

International Peace Bureau Annual Conference
Rolling Back Militarism: A Task for the Global Movement
Nov. 14 – 15, 2009; Georgetown University, Washington, DC

Confronting the Realities Behind Obama's Promising Nuclear Disarmament Rhetoric
Jacqueline Cabasso, November 15, 2009

In my travels around the world over the past year, I have been struck that in every forum, President Obama's April 5 Prague speech has been praised as a world-changing event. In part, I think this reflects our collective sense of relief that that Bush era is over, as well as our desperate desire for a real breakthrough on nuclear disarmament. One thing is certain. Obama's Prague speech has inspired a tidal wave of hope and opened up the space for a badly needed renewal of advocacy and action to abolish nuclear weapons. However, Obama made a number of conflicting statements in his Prague speech, and his foreign policy is similarly characterized by contradictory positions. These include renouncing torture, but refusing to prosecute the tortures; planning for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, but escalating the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan; and promoting diplomacy and the rule of law while conducting bombing raids on civilian targets in Afghanistan and Pakistan using unmanned drone aircraft. And, I'm sorry to have to tell you that both President Obama, and Vice-President Biden, as Senators, before they were elected voted in favor of the proliferation-provocative U.S.-India nuclear sharing deal.

Some commentators have characterized Obama's pledge to "to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons," as unprecedented. Yet 40 years ago in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty itself, the U.S. and the other original nuclear weapon states pledged to negotiate the elimination of their nuclear arsenals *in good faith*.

In his Prague speech, Obama made an historic admission that "as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon, the United States has a moral responsibility to act" for their elimination. This is a welcome acknowledgement, but we should not be naïve. While Obama has repeatedly said that he will pursue the goal of a world without nuclear weapons, this statement is invariably followed by a disclaimer that as long as nuclear weapons exist, the U.S. will maintain a strong nuclear deterrent. This disclaimer reflects the influence of a massive and powerfully entrenched military-industrial complex which has successfully perpetuated the role of nuclear weapons as the cornerstone of U.S. national security policy for 64 years. While the personality at the top of the U.S. government has changed, the architecture and special interests that underpin it have not. The U.S. continues to spend nearly as much as the rest of the world's countries combined on its military. And former government officials, Generals, and other influential members of the nuclear establishment are now engaged in a full court press to ensure that even the modest first steps taken by President Obama to reestablish traditional arms control are doomed to fail.

For example, the Commission established by Congress to give advice on the forthcoming Nuclear Posture Review, reported in May, "The United States requires a stockpile of nuclear weapons that is safe, secure, and reliable, and whose threatened use in military conflict would be credible... The conditions that might make the elimination of nuclear weapons possible are not present today and establishing such conditions would require a fundamental transformation of the world political order."

Almost as if to ensure that such conditions are not created, the Senate recently adopted a series of amendments to the 2010 Defense Authorization Bill. One of these amendments calls on the President to make sure that the U.S.-Russia START follow-on treaty does not limit U.S. ballistic missile defense systems, space capabilities, or advanced conventional weapons systems *These are precisely the issues that Russia has raised as impediments to deeper nuclear arms reductions*. Yet another amendment requires the President to deliver a plan to modernize the U.S. nuclear deterrent. All of the amendments were adopted by voice votes, meaning that many Democrats, as well as Republicans, said “Aye.” This is what we’re up against!!

And a similar set of anti-disarmament conditions will be attached to CTBT ratification – thus rendering the historic intent of the treaty mute and making it even more unlikely that the other holdout states will ratify it – unless we mobilize effectively to demand a “clean” CTBT, without conditions, that is a *real* disarmament measure.

President Obama needs our help to earn his Nobel Peace Prize. It is up to us to create the political pressure that will make meaningful progress on disarmament possible.

In fiscal year 2008, the United States spent \$52.4 billion on nuclear weapons-related programs alone. This staggering amount – a low estimate - is a drop in the bucket compared to overall U.S. military spending that year (\$711 billion), but it exceeds the entire military budgets of nearly every other country. In 2006, only China (\$121.9 billion), Russia (\$70 billion), the United Kingdom (\$55.4 billion) and France (\$54 billion) spent more on their militaries than the U.S. spent on its nuclear weapons related programs.

President Obama’s remarks in Prague notwithstanding, this is what he said when he presented his military budget request for 2010: “Going forward, we will continue to make the investments necessary to strengthen our military and increase our ground forces to defeat the threats of the 21st Century.”

In Prague, President Obama declared: “To put an end to Cold War thinking, we will reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, and urge others to do the same.” But this was immediately followed by: “*Make no mistake: As long as these weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies.*” What does deterrence mean in U.S. national security doctrine?

As stated in a September 2008 Department of Defense Report on the Air Force’s Nuclear Mission:

“Though our consistent goal has been to avoid *actual* weapons use, the nuclear deterrent is ‘used’ every day by assuring friends and allies, dissuading opponents from seeking peer capabilities to the United States, deterring attacks on the United States and its allies from potential adversaries, and providing the potential to defeat adversaries if deterrence fails.”

In other words, the U.S. uses the threat of nuclear attack the same way a bank robber might use a gun held to temple of a bank teller.

The policy of nuclear deterrence is not passive and it is not benign.

According to September 2008 Department of Defense Report on the Air Force's Nuclear Mission:

“The quality and *credibility* of U.S. nuclear forces.... are critical to an effective deterrent.”

