

# NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS: IT'S GETTING PERSONAL

Tim McDonnell

## SUMMARY

The role that nuclear weapons play in international politics and security is evolving. Crucially, these changes are manifesting themselves in competing ways for two different groups of countries. For wealthy, militarily powerful countries, nuclear weapons are playing a diminishing role in security planning. Conversely, some countries that lack advanced military capabilities may be coming to see nuclear weapons as increasingly important, or desirable, for their security. The differences between these two groups are reinforced by the fact that, over the past decade, two dictators who ended their nuclear programs have lost their regimes and their lives. As a result, authoritarian leaders may now have an increasingly personal interest in holding on to their nuclear ambitions. U.S. interests can be advanced by minimizing the association that has developed over the past decade between ending nuclear weapons programs, ending regimes, and ending authoritarian leaders' lives.

The role that nuclear weapons play in international politics and security is evolving. Crucially, these changes are manifesting themselves in competing ways for two different groups of countries. For wealthy, militarily powerful countries, nuclear weapons are playing a smaller role in security planning. Advanced conventional military capabilities are more discriminating and more usable than nuclear weapons. Conversely, countries that cannot defend themselves against these advanced Western military capabilities may see nuclear weapons as increasingly important, or desirable, for their security. These differences are reinforced by the fact that, over the past decade, two authoritarian leaders who gave up nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD)

programs—Saddam Hussein and Muammar Qaddafi—have been overthrown and killed, whereas two others—Kim Jong Un and Bashar al-Assad—have leveraged their limited WMD programs to support the survival of their regimes.

These dynamics pose challenges for U.S. non-proliferation policy, complicate U.S. relations with the Middle East and Asia, and will act as an irritant in the U.S.-Russia relationship. The Obama administration cannot avoid these challenges completely, but it can take steps to limit the negative effects that go along with these trends. Such efforts will require discretion and sometimes restraint in the use of military force, as well as careful diplomacy. One aim of this strategy should be to minimize

the association that has developed over the past decade between ending nuclear weapons programs, ending regimes, and ending authoritarian leaders' lives.

## BACKGROUND

For a small number of technologically advanced countries with strong conventional militaries—especially the United States—nuclear weapons are diminishing in importance. Advanced conventional military capabilities are more discriminating and more usable than nuclear weapons. It is difficult to imagine, 20 years after the end of the Cold War, a realistic geopolitical-military scenario that would lead the United States to seriously consider using nuclear weapons. The United States faces many problems in the world. None of them can be solved by using nuclear weapons.

The perspective of many powers hostile to the United States, however, is very different, as recent history has shown:

- In March 2003, the United States invaded Iraq, motivated by the belief that Iraq possessed active WMD development programs.
- In December 2003, observing how dangerous it had just become to possess a WMD development program, Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi struck a deal with the United States and agreed to give up its nuclear and chemical weapons programs.
- Nearly four years later, in September 2007, Israel bombed an incomplete Syrian nuclear reactor that was allegedly being built for non-peaceful purposes with North Korean assistance.
- North Korea conducted its first nuclear test in 2006 and its second in 2009.

Since March 2003, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has been deposed and hanged. Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi has been overthrown by the Libyan people with extensive Western support, and killed by a mob in his own hometown. And Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad has—successfully, as of this writing—deterred Western intervention, in his own country in part by threatening to use his remaining stocks of chemical weapons. Meanwhile, in North Korea, the country underwent a peaceful leadership transition from late 2011 to early 2012 when Kim Jong Un became Supreme Leader following the death of his father, Kim Jong Il.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The precise impact that the divide highlighted above will have upon the next Obama administration's policy agenda will depend to a large extent on its policy goals, the future of the U.S. economy, and geopolitical forces beyond the direct control of the United States. Three of the most important implications, related to the Middle East, Asia, and Russia, bear watching.

