GlobalResearch
Center for Research on Globalization

The End of Obama's Vision of a Nuke-Free World

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Theme: Militarization and WMD

Global Research, February 18, 2010
Truthdig 16 February 2010

As any student of foreign and national security policy well knows, the devil is in the details. Back in April 2009, in a speech delivered in Prague, the Czech Republic, President Barack Obama articulated his vision of a world free of nuclear weapons. Since that time, however, the Obama administration has offered very little of substance to push this vision forward. When one looks past the grand statements of the president for policy implementation that supports the rhetoric, one is left empty-handed. No movement on ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). No extension of a Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with Russia (START). No freeze on the development of a new generation of American nuclear weapons. Without progress in these areas, any prospects of a new approach to global nuclear nonproliferation emerging from the May 2010 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference are virtually zero.

Perhaps the most telling indicator of failed nonproliferation policy on the part of the Obama administration is the fact that there has been no progress on the issue of Iran's nuclear program, and in particular the ongoing controversy surrounding a proposed uranium exchange. The deal would have Iran swap a significant portion of its existing stock of 3.5 percent enriched uranium (the level needed to fuel Iran's planned nuclear power reactors, as opposed to uranium enriched to 90 percent, which is needed for nuclear weapons) in exchange for nuclear fuel rods containing uranium enriched to 19.5 percent (the level needed to operate a U.S.-built research reactor in Tehran that produced nuclear isotopes for medical purposes). Iran is running out of fuel for this reactor, and needs a new source of fuel or else it will be forced to shut it down. As a signatory member of the NPT, Iran should have the right to acquire this fuel on the open market, subject of course to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards, but the United States and Europe have held any such sale hostage to Iran's agreeing to suspend its indigenous uranium enrichment program, which is the source of the 3.5 percent enriched uranium currently in Iran.

The crux of the U.S. and European concerns rests not with Iran's possession of 3.5 percent enriched uranium, but rather that the enrichment technique employed by Iran to produce this low-enriched uranium could be used, with some significant modifications, to manufacture high-enriched uranium (90 percent) usable in a nuclear weapon. This reality, and the fears of a nuclear-armed Iran it produces, trumps the fact that the IAEA today is in a position to certify that it can account for the totality of Iran's inventory of nuclear material, and that any diversion of nuclear material would be detected by the IAEA almost immediately. Furthermore, beyond its capacity to enrich uranium, there is no real evidence that Iran has engaged in a nuclear weapons program.

But the fear and hype that emanate from American and European policymakers, strongly influenced by the zero-tolerance policy of Israel when it comes to Iran and anything nuclear, peaceful or otherwise, have created an environment where common sense goes out the

window and anything becomes possible. Take, for instance, Iran's current stock of 3.5 percent enriched uranium. The IAEA certifies that Iran is in possession of approximately 1,800 kilograms of this material. Policy wonks and those in the intelligence community given to hypotheticals have postulated scenarios that have Iran using this stock of 3.5 percent enriched uranium as the feedstock for a breakout enrichment effort that, if left to its own devices, could produce enough high-enriched uranium (90 percent) for a single nuclear bomb. This breakout capability would require Iran to reconfigure thousands of the centrifuges it uses for low-level enrichment for use in the stepped-up process of follow-on enrichment. Ironically, one of the next steps required in such a scenario would be for Iran to reconfigure its centrifuges to enrich uranium up to 20 percent—roughly the level Iran needs for the nuclear fuel required to operate the Tehran research reactor.

Fears about a potential covert Iranian enrichment breakout capability reached feverish proportions when, in September 2009, Iran revealed the existence of (and U.S. intelligence proclaimed the discovery of) a prospective small underground centrifuge enrichment facility near the city of Qom. The fact that this facility was under construction, and consisted as of September 2009 of little more than a reinforced hole in the ground without any equipment installed, did nothing to allay the fears of those who saw an Iranian nuclear bomb behind every bush, or under every rock. Suddenly Iran was on the verge of having a nuclear bomb, and something had to be done to prevent this from happening.