According to its proponents, maintaining this “credible” deterrent will require a massive investment in the nuclear weapons infrastructure. In March 2008, General Kevin Chilton, Commander of Strategic Command, in charge of U.S. nuclear war planning, told Congress:

“If the nation is going to maintain a nuclear deterrent, the capabilities that support this deterrent should be second to none. We must care for the stockpile whether we possess one weapon or thousands. . . improvements to our aging infrastructure will be required whether or not we decide to pursue an improved warhead design. . . . *A revitalized infrastructure.... will allow us to sustain our nuclear capability and expertise throughout the 21st Century.*”

Just last week, General Chilton predicted the United States will still need nuclear weapons 40 years into the future.

According to Chilton: “The president himself has said such a world will not be reached quickly and perhaps not in his lifetime and I agree with that.” He added that the idea of a world without nuclear weapons “includes a vision of a different world order than what we have today. That's why most people who talk about that vision caveat it with ‘I don't think it will happen in my lifetime.’ It's not because we couldn't physically cut up every weapon in the world in 40 years. We could... The question is would it be a safer world if we did.” He said his command must focus on “the president's confirmation that as long as nuclear weapons exist the United States will maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary and to guarantee that defense to our allies.”

To this end, the U.S. nuclear weapons research and production infrastructure is being renovated. At the end of September, the Democratically-controlled Congress voted to spend \$6.4 billion in FY 2010 to maintain and enhance the safety, security and reliability of the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile – slightly more than this year. This includes the “Stockpile Life Extension” Program for the W76 Sea-Launched Ballistic Missile warhead, carried aboard the 14 U.S. Trident submarines currently patrolling the world's oceans, ready to target any location on earth with a few computer keystrokes. Under this program the W76 is being given a new capacity to destroy “hard targets,” making it more suitable for a first-strike. It also includes funding to study modernization of the B61 gravity bomb, and plan for a “long-term 21st century weapon.” And it increases funding for production of plutonium pits – the cores of hydrogen bombs – at the Los Alamos Lab.

According to Defense Secretary Robert Gates, kept on by President Obama from the Bush administration, the Nuclear Posture Review is likely to recommend development of new warhead designs under the guise of “safety and reliability” as part of a broader effort to maintain the nation’s nuclear deterrent (there’s that word again.)

And, while government officials and the media warn us in alarmist terms about the dangers posed by North Korean and Iranian tests of short and medium range missiles, incapable of reaching the United States, the U.S. continues to conduct about four tests of ICBM’s each year, from Vandenberg Air Force Base on the central coast of California to Kwajalein atoll in the Marshall Islands, over 4000 miles away.

In a profoundly disturbing speech to the U.S. Institute of Peace on Oct. 21, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said: “We are sincere in our pursuit of a secure peaceful world without nuclear weapons. *But until we reach that point of the horizon where the last nuclear weapon has been eliminated, we need to reinforce the domestic consensus that America will maintain the nuclear infrastructure needed to sustain a safe and effective deterrent without nuclear testing.*”

So in addition to supporting a robust nuclear complex budget in 2011, we will also support a new Stockpile Management Program that would focus on sustaining capabilities.” Citing General Chilton she added: “This is what the military leaders, charged with responsibility for our strategic deterrent, need in order to defend our country.”

Adding insult to injury, she added: “As the President has acknowledged, we might not achieve the ambition of a world without nuclear weapons in our lifetime or *successive* lifetimes.”

Seriously moving toward abolition of nuclear weapons will require taking on other challenges, together with nuclear disarmament or on parallel tracks. But this is not a reason to delay any longer eliminating the role of nuclear weapons in national security policies – which will require *delegitimizing deterrence* – and getting on with the verified physical destruction of the weapons.

Some of these challenges are beginning to be discussed openly in policy circles. At a recent conference at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, DC, Vladimir Orlov, a Russian security analyst, predicted that Moscow might raise the issue of conventional weapons in the next phase of U.S.-Russian nuclear arms reduction negotiations. Of particular concern, he said, are “strategic weapons which can be used not only in nuclear but in conventional” modes. And, he suggested that addressing “Prompt Global Strike” should be just the start: “Very dramatic reductions in military expenditure in the world: This is where the United States clearly – even more than in nuclear disarmament – should take the lead.”

This view was underscored by former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev at a recent high-level conference in Rome where he warned: “The United States spends on military purposes almost as much as the rest of the world put together. Military superiority would be an insurmountable obstacle to ridding the world of nuclear weapons. *Unless we discuss demilitarization of international politics, the reduction of military budgets, preventing militarization of outer space, talking about a nuclear-free world will be just rhetorical.*”

As United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon wrote in an editorial published on Nagasaki-day in August: “I am urging progress in eliminating other weapons of mass destruction and limiting missiles, space weapons and conventional arms - all of which are needed for a nuclear weapons- free world. *Disarmament must anticipate emerging dangers from other weapons.*”

In conclusion, I can’t do better than to quote again from the Secretary General.

“Global security challenges are serious enough without the risks from nuclear weapons or their acquisition by additional states or non-state actors. Of course, strategic stability, trust among nations, and the settlement of regional conflicts would all help to advance the process of disarmament. Yet disarmament has its own contributions to make in serving these goals and should not be postponed. It will restore hope for a more peaceful, secure and prosperous future. *It deserves everybody's support.*”

In short, nuclear disarmament should serve as the leading edge of a global trend toward demilitarization and redirection of resources to meet human needs and preserve the environment.

*Jacqueline Cabasso is the executive director of the Western States Legal Foundation in Oakland, California. She serves on the Steering Committee of United for Peace and Justice and convenes its Nuclear Disarmament/Redefining Security working group. Cabasso was the recipient of the International Peace Bureau’s 2008 Sean MacBride Peace Award. She can be reached at www.wslfweb.org.