



Overcoming Nuclear Dangers

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An Idea Whose Time Has Come

GEORGE P. SCHULTZ

- London: April 1, 2009:
- “Joint Statement by President Dmitriy Medvedev of the Russian Federation and President Barack Obama of the United States of America”:
- “We committed our two countries to achieving a nuclear-free world.”

Since Russia and the United States possess over 90 percent of the nuclear weapons of the world, that statement is of great consequence.

The statement gains strength from the fact that it builds on a long history. Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy spoke about this goal.

Rajiv Gandhi urged its pursuit with eloquence and urgency before the United Nations General Assembly. I remember Ronald Reagan’s dogged pursuit of this goal. I remember one evening on December 20, 1984, when Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin brought me a letter for Ronald Reagan from General Secretary B. Chernenko, in which Chernenko said:

Recently you have spoken on more than one occasion in favor of moving along the road leading eventually to the liquidation of nuclear weapons, completely and everywhere.

We, of course, welcome that. The Soviet Union, as is known, as far back as the dawn of the nuclear age, came out for prohibiting and liquidating such weapons. But even today it is not yet too late to start practical movement toward this noble objective.

Of course, there was the dramatic effort in Reykjavik by Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev to begin work toward a world free of nuclear weapons. We can note that the Foreign Minister of Russia, Sergey Lavrov, gave a speech on March 7, 2009, in Geneva that included a statement by President Medvedev:

Today we are facing a pressing need to move further along the road of nuclear disarmament. In accordance with its obligations under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Russia is fully committed to reaching the goal of a world free from these most deadly weapons.

And there has been posted for some weeks on President Obama's White House Web site the unambiguous statement that "Obama and Biden will set a goal of a world without nuclear weapons, and pursue it."

So my first point: these statements show that the idea of a world free of nuclear weapons has extraordinary staying power.

Why the staying power? The answers are that we know all too well that these weapons are unique in their immense and inhumane destructive power, that the consequences of their use are devastating, and that access to nuclear materials is in the process of proliferating.

The joint statement by Presidents Medvedev and Obama shows something else, particularly juxtaposed to many recent statements by leaders in many countries of their support for this goal. And, on April 5 in Prague, President Obama followed up powerfully, with an ambitious agenda for the United States to lead in taking crucial, concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons beginning this year. So my second point: this idea not only has staying power but we are also entitled to hope and believe that this is an idea whose time has come.

We now must consider ourselves charged with the task of helping bring the vision to reality. What does it take to get from here to there? The answer is a lot of hard work on many subjects. Of course, major reductions in nuclear arms by Russia and the United States need to lead the way, but more vigorous attention to the proliferation threats from North Korea and Iran must also be on the front burner.

In the joint statement and accompanying material, the Russian and U.S. presidents instructed their respective negotiators to get busy immediately to negotiate a follow-on agreement to the START Treaty, due to expire in December of this year, thereby preserving the essence of that Treaty's verification measures and the learning acquired by administering them. Even now, the U.S. stockpile is about one-fourth of its size at the height of the cold war in 1986. Russian numbers have also come down sharply. The dramatic world picture, as best as it can be estimated, is shown on the attached chart. So my third point: based on evidence from the past, dramatic progress is possible.

So where do we go from here, and how?

I believe we must go carefully, remembering that we are talking about the national security of each country and of all of us collectively. To turn once again to the Obama White House Web site, his statement of the goal is followed by a pledge that he

“will always maintain a strong deterrent as long as nuclear weapons exist.” That is necessary for each country and for the non-nuclear states that depend on the deterrent capabilities of others.

Care does not mean an attitude that time is irrelevant. Time is not on our side, so the key phrase must be “careful urgency,” and the process needs to advance by taking a series of steps that will pull us back from the nuclear precipice. The agenda is reasonably well known and it is daunting.

Yes, there are steps that the United States and Russia must take because of their exceptionally large current arsenals. I’m glad to observe that this essential process seems to be getting under way.

But there are many other necessary actions that involve many other countries, and some that require virtually global participation. President Obama, in his stirring address in Prague, identified several: “A new international effort to secure all vulnerable nuclear material around the world within four years”; and building “on our efforts to break up black markets, detect and intercept materials in transit, and use financial tools to disrupt this dangerous trade.”

We know that the ability to verify that agreements are kept is essential. A way should be found, for example, to make generally available what is learned from the verification procedures under the START Treaty.

And then there are the issues of enforcement. What to do when some country or group steps out of line? As President Obama put it: “Rules must be binding. Violations must be punished. Words must mean something.”