The focus of attention shifted away from Iran's ongoing enrichment capability, which the U.S. and Europe demanded be permanently suspended, to Iran's 1,800 kilograms of 3.5 percent enriched uranium. This material represented Iran's theoretical atomic bomb. If the material could be placed under international control, then Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions, at least for the immediate future, could be thwarted. Iran was not going to freely hand over this material. However, a deal was negotiated between the U.S. and Iran that would have Iran ship 1,600 kilograms of its 3.5 percent enriched uranium to Russia, which would then further enrich it to 19.5 percent before sending it to France, which would process the uranium into fuel rods unusable for nuclear weapons. This fuel swap appeared to provide an elegant solution to a vexing problem. Indeed, President Obama embraced it as his own initiative when it was announced in October 2009.

For Iran, the swap was always about acquiring the needed nuclear fuel rods, manufactured from 19.5 percent enriched uranium, in order to continue operation of its research reactor in Tehran, which produces much-needed nuclear isotopes for medical purposes. The main attraction for the Iranians for such a deal, beyond acquiring the fuel rods, was that they would not need to produce any 19.5 percent enriched uranium itself, and thus not have to reconfigure their current centrifuge-based enrichment infrastructure to operate beyond its 3.5 percent enrichment threshold. Iran has consistently maintained that it neither requires, nor desires, any capability to enrich uranium beyond the 3.5 percent level needed to manufacture nuclear fuel rods for its own nuclear power reactors. Having its uranium enrichment infrastructure locked in at 3.5 percent simplified not only Iran's own operations, but also the safeguard monitoring and inspection requirements of the International Atomic Energy Agency, charged with verifying Iran's compliance with the terms of the NPT. Iran viewed the fuel swap as a means of facilitating international acceptance of its uranium enrichment program, a point of view that was in fundamental opposition to that of the United States and Europe.

No amount of finessing the specifics of a fuel swap, whether it be done in stages, managed by a neutral third party, or carried out over the course of several months or several years, could reconcile the Iranian position with that of the U.S. and Europe. At the center of this problem is the Iranian uranium enrichment program itself. Any fuel swap deal is little more than window dressing to the larger issue of whether or not Iran will be permitted by the international community to enrich uranium. To the U.S. and Europe, finer points such as whether such enrichment would be capped at 3.5 percent, or diversified to include 19.5 percent, remain irrelevant, since their unified policy approach is to suspend all uranium enrichment activities inside Iran.

The fatal flaw in the Obama fuel swap proposal, when it was broached in October 2009, was that it failed to explicitly state that any fuel swap had to be linked to Iran's suspension of its uranium enrichment program. While policy wonks in and out of the Obama administration can argue that such a position was more than implied, given the existence of U.N. Security Council resolutions that explicitly call for suspension, any deal that introduces Iran's stocks of low-enriched uranium as a legitimate commodity provides de facto legitimization of the processes that produced that commodity. Since Iran has consistently refused to suspend its uranium enrichment activities, it had every reason to treat the proposed fuel swap as a stand-alone deal that focused on a short-term problem, and not as part of the larger U.S.-driven demands for enrichment suspension.

The U.S. policy objective was never to provide Iran with 19.5 percent enriched uranium fuel rods, or to lock Iran in at a 3.5 percent enrichment threshold, but rather to get the majority of Iran's existing stocks of 3.5 percent enriched uranium out of the country, thereby eliminating any scenario that had Iran using this low-enriched uranium as feedstock for any breakout nuclear weapons production capability, no matter how farfetched such a scenario might be. This is why the Obama administration never paid much attention to the details of such a swap, since these details simply didn't matter. The U.S. approach was never about facilitating a swap so much as it was about facilitating a kidnapping. The policy objective was to get the majority of Iran's enriched uranium stocks under international control. Once Iran no longer had access to 1,600 kilograms of its 1,800-kilogram stockpile of low-enriched uranium, the Obama administration could blunt the fear-driven concerns over the immediacy of any Iranian nuclear capability. It would take Iran several months to reconstitute its low-enriched uranium stocks to the level needed to produce its hypothetical nuclear bomb. During this period, the U.S. would redouble its demands for suspension of uranium enrichment and develop a comprehensive package of stringent economic sanctions that would be imposed on Iran should it fail to cooperate.

