

# Heritage Lectures

No. 1165

Delivered June 16, 2010



Published by The Heritage Foundation

September 10, 2010

## How Barack Obama's Vision of a Nuclear-Free World Weakens America's Security: Russia, Deterrence, and Missile Defense

Dan Gouré, Ph.D.

**Abstract:** *Barack Obama's vision of a nuclear-free world assumes not that nations arm because they fear one another, but that they fear one another because they arm. In fact, who has the bomb is much more important than what bombs they have. The notion that the weapons are the problem flies in the face of the evidence of the way nations actually behave. Ridding the world of nuclear weapons presupposes ridding it of alliances and security commitments to deal with the threats. In the end, the Obama vision cannot coexist with robust missile defenses and makes the perfect, the end state, the enemy of the good enough, to include perhaps a smaller but robust, modernized, and even tested strategic nuclear posture.*

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I would like to discuss five fallacious assumptions in the Obama vision of a nuclear-free world. First, in a reversal of that famous Reagan dictum, his vision assumes not that nations arm because they fear one another, but that they fear one another because they arm. By this new logic, the U.S. has as much to fear from British and French deterrence as we do from the Russian and Chinese forces—or even, in theory, from a future Iranian capability.

In fact, I would argue—and this was the essence of the Reagan point—that *who* has the bomb is much more important than what bombs they have. This even includes North Korea, Iran, or Israel as the counterpart.

### Talking Points

- President Obama's vision of a nuclear-free world misconstrues the relationship between politics and weapons.
- It also assumes that nations have a greater interest in our getting out of the nuclear game than staying in. For Russia, which needs nuclear weapons for both military and political purposes, there is no such interest.
- The problem with relying on conventional superiority for deterrence and retaliation is that the very people you want to reduce their nuclear stockpiles—including the Iranians—don't agree.
- The Obama vision is that the U.S. requires missile defense because it lets the U.S. reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons to deter rogue threats, but this scares the Russians.
- Another problem is the inconsistency between maintaining and modernizing the nuclear arsenal and reaching zero.

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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
<http://report.heritage.org/hl1165>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison  
Center for Foreign Policy Studies  
of the  
Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis  
Institute for International Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

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## Politics and Weapons

Nothing, in fact, brings the disconnect between the weapons and politics of nations into starker relief than U.S.–Chinese relations. When Nixon went to China, the U.S. nuclear arsenal contained 25,000 warheads. I forget how many were strategic, but let's say it was about a third. China had a total of

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250, and the number that could reach the U.S. was about a handful. We were perfectly willing and able to have a whole different relationship with China and they with us than either had with the Soviet Union, a breakthrough that has lasted about 30 years while the nuclear forces on both sides have changed, developed, and advanced and all the rest has remained the same.

Has it helped that China has not gone into the kind of numbers that the U.S. and Russia had? Certainly, but the fact that the U.S. maintained a huge arsenal, a large chunk of which at one time was targeted on Chinese targets, did not seem to bother them at all. So the notion somehow that it is the weapons that are the problem flies in the face of the evidence of the way nations actually behave. It is problems between nations that then give rise to issues around disarmament or acquisition of weapons.

## Why Russia Will Not Give Up Nuclear Weapons

Similarly, Russia maintains its nuclear arsenal to this day because it is a fundamentally weak state whose international position, national security strategy, and defense doctrine are absolutely and totally dependent on the central role played by nuclear weapons. Russia would not be a state of significance, interest, or consequence were it not for its nuclear weapons.

Unfortunately, this means two things. First, from a military point of view, it must hold onto them; it has no other strategic tools in its arsenal. Russia's conventional forces are third-rate at best. It took quite an effort by the leading edge of the Russian military to push back on the Georgians: no big threat. But it lost

things like a Backfire bomber in the process to what little there was of Georgian air defense.

The point is that they need nuclear weapons for military purposes, and also for political purposes. The U.S. rushes to Moscow to reset the relationship not because we have a particular interest in Russia on any particular ground, but rather because of its nuclear weapons. It is important to have good relations with Moscow, the argument goes, because Russia is the other big nuclear power.

For those two reasons, the Russians are not going to give up their weapons. This is the second flaw in the Obama vision: the notion that these nations have a greater interest in our getting out of the nuclear game than staying in. When it comes to Russia, there is no such interest.

