

ISSA Proceedings 2014 - The Legacy Of The U.S. Atomic Superiority, Supremacy And Monopoly: Dispelling Its Illusion In Barack Obama's Berlin Speech

Abstract: The nature of the dilemma facing the world living with nuclear weapons is not technical, but political. This study reflects upon the extent to which the U.S. nuclear policy has been influenced by the mistaken assumption that the nation's nuclear supremacy should be enduring. The study focuses specifically on the speech delivered by the U.S. President Barack Obama, who calls for international cooperation on nuclear matters, in Berlin on 19 June 2013.

Keywords: Atomic diplomacy, Barack Obama, Berlin speech, nuclear policy, nuclear weapons

The nature of the dilemma facing the world living with nuclear weapons is not technical, but political. To a certain extent, the end of the cold war changed reliance on nuclear weapons into their further proliferation. On the one hand, in negotiations between the United States and Russia, the desire to reduce dependence on nuclear weapons corresponds with the determination to cut back on either their number or variety. On the other hand, atomic diplomacy holds on to the position of strategic superiority. This study reflects upon the extent to which the U.S. nuclear policy has been influenced by the mistaken assumption that the nation's nuclear supremacy should be enduring. The study focuses specifically on the speech delivered by the U.S. President Barack Obama, who advocates international cooperation on nuclear matters, in Berlin on 19 June 2013.

The U.S. nuclear supremacy has been founded upon a "popular fallacy"- a cause of the false sense of security and power. Nuclear weapons after the destruction of Hiroshima have not yet convincingly proved themselves to be an asset. However, the atomic superiority has locked the U.S. administration into a policy of trying to

outrage other nations in the development of new and more means of mass destruction. Such efficaciousness in diplomacy as much as unforeseen events might lead to another fallacious assumption concerning the utility of nuclear weapons. That is, their alleged capacity to avert military confrontations. Since the collapse of its atomic monopoly in 1949, the experience of the U.S. foreign policy has confirmed that nearly the opposite of these political assumptions is true. Nevertheless, it survives as myth to the present by giving impetus to the nuclear arms race.

1. *The end of the U.S. moral leadership*

A month after the uranium bombing of Hiroshima, on 12 September 1945, the *New York Times* article, "Atomic Bomb Responsibilities," questioned whether the U.S. sacrificed its moral leadership of the world for the achievement of the atomic fission (Baldwin, 1945, p. 4). Regardless of the validity of arguments that try to make war moral, the scientific achievement of manufacturing the atomic bomb changed the world. Even though Defense Secretary Forrestal described the duration of the U.S. nuclear monopoly as the "years of opportunity," the emphasis of monopoly on secrecy discouraged the U.S. administration from taking progressive steps for the international control of atomic energy. Instead, the U.S. monopoly encouraged its strategic thinking and planning to hold on to its political, diplomatic and military advantage.

Taking for granted the Soviet large conventional forces, the United States relied heavily on nuclear weapons in its defense and alliance policies. As a matter of fact, the threat of the atomic bomb was institutionalized in the U.S. military doctrine, and even in its operational planning. On the one hand, the United States is the only country that actually used the bomb, giving such reasons as patriotism, the advancement of science and technology, and the protection of the free world. On the other hand, the United States had no justification for integrating the atomic bomb into its foreign policy because it had come into being not as a result of open debate, but as the result of a secret project (Mendelsohn, 1990, p. 343). Wartime security indeed prevented the members of Congress from knowing the Manhattan Project – not to mention its funding hidden in the military budget. Overall, that the threat of the atomic bomb came to be the U.S. master card in diplomacy turned out to be a *fait accompli*.

After failing to reshape the real world in the nuclear age, the United States had to keep reviewing its nuclear strategy significantly in response to changing

technologies, advancing nuclear weapons, and evolving political contexts. In spite of its primary responsibility for safeguarding public health and safety from the hazards of the peaceful application of nuclear energy, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), a predecessor of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), thus promoted the viewing of a nuclear test as an exciting holiday event. Such an official attempt to celebrate the status of the nuclear power resulted in more than 200 atomic explosions above ground with witnesses present between 1945 and 1962.

These explosions went beyond sublimity to sheer terror, leaving trauma and a life of radiation poisoning as much as for the victims at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As the U.S. federal agency continued to insist the nuclear tests were safe, thousands of civilians who lived downwind of the AEC's Nevada test site – in Arizona as well as in Nevada – were subjected recurrently to radiation exposures for two decades. In spite of its unique position of power and responsibility in history, the U.S. government integrated the atomic monopoly to its strategy for containing Soviet expansion with wishful thinking.

