

US NUCLEAR SECURITY STRATEGY AFTER THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

The publication of an essay by George Schultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger and Sam Nunn in January 2007, calling for a 'World Free of Nuclear Weapons', revived the discussion on US nuclear security strategy in American halls of power. However, the extent of any changes in US nuclear policy will depend on who becomes the next president. While McCain's May 2008 speech on nuclear security was intended to signal publicly 'a *significant* departure' from President Bush's policy, as McCain's advisors have proclaimed, it aims to distance the Arizona Senator from an unpopular president and indicates only some changes on nuclear policy in a McCain White House. While Obama has been less vocal about his own nuclear policy, his past record on the matter and his statements to date indicate that an administration under his presidency may be willing to go further on arms control and non-proliferation than a McCain administration.

Calling for a nuclear-free world is nothing new in the American political establishment. President Kennedy did so already in the 1960s, and Ronald Reagan also famously called in the 1980s for the abolition of 'all nuclear weapons', which he considered to be 'totally irrational, totally inhumane, good for nothing but killing, possibly destructive of life on earth and civilization.' In his speech, McCain echoes Ronald Reagan's dream of '[seeing] the day when nuclear weapons will be banished from the face of the Earth', by saying 'that is my dream, too'. This vision does indeed distinguish McCain from Bush.

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Republican presidential candidate Senator John McCain (right) speaks with his Director of Foreign Policy and National Security, Randy Scheunemann, on board a chartered plane on Friday, 16 May 2008.

Sharing Ronald Reagan's dream of a nuclear-free world is certainly genuine, but also politically expedient. At a time when the Republican incumbent and his unilateralist approach have not been popular in the US (or anywhere else for that matter), and when there are calls from both moderate Republicans and Democrats for a change in US nuclear security strategy, it is wise to pay homage to the ideas of a popular Republican and also to appear prone towards a bi-partisan approach on the matter. It signals the type of change that many Americans are looking for, irrespective of their political persuasion, and the type of change which McCain understands is necessary. Furthermore, McCain needs to distance himself from the policies of an unpopular president; in the

public's perception he has supported Bush's key policies on the Iraq war, and since he therefore cannot distance himself from Bush on Iraq, he has tried to distance himself on other matters of national security, and in this case on nuclear weapons.

McCain aims to highlight a number of differences between himself and President Bush on nuclear weapons, and embraces some, if not all, of the key tenets outlined in the essay by the four national security titans, the so-called Gang of Four. He outlines his nuclear vision as follows: the US should enter into 'a new arms control agreement with Russia' and should reduce its nuclear forces 'to the lowest level we judge necessary'. It should also agree with Russia on 'binding verification measures based on those currently in effect under the START Agreement', which is due to expire in 2009. He would like to explore ways in which the US 'can reduce – and hopefully eliminate – deployments of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe'. Also, he will 'seriously consider' Russia's proposal for the globalisation of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and he feels that the US should 'begin a dialogue with China on strategic and nuclear issues'. In a reversal of his 1999 rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), he declares his willingness to take 'another look' at it. All further work on the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator, essentially a hydrogen bunker buster bomb, should be cancelled. Finally, the Non-Proliferation Treaty should be strengthened and financing for the International Atomic Energy Agency should be increased.

Bush has indeed opposed many of these ideas in the past. However, this is nevertheless not as significant a break with Bush policy as it might appear. In itself, this should not be surprising: McCain's voting record in the Senate does not portray him as a leader who is keen on nuclear non-proliferation or arms control. A dialogue with China on strategic and nuclear issues is not a new item on the Republican agenda: a US-China Strategic Dialogue is already taking place in some fora. In August 2005, US Deputy Secretary of State Robert B. Zoellick held the first of a series of strategic dialogues with China's Deputy Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo in Beijing. Furthermore, a convention of Chinese and American strategic experts was also held in August 2005 in Honolulu, Hawaii, and focused on the role of nuclear weapons in Sino-US relations. While the latter event was framed as non-political, with experts speaking in a personal capacity, it did more or less coincide with the high-level political dialogue taking place in Beijing. Even though this strategic dialogue is still in its infancy, not having produced much more than an exchange of views, the initiative was supported by Bush and is already underway. Perhaps McCain would wish to in-

vigorate this dialogue with China, but it does not represent a split with Bush.