In fact, recently, a senior U.S. defense official commented, "There are aspects of their military activities that we find very troubling. If you read recent Russian military doctrine, they are going in the other direction; they are actually increasing their reliance on nuclear weapons and the role of nuclear

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weapons in their strategy." Which, of course, then makes it hard to get to zero. So it is not a matter of the weapons. It is who you are dealing with, it is how they conduct their affairs, it is what their goals and interests are, and it is what they fear.

So the first problem with Obama's vision is that its view of the relationship between politics and weapons is wrong. The second problem is that Russian interest in going to zero is effectively zero.

## The Role and Place of Nuclear Weapons

Third, the Obama vision assumes that nuclear weapons and the nuclear balance of possessing countries can be separated from the rest of the international security environment and how it works, and from U.S. national security policy. Then, like a benign tumor, it can be excised safely. We will just do laparoscopic surgery and pop that nuke right out.

In fact, the role and place of nuclear weapons in U.S. strategy is intimately entwined with our foreign and security policies. To put it another way, you cannot get to zero or even close to zero without throwing out virtually all of the U.S. postwar and even post–Cold War security policy, alliance relationships, force deployments, et cetera.

U.S. nuclear weapons, for example, provide extended deterrence. Why do you have extended deterrence? Because you have allies in places that are relatively dangerous. Those allies need to be reassured; they need an umbrella. The other reason you have extended deterrence is because you want to control the prospects for any error that could lead to nuclear release by not making it a situation where, as soon as one tank crosses the border, nukes fly. You want, in fact, to give the side that's threatening a chance to back down in various ways.

So we have extended deterrence and the theater nuclear weapons that support it because we have alliances.

And we have theater nuclear weapons for a second reason: We have alliances that commit the U.S. to the use of force in defense of others, and it is inappropriate that those allies be free riders. We have to avoid the European problem that we dealt with at various times in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s when some in the U.S. government were concerned that deterrence could not create a situation in which Moscow and Washington alone are at risk but not Berlin, Bonn, London, Rome, or elsewhere.

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So we have nuclear weapons deployed forward, we have an approach to nuclear weapons, we have an escalatory structure and all the rest not just because it sounds good, but because of our political relationships with allies.

Ridding the world of nuclear weapons presupposes, as a condition really, ridding it of alliances

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***Going to zero means, at a time when Europe will be its weakest, kicking them out into the snow. It is a very dubious idea, but one essential to the zero option.***

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and security commitments to deal with the threats. The Chinese are explicit about this when they talk about their interest in the zero option. At some point, it is not just a matter of bringing down the weapons; Chinese writers argue that the United States also must stop threatening people with its nuclear weapons. It must disentangle itself from alliances, and the United States also must reduce or eliminate its conventional superiority. So the United States has a bigger problem than just managing its nuclear arsenal if it wants to get to zero.

In this context, I would like to pose some predictions regarding the plans for significant, even draconian, cuts in European defense budgets and force postures, which ought to give us pause on the way to zero. What else will the Europeans have in the event of a major threat? The answer is nothing. They will not have a conventional capability with which to defend themselves. That is the alternative. If you are not going to have nukes and you think there are threats out there, then you have got to have the alternative, which is conventional power. The Europeans will not.

So going to zero means, at a time when Europe will be its weakest, kicking them out into the snow. It is a very dubious idea, but one essential to the zero option.

## **Conventional Weapons and Missile Defense**

The fourth fallacy in the Obama vision is the belief that the U.S. and its allies can rely on their superior conventional capability for deterrence and reassurance. There is in the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), in the Quadrennial Defense Review, and in other policy statements the assertion that the United States has conventional superiority, so it can rely less on nukes. Simply put, the U.S. position is that conventional military capabilities—including, somewhat indirectly, missile defense—offer a means

for maintaining deterrence, for reassuring allies while lessening reliance on nuclear weapons.

The NPR talks about executing a devastating conventional response, whatever that means. I would point out that 100,000 Japanese unfortunately lost their lives in the firebombing of Tokyo, and it did not stop the war. So how much conventional damage would you actually have to inflict, and could you do it in the modern era? I don't think so.

What is the problem with the idea of relying on conventional superiority for deterrence and retaliation? We've got it; it must be good. True, except that the very people you want to reduce their nuclear stockpiles don't agree. Those include the Iranians: One of the reasons the Iranians are arming is they see the U.S. Fifth Fleet outside the Gulf of Hormuz. It is very conventional and awfully threatening to them.