With the end of the cold war, mutual nuclear deterrence embedded in the bipolar structure came to be dysfunctional as a legitimate practice in making a stable hierarchical nuclear world order. During the opening decade of the atomic age, the United States and the Soviet Union issued nuclear threats. The U.S. officials seriously considered using nuclear weapons until the 1962 Cuban missile crisis (See Betts, 1987), which was to repulse the Soviet threats by the U.S. atomic deterrence. Moreover, the antinuclear stand of many developing countries promoted disarmament politics at the United Nations (UN) general assembly. Such Third World movements failed to delegitimize nuclear weapons either as “weapons of mass destruction” or as “inhumane weapons,” but to embed deterrent practices in the means and motives of U.S. foreign policy in the cold war. Over time the non-use of nuclear weapons after the U.S. use of the plutonium bomb on Nagasaki has been symbolic of a *de facto* prohibition against the first use of nuclear arms.

For the damage control of moral leadership, the U.S. Presidents began taking a conciliatory attitude of getting rid of nuclear arsenals towards the world, especially towards the Soviet Union (later Russia). John F. Kennedy advocated that nuclear weapons “must be abolished before they abolish us.” Ronald Reagan called for their “total elimination.” In a 2009 Prague speech, which for the first

time brought the Nobel Peace Prize to the incumbent U.S. President, Barack Obama declared the nation was to take “concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons.” Nevertheless, after four years those steps became shrouded in a series of steps towards disarmament along with a promise to impose restrictions on the country to trigger its nuclear strikes. In addition, the quest for a nuclear-free world was shrunk merely into four out of the twenty-six paragraphs. There President Obama required consent from Russia to reduce both sides’ deployed strategic nuclear weapons and from Republicans in the Senate to ratify the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

2. A declining symbolic power of nuclear weapons

In the development of nuclear strategy, the legacy of the Manhattan Project appears in a plethora of acronyms like MAD (mutually assured destruction) and NUTs (nuclear-use theorists). These puns contribute to playing down not merely a historical significance of the new weapon, but also a unique position of the U.S. power and responsibility in history. In the opening of the cold war world system, the United States alone took up nuclear supremacy. Instead of founding an international control scheme for atomic energy, its administration sought to make political use of that monopoly as a bargaining card. Hence the Truman administration launched a project on making the hydrogen bomb soon after the Soviet Union succeeded in making its first nuclear test. As a result of such arms race, the two superpowers began stockpiling nuclear bombs as well as undertaking research on and development of more sophisticated nuclear weapons.

The Soviet challenge to the U.S. strategic superiority confronted the U.S. presidents with difficult choices as commander-in-chief. During the Truman administration, the United States held out to the Soviet Union a set of selective and incomplete norms to delegitimize nuclear weapons at the UN. By representing them as a credible threat of punishment, the United States enabled to put deterrence into practice. Its reliance on nuclear weapons gave rise to a hierarchical, but increasingly contested global order along with the U.S.-Soviet nuclear stand-off (Kaufman, 1956, p. 19). Then its victory in the 1991 Gulf War marked a drastic change of the U.S.-Russia bilateral relationship from confrontational to cooperative in the theater of operation. On the one hand, the risk of a superpower confrontation dramatically declined. On the other hand, the breakdown of the bipolar structure in the cold war came to fall on further nuclear

proliferation in making bilateral and multilateral nuclear deterrence dysfunctional.

Even after the cold war ended, the United States explored a way to enjoy nuclear superiority to give force to its diplomacy. In the name of national security, President Obama hence framed the United States and Russia in the lower levels of nuclear weapons on both sides by calling for “a new international framework for peaceful nuclear power.” For the reduction of global nuclear arsenals, he associated his moral and policy agenda with that of John F. Kennedy. By reciting a phrase – “peace with justice” – from Kennedy’s address in Berlin half a century ago (Entous & Barnes, 2013, p. A8; Nicholas & Boston, 2013, p. A12), Obama attempted to remind his audience of Kennedy’s call for “nuclear-arms control and nonproliferation.” In an optimistic tone, he sought to raise his hopes for moving the world as well as the country further away from nuclear arms race.

In spite of being criticized as naïve at home and abroad, Obama indeed held on to mutual nuclear deterrent for post-cold war contingencies. “Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States,” released with his Berlin speech, made it clear: the United States would never unilaterally disarm without comparable changes by Russia. In other words, the United States continued to display “nuclear folly” to see nuclear inferiority as imminent threat against national security. Yet the latest data exchange spelled out the U.S. nuclear superiority to Russia. In addition to the factual predominance of nuclear weapons, the Obama administration, supported by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and U.S. Strategic Command, concluded that 1,000 warheads would be sufficient with the triad of strategic forces for a nuclear capability (Blechman, 2013, p. A13). In the military and political perspective, Obama might take the proper steps to balance the equally important goals of nuclear safety and the U.S. world prestige.