The fatal flaw in the U.S. approach was that it failed to recognize that such policy formulations may work on paper but in the real world things are far more complicated. The Obama administration had hoped for immediate Iranian agreement to the fuel swap. Once Iran's enriched uranium was safely out of Iran, the U.S. would then redouble its diplomatic pressure to suspend enrichment activities while simultaneously pressing for international consensus on sanctions. U.S. policy formulators envisioned a seamless transition between these various stages of policy implementation. But Iran, by agreeing in principle to a fuel swap, but demanding closer scrutiny of the details inherent in any such deal, complicated implementation of the U.S. plan.

By December 2009, a point at which the U.S. had hoped to have the Iranian uranium under its control and a sanctions campaign under way, Iran had yet to agree to the specifics of any

fuel swap but at the same time publically remained committed to the concept. That approach paralyzed the U.S.-led effort to rally support behind sanctions since most nations did not want to do anything that would threaten the fuel swap negotiations. As 2010 rolled around, the Iranian delay tactics forced the U.S. to shed all pretenses around the fuel swap. While Iranian negotiators spoke of a potential swap formula that could unfold over the course of several months, the U.S. spoke of a swap timetable stretching out several years, making such a swap useless for the purpose it was ostensibly being instituted for—the Iranian nuclear research reactor and the manufacture of medical isotopes.

With the true U.S. policy objective thus exposed, Iran last week announced that it would carry out its own indigenous enrichment of uranium to the 19.5 percent needed to fuel the research reactor. Whether Iran has the technical or practical capabilities necessary to bring such a plan to fruition is debatable. While reconfiguring its existing centrifuge cascades to produce 19.5 percent enriched uranium is not impossible, Iran has never before attempted to process enriched uranium into nuclear fuel rods. Likewise, there is a question about the viability of Iran's feedstock of uranium hexafluoride (UF6), the gaseous material that is fed into the centrifuges for the purpose of enriching uranium.

Iran's stores of foreign-procured UF6 are nearly exhausted. So is the stock of UF6 that Iran produced using foreign supplies of natural uranium. What is left for Iran is UF6 produced from indigenous sources of natural uranium. However, these stocks are believed to be contaminated with molybdenum, a metallic substance the presence of which creates destructive mass-distribution problems when Iran's centrifuges are spun up to the more than 60,000 revolutions per minute needed to extract enriched uranium from the UF6 feedstock. If Iran cannot come up with the means to extract the molybdenum from its indigenous UF6, then short of finding an outside supplier of natural uranium or clean UF6 (activities that would have to be declared to the IAEA), the Iranian enrichment program will halt.

This would not prevent Iran from using its existing stocks of 3.5 percent enriched uranium as the feedstock for any effort to produce 19.5 percent uranium. Reconfiguration of its centrifuges to conduct this higher level of enrichment is likewise well within the technical capability of Iran. The ultimate testament to the failure of U.S. nonproliferation policy when it comes to Iran's nuclear program is the reality that, in an effort to retard any Iranian nuclear breakout scenario that saw Iran rapidly converting its low-enriched stocks to high-enriched fissile material, the United States has actually facilitated such a scheme. Had the U.S. sought to lock Iran's enrichment infrastructure in at a 3.5 percent capacity, any deviation from that level would have been viewed with suspicion. However, by creating the conditions that have Iran now seeking to build enrichment facilities capable of 20 percent enrichment, the Obama administration has significantly reduced the threshold of detection and prevention which was in place when all Iran produced was 3.5 percent enriched uranium.

The number of centrifuges required to step up enrichment of 20 percent uranium to higher levels is significantly smaller than the number needed to step up from 3.5 percent to 20 percent. Furthermore, any Iranian breakout scenario that starts at 20 percent enriched feedstock will reach its end objective of 90 percent enrichment far quicker than a similar program that starts at 3.5 percent. The Obama administration has not only made it easier for Iran to hide a covert nuclear weapons enrichment capability, but also made it far more efficient. That there is no evidence of any such program in existence does not matter in the minds of those who had given Iran such a capability to begin with. When dealing in a

universe driven by the theoretical, the U.S. fumbling of the nuclear fuel swap with Iran has simply made the breakout theory more viable. And since U.S. nonproliferation policy toward Iran is more driven by faith-based analysis than it is by fact-based analysis, one can all but guarantee that the U.S. response to this new fiction will be real, and measurable, and have nothing but negative results for the Middle East and the World.

