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Research Report

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No Disarmament Euphoria

US Nuclear Policy Will Be Marked by Pragmatism in Obama's Second Administration

Oliver Schmidt

In the immediate aftermath of Barack Obama's re-election, the German government expressed their hope for further nuclear disarmament initiatives from the US. However Germany should not harbour any great expectations, as the US's political room for manoeuvre is limited. The US wants to push nuclear disarmament in order to strengthen nuclear non-proliferation, but President Obama has at the same time announced investments in maintaining the US nuclear weapons arsenal and upgrading launch systems. In addition, the development of conventional weapons systems, as an alternative to nuclear deterrence and reassurance, is to be continued. This complicates disarmament progress with Russia.

On the basis that nuclear deterrence can fail and the proliferation of nuclear weapons to state and non-state actors is currently the greatest challenge facing US national security, the Obama administration has developed two courses of action: first, it is seeking military alternatives to nuclear weapons and, secondly, it wants to strengthen the instruments for nuclear non-proliferation. Both intentions are, however, difficult to reconcile.

US nuclear policy under Obama

Two documents are significantly determining the direction of US nuclear weapons policy under Barack Obama: the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) and the US Nuclear Posture Review Report (NPR).

With New START, the US and Russia agreed on a new ceiling for their strategic nuclear weapons on 8 April 2010. Both parties are to reduce their strategic nuclear arsenals to 1550 active nuclear warheads and 700 delivery systems. A further 100 delivery systems may be kept in reserve. The treaty entered into effect on 5 February 2011. Ratification took some time, due to stiff opposition from Republican senators concerned about the long-term deployability and the safety, security and effectiveness of US nuclear weapons. President Obama recognised this concern and achieved consent by announcing he would invest approximately 80 billion US dollars in securing and upgrading the existing US nuclear weapons arsenal over the next ten years. A further 100 billion US dollars are to be spent on safeguarding and further

developing the delivery systems for nuclear weapons.

With these planned investments, the USA is securing its nuclear capabilities into the year 2050 and beyond. Investment will cover all areas of the land-, air- and sea-based triad of strategic nuclear weapons and their nuclear warheads, as well as the nuclear industrial infrastructure. Expenditure is also planned for the modernisation of land-based intercontinental missiles, and studies are looking at a possible replacement system. The main emphasis of the expenditure is, however, on the development and procurement of a new long-range bomber (LRPB) and of a new generation of submarines for sea-based intercontinental missiles (SSBN-X).

Plans for nuclear weapons and the USA's budget

Based on current budget figures, it is not yet foreseeable to what extent and in which timeframes these investments will actually be realised. A good example of this is the debate about the new generation of submarines (SSBN-X). The US Department of Defense initially pushed back the procurement date by two years, from 2029 to 2031. Furthermore, the administration and Congress are looking at whether the submarine fleet, which consists of 12 active systems, can be reduced to ten vessels or even fewer without endangering the US's second strike capability. The former head of US Strategic Command, General James Cartwright, is also proposing that the budget for nuclear weapons be subject to a substantial reduction. In contrast to the NPR's guidelines, he even queries whether a nuclear triad is necessary to maintain the strategic balance with Russia and China. Instead, he puts the case for giving up the land-based components in the medium-term.

Military alternatives to nuclear weapons

In the US nuclear posture review (NPR) report from 2010, five goals are named: the prevention of the proliferation of nuclear weapons and nuclear terrorism, a reduced role of nuclear weapons in US security and defence policy, the maintenance of the strategic stability with a reduced number of nuclear weapons, a strengthening of regional deterrence and reassurance of allies and, finally, a safe, secure and effective nuclear weapons arsenal.

According to the NPR, conventional weapons systems should play a greater role in deterrence. The aim is to influence the actions of a potential adversary through the threat of retaliation (deterrence by punishment) or to achieve a deterrent effect by signalling that (war) aims are unachievable (deterrence by denial). As well as the continuing nuclear options for deterrence by punishment and denial, this is specifically a matter of expanding missile defence and developing weapon systems for conventional prompt global strike (CPGS).

Obstacles to disarmament negotiations with Russia

The depicted framework conditions do not favour successful disarmament negotiations with Russia. Both parties are still firmly attached to the idea of strategic stability by an assured second strike capability. Once US missile defence (Phase 4 of the "European Phase Adaptive Approach", by approx. 2020) reaches its full operational readiness and CPGS- weapons systems have been developed, Russia will see its strategic stability endangered. If the USA can expand its damage-limitation options by conventional capabilities, this will present a challenge to the assured second-strike capability of a possible adversary. Theoretically, this will increase first-strike instability in a potential crisis situation, although difficult to imagine at the present time. The smaller the nuclear arsenal of a potential adversary

of the US, the more pronounced the potential for crisis instability.