On the other hand, the inferiority of its conventional as well as its nuclear forces compared to those of the United States pressured Russian President Vladimir Putin to modernize Russia’s nuclear forces and to modify its nuclear war plans. While showing no interest in delegitimizing nuclear weapons, Putin carefully calculated a formula that would meet this challenge to both national security and fiscal responsibility. Such speculations might resonate with U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower’s emphasis on massive nuclear retaliation in order to deter Russia from attacking the United States. The Russian unwillingness to go further explicated its legitimate needs of nuclear weapons not just as the instruments of

national power, but also as active rather than passive nuclear defense measures. On the whole, the U.S. supremacy in science and technology served only to heighten international tensions mainly because no country would disarm at the expense of its national security.

3. A shift in nuclear politics

In spite of ruling out any actual use of nuclear weapons, the UN permanent security members – the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) conferred a privileged status to those five members that possessed nuclear weapons on January 1, 1967 – could employ a variety of veiled nuclear threats. The United States carried on the policy of neither confirming nor denying the presence of nuclear weapons even though the end of the cold war shifted a focus from the East-West to the North-South issue. Such a drastic shift lost the multilateral context of equivocating Western deployments, and public and diplomatic statements. Thus, in response to Obama's requesting a "struggle for freedom and security," the Third World nations called into question asymmetrical obligations imposed by the non-proliferation regime, in which the NPT system helped legitimize the practice of "rational" nuclear deterrence (e.g., prohibitions on possession, acquisition, transfer, and testing of nuclear weapons).

By taking on the leadership of a world, Obama expressed grave concern about the spread of nuclear weapon-making materials around the globe. Here the president redefined John F. Kennedy's phrase "peace with justice" as "the security of a world without nuclear weapons." By adding the magic word "security" to his vision of a post-cold war world pledged in Prague four years ago, he suggested his limited ability to influence the country's dependence on nuclear arms. Instead, he drew the analogy between horizontal nuclear proliferation and "fear of global annihilation" so as to center the North-South conflict on the proliferation and non-proliferation agenda. With the diplomatic overture, he framed the number of invisible tensions in speaking of rejecting "the nuclear weaponization that North Korea and Iran may be seeking." Nevertheless, Obama fell short of providing a basis for a deal on "a new international framework for peaceful nuclear power."

The rise of the developing powers not only weakened the rationality of strategic deterrence, but also prevented the United States from playing an "exceptional" role on the world stage. While keeping hold of the non-proliferation regime, Obama advocated for democratic principles. His conciliatory words sounded a cautiously optimistic tone in the call for diplomacy. Nevertheless, the NPT world

system could no longer cover up the inequality between a “system of deterrence” and “system of abstinence” with regard to the acquisition and production of fissile materials for nuclear weapons (Walker, 2000). On the one hand, the U.S. “efforts to secure nuclear materials around the world” reflected the diminished threat of superpower nuclear use. On the other hand, the United States failed to confront the non-nuclear states that viewed the special status of the nuclear powers as double standard and increased political pressure on them for delegitimizing nuclear weapons.

President Obama called those non-nuclear powers to take a constructive approach in “the struggle for freedom and security and human dignity.” In diplomatic terms, his pursuit of security interests replaced “Kennedy’s stirring defense of freedom.” Obama then rephrased “the security of a world without nuclear weapons” as “dream,” and furthermore dissociated “a new international framework for peaceful nuclear power” from military ambitions to build a nuclear weapon. In making a case for “global security,” he sought to carry out a prudent and peaceful exploration of the U.S. nuclear programs. Overall, Obama balanced strategic interests with moral opprobrium by taking into compelling account the role of moral restraint in international politics and the non-use of nuclear weapons that evolved through the cold war.

4. Fallacy of atomic diplomacy

The development of the “super bomb” in the early 1950s marked an important turning point in the nuclear age. Along with international pressure for nuclear restraint, the morality of nuclear weapons and deterrence became an unwritten rule through a pile of bilateral and multilateral arms control agreements. In his remarks at the Brandenburg Gate, President Obama called on Russian President Putin to reduce the danger of nuclear confrontation. However, Russia formally abandoned the 1982 Soviet no-first-use policy in 1993. China, which had maintained a no-first-use policy since its first nuclear explosion in 1964, also changed the defensive nature of its nuclear use in response to the U.S. plans for a national missile defense. While the capacity to use nuclear weapons remains confined to a small number of states, a greater variety of actors are getting involved. Therefore, the global arms control process is becoming not only more multilateral, but also more transitional and pluralistic.

Despite the U.S. diplomatic approach, Russia and China rely more on nuclear weapons than on conventional strength for national security. Yet neither of their

post-cold war nuclear policy is more pro-nuclear than the U.S. foreign policy that emphasizes the role of power rather than the rule of law. In the call for the full delegitimization of nuclear weapons, President Obama implicitly confirmed that the United States believes firmly in the benefits of retaining nuclear capabilities. As a whole, the failure of nuclear arms control might be the problem of forgetting what actually took place in Hiroshima and in Nagasaki. In the post-cold war world, the fear of nuclear war recedes entirely from public memory, thereby eroding inhibitions on the use of nuclear weapons for the cause of self-defense.

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