Also, after a vote in Congress in 2005 to block funding for the bunker buster bomb, President Bush abandoned this initiative. McCain voted to continue the funding for the project, and his call to cancel work which is already dead in its tracks does not signify a real policy difference with Bush on the matter, but more of a statement of political reality.

McCain's declaration that US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe should be reduced and hopefully eliminated is also less of a break with Bush than it might seem. In the first instance, from the 4,000 tactical nuclear weapons in Europe in 1991, only several hundred remain (estimates are at between 200 and 350 aerial bombs). This is an over 90 percent reduction, which began with the Presidential Nuclear Initiative signed by President George H.W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev. A June 2008 declassified report by the US Air Force has stated that 'most' nuclear weapons sites in Europe do not meet Department of Defense security standards, so their deployment in Europe is a real security risk. Given the risk these weapons pose, it is rumoured that the US intends to withdraw a nuclear custodial unit from at least one of its European bases and to consolidate the remaining nuclear weapons in fewer bases throughout Europe. As Ranking Member on the Senate Armed Services Committee, McCain would be aware of any plans essentially to withdraw some of these weapons. While Bush has not made any statements about plans for the elimination of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, McCain's declaration about the reduction and potential elimination does not amount to a 'significant' break with overall Bush policy. A reduction of these weapons is on the cards, if it has not happened already, and clearly would have been sanctioned by the Bush administration.

Furthermore, while McCain has called for extending current arms control deals with Russia, President Bush himself has not been opposed to that. McCain calls for binding verification measures based on those currently in effect under the START Agreement; Bush has opposed further limits on weapons, but he has recently agreed to make transparency and confidence-building measures legally binding, something which he opposed in the past. So, McCain's call for legally-binding verification measures follows on from and is in line with current Bush policy.

McCain's intention to enter into a new arms control agreement with Russia is genuine, and is a policy shift which we can indeed expect from a McCain White House. Russia has stated its interest in reducing the final number of deployed strategic warheads to fewer

than 1,500 each (the current agreement under SORT places the number at between 1,700 and 2,200 each) but Bush has opposed further limitations. While McCain has been hesitant to commit to a figure, preferring the more cautious approach of stating that the number will be reduced to whatever the US deems as necessary for its security, he nevertheless would like to see some further reductions. Increasing funding for the IAEA and strengthening the Non-Proliferation Treaty are further endeavours to which McCain is willing to commit, and both are in the US national interest, particularly given the dangers of nuclear proliferation by small to medium-sized powers.

These policies would be welcomed by many across the political spectrum but, given McCain's past stance on these matters, it remains to be seen how quickly any changes are implemented and whether McCain's willingness to take 'another look' at the CTBT will mean that the treaty would reach the Senate floor for ratification, thereby resulting in an actual break with Bush's position on it. It is in particular the timing of McCain's speech which places a question mark over the motivation behind his nuclear security initiatives. Why now, when he needs to distance himself from Bush in the public's eye, and not a year ago, or three years ago, or five years ago? The question is not whether or not McCain is genuine in his policy proposals – he is – but to what extent the policy position which he has now chosen to adopt for good political reasons will produce results which are significantly different to what Bush has initiated or agreed to during his past two terms.

on any premature excitement about what he might and might not do on the foreign policy front. However, his past and current policy choices on nuclear non-proliferation and arms control in particular indicate that the US might go further on these matters if he were elected than if McCain were to win. Similar to the Gang of Four and McCain, Obama has declared his vision of a nuclear-free world and among Obama's nuclear policy plans are the following: he intends to strengthen the Non-Proliferation Treaty; he would seek a global ban on further production of fissile material for weapons; he will aim to expand the US-Russian intermediate-range missile ban, and will 'work with Russia to take US and Russian ballistic missiles off hair-trigger alert,' and also 'to *dramatically* reduce the stockpiles of our nuclear weapons and material.' Obama also wishes to lead 'a global effort to secure all nuclear weapons and material at vulnerable sites within four years,' which he views as 'the most effective way to prevent terrorists from acquiring a bomb.'