This issue of enforcement is central to the desired outcome. The reality is that, in recent years, words have not meant much. Security Council statements and declarations by government leaders have been almost routinely ignored, most recently after the North Korean test of a ballistic missile capability. If the threat of proliferation is to be dealt with successfully, then “Violations must be punished.”

I will not catalogue all of the steps that need to be taken. In the articles published in the last couple of years with my colleagues Bill Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, we identified critical steps. All this is by way of establishing an agenda and creating a commitment to its implementation on a global basis.

Beyond discussion here of the creation of a joint enterprise, our discussion of various alternatives for getting to the nuclear-free mountaintop is essential. Sam Nunn has compared the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons to the top of a very tall mountain. Today we are heading down, not up. We can see that we must turn around, that we must take paths leading to higher ground, and that we must get others to move with us. We must find trails leading upward. Because today, even if we cannot see the path to the top of the mountain – a world free of nuclear weapons – we can reach agreement on what a base camp might look like even well on the way to the top. From there, our view of the mountaintop will be clearer to both governments and to publics.

On our second day here, we tackle two of our most pressing challenges:

- How to square the circle between the world's increasing demand for energy – including nuclear energy – with the challenge of ending proliferation and the threat of nuclear weapons. This is a problem that must be solved if we are to reach the mountaintop. Fortunately, progress is being made in addressing the nuclear fuel cycle, but much more difficult work remains.
- And finally, we need to find a way to secure nuclear materials so that terrorists and rogue states cannot gain access to the fissile material necessary to build a bomb.

This is one of the most pressing and urgent problems we face – because we know there are terrorists who are seeking these materials today and would not hesitate to use them in making a bomb that could kill hundreds of thousands.

Our agenda is truly extensive, so we must consider the immense diplomacy needed to take the steps that have been identified.

- The issues involved are of transcendent importance, so the heads of government must be the chief diplomats. This is their issue. A key task is to help them exercise their awesome responsibilities.
- Foreign ministers should expect to be at the center of organizing this effort, working in tandem with ministers of defense and others. Broad training is essential, particularly in the ability to work with technological issues and scientific people. Ways must be devised to retain seasoned officers and to engage senior people with political backgrounds. Young people should be encouraged to take careers in the foreign service.
- The principal diplomatic task is to ensure that key constituencies and the general public in each country, groups that have an impact on the body politic, are brought on board, kept informed, and made a part of this process.
- Scientists and diplomats must learn to work together on issues. When they do so successfully, they will experience the thrill of learning important things about areas with which they normally have little contact.
- Finally, work must be undertaken, right from the outset, on a global scale. When I was in office and dealing with members of Congress, I learned that one of the rules of the road is: If you want me with you on the landing, be sure I'm with you on the take-off.

In 2006, a small group gathered at Stanford University's Hoover Institution on the 20th anniversary of the Reykjavik Summit meeting to discuss the continuing relevance of the Reagan-Gorbachev vision of a world free of nuclear weapons. Ambassador Max Kampelman – whom many of you know – gave a stirring opening speech at that conference. Max spoke of the importance in America of the movement from the “is” of our present day to the “ought” to which we aspire, and how that movement has made our democracy the country we cherish today.

Our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution contained many “oughts” but it has taken us many years to end slavery, grant voting rights to all our citizens, and guarantee civil rights, to give you just a few examples. Max said it very clearly then: we must work to establish a civilized “ought” for human beings – the abolition of nuclear weapons. Achieving a world free from the threat of nuclear weapons will require a willingness to be idealistic and realistic at the same time.

By combining realism with idealism, we can find a way to move through practical steps from what “is” – a world with a risk of increasing global disaster – to what “ought” to be: a world free from the threat of weapons of mass destruction.

I hope that our work over the next two days in Rome will help us close the gap between what “is” and what “ought” to be.

In closing, I want to compliment the government of Italy and Foreign Minister Frattini for joining us in convening this conference at this propitious moment. I feel privileged to be here, and I express my thanks for the foresight of the Italian government, for your engagement and leadership on this important issue, and for the incomparable Italian hospitality.

I also want to express my admiration and thanks to President Mikhail Gorbachev. President Gorbachev first proposed the idea of organizing this meeting last summer, and his World Political Forum has played an essential part in bringing this event together. He has been thinking about these issues for a long time and had the courage, along with President Ronald Reagan, to get the ball rolling at Reykjavik over two decades ago. I had the privilege of meeting with him there and on many other occasions. He is a man who has made, and continues to make, a difference in the world. I salute him.