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Addressing Today's Nuclear Threats

Remarks

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Introduction

I would like to thank the Alaska World Affairs Council for the invitation to speak here this evening. I appreciate this opportunity to visit your beautiful state and to engage with you on the issues that are raised so starkly in the film that we have just watched. I wholeheartedly agree with former Secretary of Defense Perry as to the gravity of the challenge that the spread of nuclear weapons and the control of nuclear materials and nuclear technology pose to us and our world; it is a problem that dwarfs all others.

This problem is one to which I have devoted much of my professional career. In my current role as Special Representative of the President for Nuclear Nonproliferation, it is the problem that occupies each of my days. My charge is to work with other countries, relevant international organizations, and non-governmental organizations to strengthen the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the NPT, which serves as the cornerstone of international efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons.

Cooperation to Avert Catastrophe

In the film we have just watched, former Senator Sam Nunn states that the choice before us is clear; either we can cooperate to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, decrease the number of nuclear weapons on the planet, and prevent terrorists from accessing the nuclear weapons, nuclear materials, and nuclear technologies that they seek, or we face catastrophe. It is ironic, as the film points out and President Obama has stated repeatedly, that decades after the Cold War’s end and despite very real reductions in the nuclear arsenals of the key Cold War adversaries, nuclear dangers are on the rise. Ironic or not, new dangers, particularly from new states and terrorist organizations seeking nuclear capabilities, have mounted.

President Obama made clear the priority he and his Administration place not only on averting such a catastrophe but on seeking “the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons” in the seminal foreign policy address that he
delivered in Prague in April in 2009, a speech that the film quoted extensively. At Prague, President Obama warned that a world without nuclear weapons will be achieved neither quickly nor unilaterally. It will take “patience and persistence,” and only through cooperation can we attain that goal. The President noted that, while “the United States has a moral responsibility to act” and while the United States can “start” and “lead” such an effort, “We cannot succeed in this endeavor alone.”

At Prague, President Obama outlined three tools that the United States will use in leading this effort to achieve a world without nuclear weapons. The first is disarmament; he pledged that “the United States will take concrete steps to achieve a world without nuclear weapons.” The second is a strengthened NPT. The third is enhancing nuclear security to “ensure that terrorists never acquire a nuclear weapon.” It is these three related aspects of U.S. policy that I would like to discuss with you this evening.

Disarmament

At Prague, the President outlined steps that the United States will take toward a world free of nuclear weapons. He pledged that the United States would “reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy.” He stated that the United States would negotiate a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with Russia. He said that his Administration would pursue ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, a global ban on the testing of nuclear weapons, and that the United States would “seek a new treaty that verifiably ends the production of fissile materials for use in state nuclear weapons,” also known as a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty, or FMCT. If the international community is serious about building down, we must constrain the ability to build up.

Important progress has been achieved on the President’s agenda in the year and a half since his speech at Prague. In April of 2010, the United States released the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review. This review marks a milestone in the transformation of U.S. nuclear forces and the way the United States approaches nuclear issues. It recalibrates U.S. priorities, placing the prevention of nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism at the top of the U.S. nuclear agenda, recognizing that the primary nuclear danger is no longer the threat of global nuclear war. The Nuclear Posture Review provides a roadmap for implementing President Obama’s agenda for reducing nuclear risks to the United States, our allies and partners, and the international community. And it describes how the United States will reduce the role and numbers of its nuclear weapons. Finally, as President Obama pledged at Prague, it insures that as long as nuclear weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent that will protect the United States and U.S. allies and partners. To this end, the NPR calls for significant investments to rebuild America’s aging nuclear infrastructure.

Also in April of this year, the United States and Russia took another important step toward a world without nuclear weapons when Presidents Obama and Medvedev signed a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or New START. This Treaty, the product of an intense year of U.S-Russian negotiation, sets new limits on U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear arsenals. These limits are important because the United States and Russia control more than 90 percent of the world’s nuclear weapons. When the New START Treaty is fully implemented, it will result in the lowest number of deployed nuclear warheads since the 1950s, the first full decade of the nuclear age.

This Treaty enhances U.S. national and global security by stabilizing the strategic balance between the United States and the Russian Federation at lower levels of nuclear forces. The Treaty preserves the U.S. right to determine its own force structure, giving it the flexibility to deploy and maintain strategic nuclear forces in a way that best serves U.S. national security interests. It contains a strong and comprehensive verification regime that gives us confidence that the Treaty’s limits are being met. This Treaty also represents a significant step forward in building a more stable, cooperative relationship with Russia, and the next step, as Presidents Obama and Medvedev have noted, to pursuing additional reductions in the future.
The New START Treaty cannot enter into force until it has been ratified by both the U.S. and Russia, and we are making good progress on ratification. On May 13th of this year, the White House transmitted the Treaty to the Senate for its advice and consent to ratification. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee has since held intensive hearings on the Treaty and in September, it voted with strong bipartisan support in favor of a resolution of advice and consent to its ratification of the New START Treaty. The Administration is confident that bipartisan support for this treaty will only grow in the coming weeks and looks forward to the full Senate providing its advice and consent to ratification as soon as possible.

The NPT

The second tool that President Obama discussed at Prague was the NPT. Specifically he called for strengthening the NPT as “a basis for cooperation.” The Obama Administration is committed to advancing each of the three pillars upon which the NPT has stood for forty years: disarmament, nonproliferation, and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The momentum the United States has given to disarmament is clear, and the United States is equally committed to strengthening nonproliferation and cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

At Prague, President Obama called for strengthening the barriers to proliferation by giving “more resources and authority” to the International Atomic Energy Agency’s, the IAEA’s safeguards system, the mechanism which verifies NPT non-nuclear-weapon State Parties’ compliance with their NPT obligations to use nuclear materials and technology exclusively for peaceful purposes. Since Prague, the Obama Administration has engaged in a review of the IAEA safeguards system to identify ways to make it even more effective.