For more than 30 years, Russia and its predecessor, the Soviet Union, warned about the destabilizing consequences of what they called the "revolution in military affairs" involving such technologies as stealth, wireless communications, unmanned vehicles, precision targeting, long-range missiles—all the things we have now. They

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basically said that such "stuff" is destabilizing because the U.S. can execute nuclear-equivalent attacks with conventional weapons. So nations such as China, Russia, and North Korea argue that the U.S. has to get rid of dangerous conventional weapons before these other states will agree to get rid of their nukes.

Well, what is it the NPR is promising? Nuclear-equivalent attacks in at least notional terms if we get rid of nuclear weapons. So you have got a problem. You've got to get rid of your nukes, but to do that, you need to get rid of your conventional advantage, and then if you get rid of the conventional advantage, won't you need those nukes?

The final report of the Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States contains an interesting line: "Ironically, our edge in conventional capabilities has induced the Russians, now feeling their conventional deficiencies, to increase their reliance on both tactical and strategic nuclear weapons." You want to get to zero, so cut the conventional military—except, that is, what we are going to rely on in getting rid of nuclear weapons. This is a big problem.

We have the same problem with missile defense. This Administration is committed to missile defense as a way of providing deterrence and reassurance in the theater against so-called rogue states. This makes some sense. We would rather not have to go nuking people, North Koreans and Iranians alike, as a way of getting them to stop being a threat or acting on the threat to their neighbors, so we are going to put a lot of missile defenses in place. It is not going to be quite the same missile defense as the last Administration proposed, but if you look at the plans, the ultimate goal is to spread missile defense sites like daisies across Europe and elsewhere.

If you put all that stuff together, it becomes a fairly formidable defense. All you have got to do is add a few sensors, add a little faster-burning booster and, guess what, you have neutralized—or could potentially neutralize—the Russian strategic deterrent, at least as it applies to Europe.

So the Obama vision is that the U.S. requires missile defense because it lets the U.S. reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons to deter those rogue threats. But if it has that missile defense to reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons to deal with the rogue threats, it scares the Russians. It's a bit of a problem. I couldn't square the circle if I was in the Administration.

### **The Zero-Nukes Fallacy**

The fifth fallacy in the President's vision is the inconsistency between maintaining and modernizing your nuclear arsenal and reaching zero. Right now, the Administration is walking a very interesting tightrope; it is trying to figure out how it can maintain forces and weapons and also modernize the nuclear complex. We are going to spend a lot of



money on that. We are going to be refurbishing, reusing parts, mixing and matching parts from different kinds of weapons to make sure that these things work fairly accurately to keep a fairly robust nuclear force alive and keep the capacity to expand that nuclear arsenal if necessary. We will have to train people, and we will have to have the sites. As a government official told me, “It’s a matter of floor space and equipment.”

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For all the talk about reducing weapons, the Administration is moving forward and creating the capability to maintain and in fact build more. So, if you are concerned about the sensitivities of the people you are trying to haul into the zero-nuke world, you have a problem.

On the other side, you have an equally bad problem. Let’s say that the goal of zero nukes fails, that this nirvana cannot be achieved. Because we have in fact *not* built new nuclear weapons and we are *not* testing what weapons we have, and we have an “iffy” approach to how we are going to maintain the strategic launch systems—the ICBMs, SLBMs, the submarines to carry them, the new bombers, etc.—we may end up in a situation where, having gone halfway down this path in the interest of proving our good intentions, we are

now in a position where if the process breaks down, we’ll be in worse shape.

The situation discussed above is not unlike the U.S. position after the Washington–London naval treaties. I would suggest that if you go back and read the history of those treaties, the effort to deal with the weapons and not the people ended up failing to contribute to better security in the Pacific.

In fact, historians now argue that the agreement not to fortify U.S. Pacific islands created a vulnerability that Japan exploited once the treaty regime broke down. Also, the Japanese political reaction to the treaties, to being in a second class of countries, was so severe that it provoked the radicalization of the political system and a coup that brought the militarists to power. To put it even more simply, arms control brought about World War II, or at least the attack on Pearl Harbor.

In sum, the problem with the current vision is that it undermines any notion of a system of alliances and our relationship with long-standing allies. It will weaken Russian security. Russia does not have the conventional forces, so if you ask them to give up their nuclear forces, it can’t happen.

The vision requires drastic conventional arms limitations. It cannot coexist with robust missile defenses—anybody’s, by the way, not just ours—and it leads you down the road where the perfect, the end state, is the enemy of the good enough, to include perhaps a smaller but robust, modernized, and dare I say even tested strategic nuclear posture.

—*Dan Gouré, Ph.D., is Vice President of the Lexington Institute.*