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.

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—es-
pecially 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

Since March 2003, Iraqi President Saddam Hus-
sein 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 administra-
tion’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 implica-
tions, related to the Middle East, Asia, and Russia,
be 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 impor-
tantly, they may increasingly believe that giving up
a nuclear or other WMD program may be a death
sentence.
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.

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