

NATO reform critical to the Obama Administration's nuclear disarmament agenda

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As international support for the phased and verified elimination of nuclear weapons gathers pace several key regional security relationships hold the key to progress. In terms of building initial momentum, none is more important than the US/NATO-Russian transatlantic relationship. Most attention in Washington is focused on the bilateral US-Russian relationship, but the broader Alliance could have a powerful restraining influence on Obama's ambitions for progress.

Russia's cautious but positive response to President Obama's Prague speech gives grounds for optimism, but major hurdles remain. As Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said in a speech in Helsinki a number of conditions remain, including US plans for a missile shield in Europe and "making it impossible to compensate for a cut in nuclear arms by building up of conventional forces". Medvedev also pointedly repeated Moscow's call for a new security pact to replace NATO.

Obama will be keen to reassure allies, but it is important for NATO to be flexible and recognise the opportunities in play here. The tone and emphasis coming out of the Administration on NATO matters could play an important role in changing perspectives and Alliance policy.

Russian concerns about NATO superiority in conventional forces and the potential further eastwards expansion of NATO could well stymie progress on US-Russian nuclear disarmament talks beyond any simple extension of the START treaty. Planned NATO military exercises in Georgia have already resulted in Moscow threatening to cancel the Russia-NATO meeting of general heads of staff planned for early May

A crowded international fixture list (including G20 and EU-US Summits), understandable preoccupations with the global financial crisis and divisions within NATO meant that the 60th Anniversary NATO Summit in Strasbourg largely passed without notice. NATO leaders adopted a rather tame Declaration on Alliance Security reaffirming the basic values, principles and purposes of the NATO Alliance. They also appointed Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen as the next Secretary General and launched the process to develop a new Strategic Concept, a document that will define NATO's longer-term role in the new security environment of the 21st century.

The process for developing a new Strategic Concept in NATO needs to be linked to the Obama Administration's change agenda. NATO's new vision and mission must include Russia as a real and meaningful partner. Civil society groups meeting at a Shadow NATO Summit in Brussels at the end of March launched two new initiatives towards these ends (the conference proceedings will be published shortly). First, a Citizens Declaration of Alliance Security set out the basic principles for reforming NATO to meet the different and diverse challenges of this 21st century. These core principles include achieving security without weapons of mass destruction and at lower levels of armaments, adopting a 'responsibility to protect' agenda as well as reconnecting with citizens by creating a more open, transparent and accountable Alliance. The Declaration is being used to start a NATO-wide, civil society-led public consultation on a new Strategic Concept.

Second, a new project - NATO Watch – has been established to facilitate this civil society consultation process and to provide independent monitoring, information and analysis of policy-making and operational activities within NATO. This includes a NATO policy network (which we hope will eventually include at least one 'NATO Watcher' in each member state) and an annual 'shadow' NATO summit. The aim is to increase transparency, stimulate parliamentary engagement and broaden public awareness and participation

in NATO policy-making.

As Gareth Evans, former Foreign Minister of Australia, said at the Shadow NATO Summit, “NATO has still not worked out, in the post–Cold War world, what kind of organization it wants to be, and there is bound to remain a degree of both external hostility and internal division until it does”. Choosing the right reform path for NATO will also play a major role in shaping progress towards Global Zero.

Ian Davis, Founding Director, NATO Watch and Paul Ingram, Executive Director, BASIC.

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