist.¹⁰ This insistence invalidates the SBSS program and the safeguards put in place by the Clinton Administration to support CTBT ratification. With it, President Obama has also invalidated his own call for U.S. ratification.

Nuclear Weapons in the Post-Cold War World. Today's real world circumstances have justified the Clinton Administration's concerns. The world now presents a complex and unpredictable array of potential strategic threats to the U.S. and its allies from disparate sources that did not exist during the Cold War. Yet the U.S. nuclear arsenal, although smaller, essentially consists of the same weapons that existed during the Cold War. As a result, the U.S. needs to modernize its nuclear force, along with defensive and conventional forces, to adapt it to new circumstances.

Specifically, the U.S. needs to adopt a more defensive strategic posture that strives to protect and defend the people, territories, institutions, and infrastructure of the U.S. and its allies against strategic attack—as opposed to relying on the kind of

1. Robert Schroeder, "Text of President Obama's Speech in Prague," MarketWatch, April 5, 2009, at http://www.marketwatch.com/news/story/text-president-obamas-speech-prague/story.aspx?guid=%7B61A1EE9A%2DAA02%2D4876%2D8F9F%2D7E0A3797F54B%7D&dist=msr_2 (April 14, 2009).
2. *Ibid* (emphasis added).
3. *Ibid*.
4. U.S. Department of State, Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, Articles I and IX, at <http://www.state.gov/t/isn/trty/16411.htm> (April 16, 2009); "Article by Article Analysis of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty," under headings "Article I—Basic Obligations" and "Article IX—Duration and Withdrawal," at <http://www.state.gov/t/isn/trty/16522.htm> (April 16, 2009).
5. The White House, "Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Safeguards," *Fact Sheet*, September 22, 1997.
6. Baker Spring, "The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty: In Arms Control's Worst Tradition," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1332, October 7, 1999, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/MissileDefense/BG1332.cfm>.
7. Baker Spring, "Why the Administration's Stockpile Stewardship Will Harm the U.S. Nuclear Deterrent," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1334, October 7, 1999, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/MissileDefense/BG1334.cfm>.
8. *Congressional Record*, 106th Cong., 1st Sess., October 13, 1999, p. S12547.
9. Baker Spring, "Ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty: A Bad Idea in 1999, A Worse Idea Today," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1533, June 29, 2007, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/wm1533.cfm>.
10. It is not clear why President Obama also decided to drop the Clinton Administration's insistence on retaining a "reliable" nuclear arsenal under the SBSS program, the safeguards, and the CTBT.

retaliatory forces used to deter Soviet strategic attacks during the Cold War.¹¹ The current U.S. nuclear force is not designed for this defensive strategy. In short, the U.S. nuclear arsenal is not as effective as it should be for meeting today's security requirements.

President Obama is right to insist on maintaining an effective U.S. nuclear arsenal for as long as nuclear weapons exist, but he also needs to acknowledge that the entry into force of the CTBT for the U.S. is incompatible with this effectiveness standard—a truth the Clinton Administration tacitly acknowledged in the 1990s.

Also, President Obama will be better served by recognizing that the CTBT complicates, more than contributes to, his long-term vision for nuclear disarmament. There is no direct route to nuclear disarmament at this time. What President Obama should be focused on is adapting U.S. strategic forces—nuclear and conventional, offensive and defensive—to fulfilling the needs of a fundamentally defensive strategic policy that is consistent with today's security needs. Following the modernization of all U.S. strategic forces, including the nuclear

arsenal, to fulfill the requirements for this defensive policy and posture, the U.S. is more likely to find itself in a position to pursue nuclear disarmament directly. The first priority, therefore, is to modernize U.S. strategic forces.

The Senate, for procedural reasons, should acknowledge that its decision in 1999 to reject the CTBT was its definitive judgment on the treaty's shortcomings. Substantively, the Senate needs to recognize that President Obama's stated policy of insisting on an effective U.S. nuclear arsenal for as long as nuclear weapons exist is incompatible with CTBT ratification and that both international circumstances and the atrophy of U.S. nuclear forces since the end of the Cold War have only increased the CTBT's incompatibility with U.S. security requirements. Ultimately, the CTBT does not serve U.S. security interests.

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11. Baker Spring, "Congressional Commission Should Recommend 'Damage Limitation' Strategy," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 2172, August 14, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/bg2172.cfm>; "Toward an Alternative Strategic Posture," Heritage Foundation WebMemo No. 2183, January 2, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/wm2183.cfm>.