The US, which wants to promote conventional weapons systems for deterrence and reassurance, is thus far refusing to accept limitations on the development and stationing of these systems.

Further complicating matters is Moscow's perspective that NATO armed forces in Europe have achieved conventional superiority. This makes it difficult for Russia to reduce its nuclear arsenal. Added to this is the proliferation of ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction on its southern border. Since Russia renounced nuclear medium-range missiles in the INF Treaty, it can only react to these with the re-location of sub-strategic nuclear weapons. The Obama administration has made clear to the US-Congress and NATO allies of central and Eastern Europe, that they will include sub-strategic nuclear weapons in future disarmament talks with Russia, in order to bring the numbers in the arsenals of both countries closer together.

US Senate obstacle to disarmament

Domestic politics is also raising obstacles to further nuclear disarmament, even after the Senate elections of 6 November 2012. Any international treaty has to be approved with a two thirds majority before it can be ratified. Since the Democrats do not have this majority, they continue to be reliant on collaboration with Republican senators. In view of the blocking stance announced by the Republican Party, one will have to reckon with some tough grappling for every decision in favour of a disarmament treaty. Republican opposition to New START was unexpectedly vigorous. As a result, the Obama administration refrained from the anticipated second attempt to get approval of the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty (CTBT). The passing of the CTBT had already failed under President Bill Clinton in 1999, due to lack of support in the US Senate.

Disarmament and non-proliferation

In his Prague speech in April 2009, US President Obama presented the vision of a nuclear weapon free world. The surest way to nuclear non-proliferation, he said, was the disarmament of all nuclear weapons. One could get closer to this goal by assigning nuclear weapons a smaller role in defence planning in order to enable further disarmament in accordance with article 6 of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT).

Efforts at nuclear disarmament by recognised nuclear weapons states, above all by the USA and Russia, nevertheless have no direct influence on the motivation of a state to procure nuclear weapons. The incentive to procure nuclear weapons can come from regional security dynamics or from striving to achieve greater political weight and recognition. At present it seems unlikely that regional powers with nuclear potential will orientate themselves militarily with the USA and aim for a stable nuclear balance. This applies, say, to states armed with nuclear weapons such as North Korea, India and Pakistan or states that are on their way to military nuclearisation, such as Iran. Nonetheless, efforts at nuclear disarmament by the USA and Russia not only place the other official nuclear weapons states of China, Great Britain and France, but also the international community as a whole, under greater political pressure to act and thereby to strengthen the disarmament and non-proliferation norm of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

Cautious expectations

Despite the difficult starting position, the USA has the potential to set further nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation steps. It could, for example, recognise Russian reservations and delay the implementation of phase 4 of its European missile defence plans. Additionally, the USA could offer to negotiate sub-strategic nuclear weapons and nuclear reserve warheads for strategic weapons together in a coming disarmament treaty. In so doing, every party to the

treaty could decide for themselves what the composition of their nuclear arsenal should look like. A further conceivable initiative would be to submit the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty (CTBT) to the US Senate once again for approval. Ultimately, the USA could emphasise confidence-building measures. An intensified information-exchange with Russia and joint studies on questions of disarmament, non-proliferation and verification could be feasible.

It is still unclear whether the US budget situation will prompt further disarmament measures. The compulsion to reduce spending could become one of the strongest incentives for nuclear disarmament, meaning that US senators could see themselves endorsing disarmament beyond party boundaries and cutting expenditure on development and procurement.

Limited room to manoeuvre for Germany

Traditionally Germany has a great interest in nuclear arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation. As a non-nuclear armed ally of the USA in Europe, it can however only follow the disarmament process as a supporter. Even so, Germany has the possibility, perhaps through contribution to the construction of a territorial NATO missile defence system, to work towards a reduced role for nuclear weapons. However, as long as NATO finds no suitable form of cooperation with Russia, negative effects on arms control and disarmament talks can be anticipated. In order to facilitate a reduction in Russian and US nuclear weapons stationed in Europe, conventional arms control should be revived. Here, there is political room to manoeuvre for non-nuclear arms states too, such as Germany. In this policy area Germany can provide more than mere support and has already proved this by committing to the resolution of the conventional arms control crisis in Europe. This commitment should be continued.

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