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## How Barack Obama's Vision of a Nuclear-Free World Weakens America's Security: Deconstructing the "Road to Zero"

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**Abstract:** *President Obama's vision of universal nuclear disarmament—or, as it is called, the "road to zero"—is a resurrection of old Cold War thinking, both in the particular idea of mutual assured destruction and its attending arms control theories and in criticisms of missile defense. It is not hope and change. It is a throwback to a strategy that during the Cold War led to stalemate, and it cannot lead to anything different today.*

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There are several observations we can make about President Barack Obama's nuclear disarmament vision. He actually has said a great deal about this issue, not only at major events and conferences, but also in treaty negotiations. I think it would be helpful to deconstruct what he has said and compare it with the history of disarmament thinking.

When I did this exercise, I came to the conclusion that his vision of nuclear disarmament and his policies are standard fare—a resurrection of pre-Ronald Reagan ideas of disarmament. Then and certainly now, these ideas are based on the assumption that the mere existence of nuclear weapons is a sort of "original sin," particularly for the United States, the only country to have dropped an atomic bomb.

A cottage industry developed around this kind of strategic thinking, which included such theories as mutual assured destruction, or MAD. Many people thought that we had put some of these old theories to rest with the end of the Cold War, but they are back, and with a vengeance. In my opinion, those theories

### Talking Points

- President Obama's vision of nuclear disarmament is a resurrection of pre-Ronald Reagan ideas of disarmament, based on the assumption that the mere existence of nuclear weapons is a sort of "original sin," particularly for the United States.
- Many people have argued that what the President wants to do is similar to what Ronald Reagan wanted to do when he talked about making nuclear weapons obsolete.
- Nothing could be further from the truth. Reagan believed we should reduce our reliance on nuclear weapons, but he did not envision their complete elimination through the treaty process.
- Reducing nuclear weapons is good, but the balance between the forces and the nature of the regimes that have those weapons is far more important than the utopian fantasy of simply getting to zero.

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were questionable then, and they are more questionable now that the Cold War has long since passed into history.

### A Four-Part Vision

President Obama's vision of nuclear disarmament has four parts.

First, there is the idea that universal nuclear disarmament—or, as it is called, the “road to zero”—is disarmament's ultimate moral imperative. Many experts scoff at this idea, admitting that it's an impossible goal and saying that what it is really all about is reducing nuclear weapons and thus our reliance on them; but I believe there are many people who actually adhere to this philosophy, who are true believers. They use the delegitimization of nuclear weapons as a moral argument for bringing down the size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

Second, there is the idea, implicit in many of the President's statements, that if we disarm, others will follow suit. In other words, the President intrinsically agrees with the arguments of states like Iran and proliferators like North Korea who say they do what they do partly because of what we do. Our possession of nuclear weapons, they believe, is an incentive for them to try to acquire them.

By equating universal disarmament (and also, by the way, the rights of nations to nuclear energy) with nuclear nonproliferation in the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference—as the President and

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the Secretary of State have done repeatedly—the Administration has officially linked America's disarmament and stopping proliferation as treaty obligations. In that view, we *must* disarm to show good faith before we can expect Iran and North Korea to give up nuclear weapons, or in Iran's case not to acquire them.

Third is the notion that we need not concern ourselves too much with the actual details of nuclear reduction treaties such as New START because what matters most is the diplomatic and political symbolism of the reductions—in other words, the message it sends to Iran and North Korea. The Secretary of State and the President have said this repeatedly, so it is not something we should ignore.

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If this is true, then the flaws in the New START treaty that could give Russia an advantage over us are not being taken seriously, and I think in part that is because the treaty is seen largely as symbolic and a vehicle by which to “reset” relations with Russia. It's not about the details of the treaty. I've noticed in my conversations with people who support the treaty that they may or may not know its details, but, frankly, they don't care about that very much. To them, the treaty symbolizes the larger purpose of improving U.S.–Russian relations, or setting an example for Iran and North Korea, or something else. It's all about posturing and messaging.

The fourth idea in the President's vision is a return to the old Cold War idea of mutual assured destruction. The preamble of the New START treaty clearly links U.S. missile defense systems to Russia's offensive nuclear forces in a way that is pre-Reagan strategic thinking—the old logic that says U.S. strategic defenses and missile defenses must be reduced corresponding to the reduction of Russian offensive forces.

This revival of the “old think” that surrounded the now-defunct Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty is completely at odds with the deployment strategies of our missile defense systems, which are aimed primarily at Iran, not Russia, even though Russia tries to link these two ideas, particularly in the treaty's preamble. It is the view embodied in the ABM Treaty and all the other arms control treaties of that time that there is a linkage between offensive and defensive forces.

## Flaws and Weaknesses

So what's wrong with this vision of nuclear disarmament? It has a number of flaws and weaknesses, but let me focus on just a few.

First, the "road to zero" nuclear weapons idea is pure fantasy. Few strategic or defense experts really believe we can or will eliminate all the nuclear weapons in the world. Those who do never convincingly explain how to get there. The best they can hope for is to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons, and yet they insist on talking about "zero" nuclear weapons.

This issue begs the questions of what actually deters war and what a balance of nuclear forces really is. President Obama thinks merely reducing quantities will do the trick, but will it? If I have two or three nuclear weapons and my opponent has 10, we are in a far more unstable situation than if each side has 1,000. In addition, the smaller our own nuclear force becomes, the more exposed we are to intimidation by other countries or rogue states that have small arsenals. It is not the numbers of weapons that matters, but who has them and what they will try to do with them.

