

Forgotten, But Not Gone

Six years ago this month, Barack Obama, the then-new US President, journeyed to Prague to declare his desire for a nuclear weapons-free world. The strategic deterrent had already been an afterthought for 20 years, struggling to maintain funding or support from anyone not directly supporting the mission.

The deterrent may as well be invisible to many in the military, members of Congress, and the American public. In early 2015, the Iranian nuclear program has gotten more attention in the US than the nation's own strategic deterrent.

A deterrent only works if it is known to be effective and ready for use, but the American nuclear enterprise has long been underfunded and under-prioritized. A catch-up program is desperately needed. If enemies come to disregard the US deterrent, something critically important will be lost.

Nuclear weapons provide essential insurance for the US, its interests and troops overseas, and even to its allies. Until 1945, massive and deadly state-on-state conflicts were the norm. Sixteen million people died in World War I. Just two decades later, 60 million died in World War II.

Then, suddenly, this type of war ended. Nuclear weapons were the prime reason for this change in human behavior: Their enormous destructive power compels nations to tread very carefully. But the President's 2009 Prague speech reinforced an ambivalence seen since the Cold War ended.

"I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons. I'm not naïve," Obama said. "This goal will not be reached quickly—perhaps not in my lifetime. It will take patience and persistence. But now we, too, must ignore the voices who tell us that the world cannot change. We have to insist, 'Yes, we can.'"

The US "will take concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons," he continued. "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. 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 ... but we will begin the work of reducing our arsenal."

In reality, there was very little new there. Eliminating nuclear weapons has been US policy under every president since Reagan, and inventories have been steadily and dramatically declining since the 1980s.

Officials in nuclear leadership positions pointed to Obama's Prague pledge to maintain nuclear safety, security, and effectiveness—but this passage was clearly a digression from the President's

It is time to prioritize the nuclear deterrent.

main point, which could be summarized as: We need to get rid of these things.

This cast a tone of obsolescence and irrelevance over the US nuclear enterprise. Ingrained habits will now take time to overcome.

Case in point: At a March 17 House Armed Services Committee hearing with the seven military service Chiefs and Secretaries, the word "nuclear" was uttered exactly nine times in a 31,000-word posture hearing. It usually came up in conjunction with other capabilities, such as cyber.

This is somewhat expected with the nation still involved in shooting wars, but the nuclear mission can no longer be ignored—or even left on the back burner.

The Air Force is taking positive steps, by pushing for a next generation bomber, cruise missile, and ICBM. It is elevating the commander of Air Force Global Strike Command from a three-star to a four-star position and is pumping \$160 million into nuclear force equipment. Now it must follow through with these plans, for years.

Abolitionists bemoan nuclear weapons' very existence and claim that US modernization programs inspire other nations to pursue the weapons and expand their arsenals. This is nonsense. The security and influence that nukes offer is clear for all to see.

Other nuclear states and nuclear aspirants have zealously moved forward with developing and modernizing arsenals while America paused. The situation

is reminiscent of what Harold Brown, Defense Secretary under President Carter, once said of the Soviet Union's arsenal. To paraphrase: When we build, they build. When we stop, they build.

Many of these nations—such as Iran, North Korea, and Russia—are belligerent and threatening to their neighbors. Others (India, Pakistan, Israel) have long-standing border disputes. Fortunately, although other nations want these weapons for many of the same reasons the US does, there is a clear worldwide taboo against using them.

An effective US deterrent can bring a measure of stability even to unstable states. Nations such as North Korea and Iran must be made to understand that using nuclear weapons would mean an instant end to their leaders and regimes.

The United States should absolutely reduce its nuclear inventory to the minimum level necessary to meet national security requirements. The requirement itself can be reduced through verifiable and enforceable arms control treaties, so the US should pursue beneficial agreements with nations such as Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran. You don't have to like a nation to benefit from a treaty with it.

The US should also defend the Non-proliferation Treaty, making it harder for new nations to acquire nuclear weapons. Work should continue on reducing and securing materials, to keep them out of terrorist hands. The US must also reassure the nations under its nuclear umbrella, so that countries such as Japan, South Korea, Germany, and Estonia are not inspired to develop their own weapons.

At the same time, these weapons will serve a valuable purpose for the foreseeable future, and the Administration shouldn't be afraid to publicly support the mission. The US must modernize to keep the deterrent credible, and should press on with plans to develop next generation systems. Strategic deterrence must return to a place of prominence in military decision-making.

It will soon be 70 years since nuclear weapons were used in war. May this be just the beginning. An effective US deterrent will help keep the world safer for the next 70 years, too. ★