The unfolding crisis concerning Iran's nuclear program represents but one of several nonproliferation failures perpetrated by the United States that, in combination, bode poorly for the upcoming NPT Review Conference scheduled for May. In May of 2009, at the conclusion of the preparatory committee for the NPT Review Conference, there were high hopes for the possibility of progress in reaching international consensus on nonproliferation issues, and reshaping the NPT to capture this consensus. Much of these hopes were derived from the statements and rhetoric of the Obama administration about nuclear disarmament and arms control. Unfortunately, rhetoric never caught up with reality.

Not only has U.S. policy toward Iran been exposed as operating in total disregard to the provisions of the NPT (Iran, after all, is permitted to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes under Article IV of that treaty), but the cornerstone commitments made by the Obama administration as a prerequisite for a successful NPT Review Conference in May 2010—movement toward ratification of the CTBT, agreement with the Russians to extend the verification mechanisms inherent in START while achieving even deeper cuts in their respective nuclear arsenals—have failed to materialize. There is almost no chance of the CTBT being submitted to the U.S. Senate for ratification, let alone being actually ratified. The failure of the administration to extend START past its December 2009 expiration date has not only left the U.S. and Russia with no arms control verification vehicle, but has reignited dormant Cold War-era tendencies in both nations, with the Russians deploying a new generation of intercontinental ballistic missile and the U.S. talking about nuclear warhead modernization.

President Obama had hoped that the 2010 NPT Review Conference would pave the way to a global consensus on multilateral approaches toward nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation. Instead, its looming demise only accelerates the existing trend in the United States to reject international agreements and instead embrace a unilateralism sustained by the false premise that security can be achieved through nuclear supremacy. One only needs to examine the events of Sept. 11, 2001, and the ongoing fiasco that is America's global war on terrorism to understand the fallacy of that argument.

The policy of the U.S. toward Iran's nuclear program is to blame for much, if not all, of this failure. Had the administration used the fuel swap agreement as an opportunity to bring Iran back into the fold of the international community—not by excluding its uranium enrichment efforts, but rather legitimizing them through enhanced IAEA inspections and Iran's agreement to participate in closely controlled regional fuel bank programs that kept its enriched uranium stocks under stringent international controls—there would not have been the policy floundering which occurred in the fall of 2009.

Fears about a phantom Iranian nuclear weapon would have dissipated, and with it the illogical U.S. insistence on ballistic missile defense initiatives that have fatally undermined the current round of U.S.-Russian arms control negotiations. Had the Obama administration remained consistent with its September 2009 decision to terminate the controversial Bush-era missile defense plan involving the stationing of interceptor missiles and radar systems in Poland and the Czech Republic, there would be a START treaty today. But the sleight-of-

hand approach, in which one program was terminated only to be replaced by another, triggered concerns among Russian military leaders about the real policy objectives of the Obama administration.

The administration has demonstrated that, for all the noble intent and objectives in the arena of arms control and nonproliferation exhibited at its inception, it too is susceptible to the addiction to nuclear weapons that has plagued America since 1945. This addiction, which feeds the notion of the United States' self-appointed status of global savior and policeman, prevents any policy formulation that is perceived to weaken or undermine America's nuclear supremacy. At a time when the world needed American leadership in the field of disarmament and nonproliferation, it instead got nothing but a replay of past policy, wrapped in the paranoid delusions of a nation that is unable or unwilling to come to grips with reality. Genuine international security is derived not from any nation, even the United States, seeking to impose deterrence-based policies through nuclear supremacy. True security comes from a world free of nuclear weapons.

To secure America, a president must have the courage to dismantle what, in the past, has been proclaimed as the foundation of our survival, but in reality presents us with the seeds of our destruction—nuclear weapons. President Obama had articulated such a vision in his groundbreaking speech in Prague back in April 2009. Since that time the United States has embarked on arms control and nonproliferation policies that have not only failed to move America and the world further down the path of peace and security, but actually made matters worse.

Policies must be judged not by their intent but their results. In this, the Obama administration's policies represent an abysmal failure. The administration seeks to place the blame for these failures elsewhere, on Iran, China, Russia and North Korea. But the root cause of such failure lies with the utter lack of courage and conviction on the part of Barack Obama. He claimed to possess a vision of a world free of nuclear weapons, only to succumb to the same hubris and avarice that afflicted past U.S. presidents when tempted by the world supremacy that nuclear weapons promise.

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