But strengthening safeguards will fall short if some states are able to violate their international legal obligations with impunity in pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability. At Prague, the President made clear that when countries violate their treaty obligations there must be consequences.

Two states pose some of the gravest challenges to the nonproliferation regime and regional and international security. North Korea violated its nonproliferation obligations while under the NPT, announced that it was withdrawing from the Treaty without resolving those violations, and has twice publicly announced that it has tested a nuclear device. After nearly two decades of hiding its most dangerous nuclear activities from the IAEA, Iran, an NPT Party, continues to test the will of the international community. Iran continues to refuse to cooperate with the IAEA despite repeated UN Security Council resolutions and a finding by the IAEA Board of Governors that Iran violated its safeguards obligations. The United States is working closely and carefully with international partners to address the challenges posed by Iran and North Korea. The United States has made clear that both countries must live up to their obligations, and that when they do not there will be consequences.

Despite the attention and concern raised by these serious cases of noncompliance, the overwhelming majority of NPT Parties are meeting their treaty obligations and look to a strong NPT to bolster regional and international security. While disarmament and nonproliferation usually grab the headlines, the peaceful uses of nuclear energy impact all NPT Parties daily, in fields like medicine, food safety, water quality, and of course power production. With the growing challenge of climate change and growing demand for energy, many states are considering nuclear power for its cleaner, cheaper, domestic potential, and this is the right of states that renounce nuclear weapons. The challenge, as the film makes clear, is that increased reliance on nuclear power can increase the risk of proliferation.

At Prague, President Obama called for building “a new framework for civil nuclear cooperation, including an international fuel bank, so that countries can access peaceful power without increasing the risks of proliferation.” The United States is engaged in discussions at the IAEA on multilateral fuel assurances with an aim of reaching a decision soon to establish an
IAEA fuel bank. This action will reinforce other efforts to persuade states possessing or seeking civil nuclear power that they need not develop costly fuel-cycle facilities in order to be assured of supplies of nuclear fuel.

At the 2010 NPT Review Conference, held in New York last May, the Treaty Parties reached agreement on a forward looking Action Plan aimed at strengthening the Treaty in all its aspects. This agreement reflected global conviction that the NPT bolsters national and international security as well as global concern with the gravity of the challenges the Treaty faces. In welcoming the outcome of this Conference, President Obama noted that the Action Plan “reaffirms many aspects of the agenda” that he had laid out in Prague, including strengthening international safeguards, supporting compliance with nonproliferation obligations, and making progress on multilateral fuel assurances. The United States looks forward to working with other NPT Parties to build on the Action Plan.

**Nuclear Security**

The third tool that President Obama discussed at Prague is nuclear security. To ensure that terrorists do not acquire a nuclear weapon, he announced “a new international effort to secure all vulnerable nuclear material around the world within four years.” He called for building on “efforts to break up black markets, detect and intercept materials in transit, and use financial tools to disrupt” illicit trade in nuclear materials and technology and for making more durable existing activities to reduce the threat of nuclear terrorism. Finally, he pledged that the United States would host a Nuclear Security Summit to start these efforts.

The United States convened that Summit in Washington, DC, in April of this year. It was the largest Summit ever convened in Washington and the largest gathering of world leaders hosted by the United States since the founding of the United Nations. It achieved consensus on three themes, all of which are echoed in the film: the gravity of the threat of nuclear terrorism to our collective security, the determination of terrorist networks to acquire and use a nuclear device, and the catastrophic nature of an event of nuclear terrorism. Summit participants also issued a Communiqué, committing themselves to principles of nuclear security. When implemented, these principles will lead to focused national efforts to improve the security of all weapons-usable nuclear materials, and to consolidate or reduce the use of highly-enriched uranium in civilian applications. South Korea has agreed to host a second summit in 2012.

As the film notes, cooperative efforts to reduce the threat posed by nuclear as well as other weapons of mass destruction date to 1992 and the inception of the highly-successful Nunn Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program. In its earliest years, this program focused on securing and destroying the Cold War’s legacy, WMD and their means of delivery in former Soviet territories, and redirecting toward peaceful pursuits scientists and others once engaged in their production. As the threat has evolved to include new actors and new regions, so have threat reduction programs.

The United States has taken a leading role in these programs to address the many aspects of the threat. Eighty-two states participate in the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism, an international partnership committed to strengthening individual and global capacity to respond to the shared threat of nuclear terrorism. Ninety-eight partners in the Proliferation Security Initiative have committed to stopping WMD trafficking through greater cooperation with any state whose vessels, flags, ports, territorial waters, airspace or land might be used for proliferation purposes by states or non-state actors of proliferation concern. The United States committed $10 billion to the G8 Global Partnership against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction, a 10-year effort aimed at preventing terrorists and states from acquiring or developing WMD.

And there are other cooperative ventures in which the United States has taken a leading role, including the IAEA’s Nuclear Security Fund, UN Security Council Resolution 1540, efforts to minimize the use of highly enriched uranium in civil applications around the world, and efforts to counter smuggling of nuclear or highly radioactive materials. This work reflects U.S. awareness of the threat and the determination to address it.
Conclusion

In the choice between cooperation and catastrophe, as the film so bluntly states, the Obama Administration has chosen cooperation and U.S. leadership. Nuclear dangers are mounting, but the United States, working with its allies and partners, is responding. By advancing disarmament, while maintaining a strong U.S. deterrent, strengthening the NPT, and improving global nuclear security, the United States is taking concrete, practical steps toward a world free from the fear of nuclear attack.

Again, I thank you for inviting me here tonight, and I look forward to taking your questions.