Resetting the Nuclear Clock

Wars abroad and political battles at home will complicate Obama’s signature initiative to check the spread of doomsday weapons.

By James Kitfield

Well before the 2008 election, foreign-policy hands predicted that the next commander-in-chief would confront an incendiary in-box without precedent in the modern American presidency. Recently, Barack Obama has begun to grasp what they meant. After spending his honeymoon wrestling with the Great Recession and health care, and with cap-and-trade and climate change on deck, Obama will soon enter a stretch of his young presidency that includes deciding how to end an unpopular war in Iraq, salvage a failing war in Afghanistan, and avoid a potential war with Iran. All are likely to affect his signature initiative to check what many experts see as the greatest long-term threat to U.S. national security—the spread of doomsday weapons.

“Today, the threat of nuclear weapons proliferation is growing in scope and complexity,” Obama warned in his September 23 speech before the United Nations, asserting that the next 12 months would prove critical in determining whether the “fragile consensus” against the spread of nuclear weapons will hold or slowly dissolve. “If we fail to act, we will invite nuclear arms races in every region, and the prospect of wars and acts of terror on a scale that we can hardly imagine.”

In becoming the first American chief executive to chair the U.N. Security Council summit and choosing nonproliferation as its subject, Obama put the full weight of his presidency into reinforcing a rickety global nonproliferation architecture. In the past decade, its foundation of arms control agreements and nonproliferation treaties has been shaken both by serial cheaters North Korea and Iran, and by treaty outliers such as India, Pakistan, and Israel. The Bush administration’s skepticism of arms control treaties, and its interest in expanding missile defenses in space and exploring new uses for nuclear weapons, was also hard to square with the bargain at the core of the Nonproliferation Treaty that the nuclear “haves” would move toward disarmament as the “have-nots” foreswore acquiring them.

Key pillars of the Obama administration’s ambitious rebuilding agenda include negotiating a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with the Russians by December; launching talks in January on a multilateral treaty to halt production of weapons-grade fissile material; releasing by February a new Nuclear Posture Review that reduces the Pentagon’s reliance on nuclear weapons; holding in April a nuclear security summit of world leaders on measures to secure global stockpiles of nuclear materials; and moving forward with Senate ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty—all leading up to a critical NPT review conference next May.

“The administration’s strategy is to show enough progress on disarmament by the United States and Russia to win international support for much tougher counter-proliferation measures to prevent more countries from acquiring nuclear weapons,” said Joseph G. Cirincione, president of the Ploughshares Fund and a longtime arms control expert. “So all of these step-by-step decisions, meetings, and summits are about building enough momentum over the next 12 months to fundamentally reverse the direction the world is heading in terms of nuclear proliferation.”

If history is any judge, however, major fissures and possible outright collapse are likely to threaten Obama’s best-laid architecture. The administration’s first gambit was last month’s decision to scrap a proposed missile defense system in Eastern Europe, a major irritant in U.S.-Russian relations. Resetting that relationship was important not only in paving the way for a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty in December but also in persuading veto-wielding Moscow to accept tougher U.N. sanctions on Iran for its clandestine nuclear weapons program.

If Iran is able to shake off weak sanctions and thumb its nose at the Security Council by acquiring and eventually testing a nuclear weapon, it could lead to a nuclear arms race in the Middle East and scuttle any chances for Senate ratification of the test-ban treaty, dooming the administration’s nonproliferation agenda.

“People sometimes find it difficult to understand the relationship between the specific steps and treaties that Obama has proposed and today’s proliferation threats like Iran and North Korea, but it’s important to note that they are all connected and that to work, the strategy has to be self-reinforce-
ing," said Deepak Choubey, deputy director of the Non-proliferation Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "I can tell you, at arms control conferences the atmosphere has already changed dramatically and Iran is losing support. Countries are looking to the United States for leadership on this issue again."