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It may not be a very popular topic, but we also should never forget that before the first atom bomb was dropped, at least 70 million people had already lost their lives in World War I and World War II. That's as many people as in all of France today. Since then, we have not had such large-scale slaughter, and one reason is because the existence of nuclear weapons has made total war between large nuclear-arsenal states suicidal and therefore unthinkable.

I do not make this point as a moral argument to defend the use of nuclear weapons. It is simply a hard fact to keep in mind when we hear people romanticizing about a world without nuclear weapons. They seem oblivious to the fact that machine guns, tanks, rifles, artillery, and gas chambers were

capable of and responsible for massive slaughter and butchery.

Reductions of nuclear weapons are good, so yes, let's make reductions; but let's be mindful that what matters is the balance between the forces and the nature of the regimes that have those weapons. That's far more important in terms of history than the utopian fantasy of simply getting to zero.

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Second, there is the wrongheaded premise that Iran and others want nuclear weapons just because we have them. Iran and North Korea want nuclear weapons for two reasons: to ensure the survival of their regimes and to intimidate. North Korea uses nuclear weapons as a form of extortion. Iran's regime sees them as a trump card to keep the U.S. not only from ever helping to overthrow them if it were to come to that, but also from ever coming to the defense of our allies in a shooting war.

By conceding the idea that it is understandable and partly our fault that Iran wants nukes because we have them, President Obama essentially handed Iran and others a perfect propaganda tool to do precisely the opposite of what we want. He gave them an excuse not to cooperate. On the one hand, we beat up on Iran at the U.N. Security Council, and on the other, we concede that they've got a point about wanting nuclear weapons.

It makes no sense. In essence, it is saying that every instance of their proliferation is an argument in favor of our unilateral disarmament. According to that logic, if they want nukes because we have them, we should not reasonably expect them to give them up until we do.

Thus, Obama gives the Iranians and North Koreans an excuse not to move. You can say they'll make that argument and do whatever they want to do regardless of what we say. Okay, I get that; but why would we concede the point when we're trying

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to build a case against them on the international scene? Particularly at the U.N., why would we make it easier for them to garner support for their arguments?

A third problem with this vision is that it could allow the New START treaty to move forward. There are many problems with the treaty. I've already mentioned that it links our missile defense programs to Russia's offensive strategic forces. This will enable the Russians to claim that any innovation or improvement of our missile defense capabilities that they deem or interpret to be aimed at them—even though we say otherwise—will be viewed as a violation of the treaty.

Don't take my word for it; listen to what the chief of the International Treaty Directorate at the Russian Defense Ministry, General Yevgeney Buzinski, said: "This [treaty provision on missile defense] makes it possible for us, in case the Americans increase their strategic ABM systems, to claim that they are not observing the terms of the treaty." And then listen to Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov; he said the treaty's preambular language on missile defense is binding, and if for some reason we start expanding our ABM systems, then Russia will have a reason to get out of the treaty.

What all this means is that, in the future, any attempt to protect the Europeans or ourselves from Iranian missiles by deploying missile defense systems will likely be deemed a violation of the treaty by the Russians.

You may ask: Who cares what the Russians say? Well, the Europeans, the rest of the international community, and, frankly, people in this country who see themselves as arms controllers. They care. The fact is, if you look back at how the ABM Treaty was treated during the 1980s and even the 1990s, when we were still abiding by it, you'll find that

many of its supporters adopted Russia's position. They internalized Russia's arguments because they didn't particularly like missile defense. That will happen again if New START is ratified.

Not only does the new treaty take a wrong direction in missile defense; in the end, it will also increase the importance of Russia's nuclear arsenal—in terms of the relative balance of forces and by not dealing with things like Russia's tactical nuclear weapons arsenal.

### **Throwback to a Hopeless Strategy**

Many people, even in the Administration, have argued that what the President wants to do is similar to what Ronald Reagan wanted to do when he talked about making nuclear weapons obsolete. I assure you this is not the case. I was working this issue in the 1980s, and nothing could be further from the truth, because while Reagan, like most people, believed we should reduce our reliance on nuclear weapons, he did not envision their complete elimination coming about through the treaty process.

To prove this point, I ask one question: Why did Ronald Reagan walk away from Mikhail Gorbachev's offer to eliminate nuclear weapons if only we gave up the Strategic Defense Initiative? Why did Reagan not take him up on that offer? The rea-

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son is that Reagan believed strategic defenses were the essential ingredient in disarmament—the exact opposite of what Gorbachev's vision was then and President Obama's vision is today.

Whereas Russia wanted to limit our defenses in order to give its nuclear weapons a free shot at us, and since it couldn't compete with us technologically, Reagan believed that only when our strategic defenses were advanced and successful enough could our offensive forces be safely reduced or even eliminated. In other words, he believed that strategic defenses made nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete, not treaties—which, by the way, he said

must be met with a skeptical attitude of “trust but verify.” It is also worth remembering that all of the arms control treaties up until the START process didn’t reduce nuclear weapons at all; they only managed the growth of nuclear weapons systems in the arsenals.

President Obama’s philosophy is a resurrection of old Cold War thinking, both in the particular idea of mutual assured destruction and its attending arms control theories and in criticisms of missile

defense. I do not see this as hope and change. Frankly, I see it as a throwback to a strategy that during the Cold War led to stalemate. I do not see how it can lead to anything different today.

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