Importantly, Obama has declared that he will make the ratification of the CTBT a priority. While it is not unlikely that McCain would also hand it to the Senate for ratification at some point during his administration, it is more certain that Obama would do so: he is presently willing to do more than take another look at it. Given the broad Democratic support for the CTBT, as well as that of moderate Republicans who agree with the Gang of Four, there might be a real chance that the Senate would actually ratify it. The 1999 Senate rejection of the CTBT by the Republican majority was done on a partisan basis with the intention to humiliate Clinton for non-CTBT related matters. This time around, the political mood is very different and there is a bi-partisan willingness to work together on matters of nuclear security strategy. Thus, a move towards the ratification of the CTBT is a likely and significant change in US nuclear policy that we can expect from an Obama Presidency.

Obama's past Senate initiatives on nuclear security include the introduction with Republican Senator Richard Lugar of the 'Cooperative Proliferation Detection, Interdiction Assistance, and Conventional Threat Reduction Act of 2006,' and a provision aimed at preventing nuclear terrorism introduced together with Republican Senator Chuck Hagel in 2007. These indicate that an Obama White House would approach nuclear policy in a bi-partisan way. His stated intention to 'dramatically reduce' the stockpiles of US nuclear weapons, in contrast to McCain's stance to reduce them to whatever the US judges as necessary, implies that he may be willing to go slightly further



Democratic presidential candidate, Senator Barack Obama (left) with former Senator Sam Nunn during a panel discussion on national security at Purdue University, Wednesday, 16 July 2008.

Despite Obama's July 2008 trip to Europe and the Middle East, which was designed to bolster his foreign policy credentials at home, the fact that he does not have much foreign policy experience puts a damper

than McCain on arms control. Certainly, Obama would not reduce the stockpiles to a number lower than he deems necessary for US national security, and the difference in the statements stems partially from the fact that both candidates cater to different audiences and therefore adopt different terminology. But there may indeed be differences between the candidates as regards the judgment as to what is 'necessary' in terms of the number of deployed strategic warheads, as indicated by Obama's suggestion that he would seek a *dramatic* reduction.

Despite Obama's official position that he would stop the development of new nuclear weapons, he has not directly opposed the building of a new Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW), stating only his opposition to a 'premature' decision on the matter. Thus, it cannot be expected that Obama would necessarily cancel any plans for the building of the RRW. His position on maintaining a strong nuclear deterrent (as long as nuclear weapons exists), which is in line with McCain's, would seem to support this.

In stating that the nuclear option is not on the table when it comes to terrorist targets in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Obama has indeed broken with presidential nuclear security orthodoxy. This, however, does not imply that the US is likely to see an overhaul of US nuclear security strategy if he is elected. Obama would make a concerted effort to restore US leadership on non-proliferation and would return

to arms control, both of which will, at this point in time, help to advance US national security interests.

For a president to have an impact on arms control and disarmament policy, he needs to press upon the bureaucracy that he wishes to see his vision implemented. Otherwise, US positions are formulated on the mid-level of decision-making, which is where most of the inter-agency compromises are struck. Thus, there is actually much continuity in US positions, unless the president decides to push for the implementation of particular policies. McCain and Obama have indicated that they will push on certain issues. While McCain's policy proposals do not simply offer more of the same of what we have seen over the course of the past eight years, they also do not distinguish him from the policies that have been conducted by Bush as much as his advisers have suggested. McCain does differ from Bush in wishing to pursue further reductions in deployed strategic warheads, as does Obama, but Obama might effect greater reductions in terms of numbers. McCain has also shown himself to be willing to reconsider the ratification of the CTBT, which Bush has opposed, but it is unclear to what extent he will push for it. Obama, however, would actively pursue its ratification. Thus, while changes to overall nuclear policy can be expected from a new administration, how far-reaching these changes will be hinges on whether McCain or Obama emerges as the next incumbent.