Yet Iran is only one potential spoiler of the administration’s nonproliferation agenda. At home, Republican supporters of the missile defense system in Eastern Europe have vilified Obama’s decision to scrap the project as “appeasement” by an inexperienced president of an increasingly authoritarian Russia. If Moscow fails to back tough sanctions against Iran in the months ahead, that argument is likely to gain traction just as the administration is poised to send a new START treaty and perhaps even the test-ban treaty back to the Senate.

Because arms control treaties require a two-thirds majority vote in the Senate for ratification, Obama has no choice but to win significant Republican support. Already, Senate Minority Whip Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., who helped organize opposition to the test-ban treaty in 1999, is reportedly lining up votes in opposition. Insiders believe that Republicans may try to make support, even for the new START treaty, contingent on the administration’s supporting a “reliable replacement warhead” to modernize the nation’s aging nuclear arsenal. That condition, which Obama voted against as a senator, would be a poison pill for arms control advocates. Kyl and Richard Perle, the former chairman of Bush’s Defense Policy Board, wrote in the Wall Street Journal on June 30 that the Obama arms control agenda was based on “dangerous, wishful thinking.”

Strobe Talbott, president of the Brookings Institution, said, “If you look at the controversy triggered by President Obama’s decision in regards to missile defense in Europe, I think that was a harbinger of the arguments to come over arms control as opponents come after him for watering down the Bush legacy and being weak on national security.” Talbott, a former deputy secretary of State in the Clinton administration, has never forgotten the “horrendous defeat” that Clinton—weakened by an impeachment battle and a divisive war in Kosovo—suffered in 1999 when a Republican-controlled Senate rejected the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

By launching the nonproliferation initiative while Obama’s popularity and stock of political capital remain relatively high, the administration seems to have absorbed the lesson of 1999. “But I see both risk as well as opportunity in the administration’s very ambitious strategy,” Talbott said. “They obviously hope to get some points on the board with negotiation and ratification of a new START, building a sense of momentum that will translate into Senate ratification of the test-ban treaty. That has a familiar ring, however, because this administration similarly hoped to score some early points with their domestic agenda and then get on a roll where victory begot victory. Then they ran into trouble on health care, which will translate into trouble on other domestic issues. The same thing could happen on their nonproliferation agenda.”

Indeed, Obama is facing a pivotal decision on whether to surge as many as 40,000 additional U.S. troops to salvage an unpopular war in Afghanistan. Influential Democrats in Congress are already mobilizing to oppose a surge. Such an expansion of the war effort there would likely force the administration to seek Republican support for a supplemental war-funding bill, even as Obama tries to hold his own fractious caucus together behind the nonproliferation agenda.

Peter Feaver served in the White House on the National Security Council staff during the Bush administration’s surge of forces to Iraq in 2007. If Obama decides to repeat that tactic in Afghanistan, Feaver said, the administration is about to learn some tough lessons about the limits of a president’s personal and political capital, and Washington’s ability to simultaneously digest major, contentious policy proposals.

“The most precious White House resource is a president’s actual time and attention, because there are only so many hours in a day and you can’t let the president get burned out. The fact that Obama has only spoken to his top commander in Afghanistan a couple of times suggests to me that his staff has conserved that resource for other priorities, and that is about to change if he backs a surge in Afghanistan,” Feaver told National Journal. “There is also a limited amount of congressional bandwidth, meaning you can only jam so many major issues into the pipeline before they are traded off against each other.”

As an example, Feaver notes that if the administration angers Republicans on missile defense but needs their help on an Afghan supplemental, then it may be forced to give on the test-ban treaty or perhaps cap-and-trade. “The deals become more complicated,” he said, “and lawmakers have fresh memories of when the administration rolled them and when it conceded to their demands.”

In the end, Bush pushed through a divisive invasion of Iraq in 2003; won re-election in 2004; and even after the war turned unpopular, mustered enough political backing to surge troops to Iraq in 2007. But major domestic priorities such as immigration and Social Security reform became casualties of war. “I think Obama is in a similar place as Bush in 2002,” Feaver said. “Though he’s starting to get a lot of push-back, Obama probably has the political capital to ram through health care and get what he wants on Afghanistan and possibly even arms control, but he’ll pay a price.”

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