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A nuke-free world in Obama's lifetime? Yes he can

Ramesh Thakur

Barack Obama's speech in Prague lived up to the advance billing of a major address on the nuclear challenges we face today - an issue that literally has life and death implications for all of us, wherever we may be.

The dream of a world free of nuclear weapons is an old one. Indeed, it is written into the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which balances the prohibition on non-nuclear states acquiring these weapons with the demand on the five NPT-licit nuclear powers - Britain, China, France, Russia and the U.S. - to eliminate their nuclear arsenals through good-faith negotiations. Considering that the NPT was signed in 1968 and came into effect in 1970, the five have not lived up to their bargain.

The dream has been kept alive by many NGOs, a coalition of like-minded countries, and a plethora of international blue ribbon commissions. The abundance of "zero nuclear weapons" initiatives has been stillborn because of zero follow-up and a failure to address real security concerns.

If we examine the geostrategic circumstances of the existing nuclear powers, the two with the least - zero - security justification for holding on to any nuclear weapons are Britain and France. North Korea can't justify nuclear weapons on national security grounds; it seems to play a nuclear hand as a bargaining chip, the only one it has. Israel's security environment is harsh enough, with many in its neighbourhood committed to its destruction, to make its reliance on nuclear weapons understandable. Iran, too, can justify the pursuit of such weapons on national security grounds far more readily than Britain or France, except it is illegal under the NPT.

Pakistan will not give up its nuclear weapons while India still has them. India's main security benchmark is not Pakistan but China. Neither China nor Russia will contemplate giving them up for fear of the United States. This is why the circuit breaker in the global nuclear weapons chain is Washington.

Mr. Obama's Sunday speech acknowledged this. The U.S. cannot achieve the dream on its own, the President said, but it is prepared to lead, based in acknowledgment of its special moral responsibility flowing from being the only power to have used atomic weapons. Mr. Obama thus laid down the challenge to others to follow. And he outlined concrete follow-up steps that are practical, measurable and achievable.

In other words, his strategy is to map out a vision, then outline the road map to achieve it. These include ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty negotiated in 1996; a new treaty banning fissile material; reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy; and a new strategic arms reduction treaty with Russia that is both bold and legally binding. Washington

will also play host to a global summit on nuclear security within one year.

Such measures by the five recognized nuclear states must be matched by decisive action against the threat of proliferation. Mr. Obama reclaims the moral high ground for Washington to pursue a vigorous non-proliferation and counterproliferation strategy. More resources and authority will be provided for institutions such as the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Proliferation Security Initiative. Countries leaving or breaking the NPT must face real and immediate consequences.

An international fuel bank could be created to ensure supply to countries whose interest is limited to peaceful uses of nuclear energy. All vulnerable nuclear material around the world - loose nukes in Russia, for example - will be secured within four years. Black markets such as Pakistani nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan's will be broken up, the trade in nuclear materials will be detected and intercepted in transit, and financial tools will be used to disrupt the trade.

Mr. Obama is right to say that reaching the goal will require patience and persistence. But he is wrong to say that it may not be achieved in his lifetime. He should set down the marker of achieving it by the end of his second term if re-elected. Without such a finite deadline, no one will work to make it happen.

Mr. Obama may also be mistaken in pinning his faith on the global regime centred on the NPT that, he said, "could reach the point where the centre cannot hold." The NPT is already a broken reed, with far too many flaws, anomalies, gaps and outright contradictions. For instance, the promise that those who break the rules must be punished cannot be enforced against India. The Indian-American civil nuclear agreement itself, however justified, breaks the NPT rules. A new clean nuclear weapons convention might be a better goal to pursue.

That's a minor quibble. More important is the broad sweep of Mr. Obama's commitment, based on national interest and personal conviction, to freeing us from the fear of nuclear weapons.

Ramesh Thakur is the founding director of the Balsillie School of International Affairs in Waterloo, Ont.