First, the leadership of countries that harbor nuclear ambitions—particularly Iran and North Korea—may cling harder to those ambitions. Having watched what happened recently in Iraq, Syria, and Libya, authoritarian leaders by now understand that, although having a nuclear weapons development program involves the risk of military action and crippling sanctions, leaders who do acquire nuclear or other WMD capability have a much freer hand to violently put down domestic dissent and stir up trouble in their regions. Perhaps more importantly, they may increasingly believe that giving up a nuclear or other WMD program may be a death sentence.

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Countries have long looked to nuclear weapons as guarantors of national sovereignty; however, the past decade has seen the development of a visible association between nuclear programs and national leaders’ personal fates. It is natural to assume that leaders’ interest in their own fate in addition to their nation’s fate will be a more powerful motivator than their interest in their nation’s fate alone. If this association gains traction, this new, personal dimension to nuclear policies may hamper the Obama administration’s efforts to halt or roll back Iran’s and North Korea’s nuclear programs.

Second, nuclear politics, combined with existing challenges in both the Middle East and Asia, will force the Obama administration to perform a difficult multilateral political, diplomatic, and military balancing act in these regions. Although little evidence supports the theory that Iran’s continuing nuclear ambitions and North Korea’s growing nuclear capability could touch off regional ‘proliferation cascades,’ both countries’ activities are likely to force the United States to work harder to assure its jittery friends and allies in the Middle East and Asia that it will stand with them, even in the face of hostile, nuclear-armed powers. This pressure has already led the United States to respond by deepening its political, diplomatic, and political engagement with

regimes that feel threatened, much as the United States deepened its engagement in Europe following World War II. But the world situation is much more complicated now.

In the Middle East, the United States will need to achieve its goals of dissuading Iran from developing nuclear weapons, restraining Israel, and reassuring surrounding Arab states, even as the medium- and long-term consequences of the Arab Spring and its effects on U.S. relations and influence in the region remain unclear. In Asia, the United States will need to find ways to deter North Korea from using its nuclear capability, and to reassure its allies in the region, without irritating the complex and sensitive U.S. relationship with China.

Third, U.S. relations with Russia will continue to be negatively influenced by the divide over the value of nuclear weapons and their role in international politics. Forces such as Russia’s conventional military decline have elevated the role of nuclear weapons in its security calculus. This trend is reflected in Russia’s ongoing program of modernizing and improving its nuclear arsenal. The chief symptom of this divide thus far has been U.S.–Russian tensions over ballistic missile defense, but it has other implications as well.

Both Iran and North Korea are working to develop nuclear-capable ballistic missiles that could threaten U.S. allies in the Middle East and Asia and, in the future, possibly the continental United States itself. The U.S. response has been to field a continuously improving ballistic missile defense system that would shield the United States and its allies.

Russia, unable to build a comparable system on its own, worries that a U.S. missile shield could blunt the effectiveness of its own strategic nuclear forces. Russia fears that this would upset the stable deterrent relationship that has existed between the United States and Russia for more than 50 years.

Ballistic missile defense has become a major bone of contention in U.S.-Russia relations which, if left unresolved, could reduce bilateral cooperation in spheres of mutual interest, including continued progress in nuclear arms control negotiations, counter-terrorism, cyber security, and Afghanistan and Pakistan.

## CONCLUSION

American nuclear policy is organically connected with other U.S. political, foreign, and security interests around the world. Advanced conventional weapon capabilities have helped countries such as the United States deemphasize nuclear weapons, but those capabilities may cause nations that cannot compete on the high-tech battlefield to cling to their nuclear ambitions. This dynamic will have important spillover effects beyond nuclear policy to include the full range of foreign and security policy in the Middle East, Asia, Russia, and elsewhere.

To navigate this complicated terrain, the Obama administration will need to exercise careful diplomacy, along with discretion and sometimes restraint in the use of military force. The long-term interests of the United States will be served by a policy agenda that minimizes or pushes into the past the association that has developed over the past decade between ending nuclear weapons programs, ending regimes, and ending authoritarian leaders' lives.

**Tim McDonnell** is an associate with the Nuclear Proliferation International History Project. He can be reached at [Timothy.McDonnell@wilsoncenter.org](mailto:Timothy.McDonnell@wilsoncenter.org)

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Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars  
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza  
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20004-3027

