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Obama Needs Friends on Nuclear Weapons

by Douglas Roche

When President Barack Obama chairs a summit of the UN Security Council Sept. 24 on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, a new and exciting moment will have arrived in the long struggle to rid the world of nuclear weapons. This unprecedented event gives Canada a rare political opportunity to obtain several political goals with one stroke.

We must understand how high the stakes are in this new round of the nuclear poker game. Unlike his predecessors, President Obama has moved nuclear disarmament to the centre of US foreign policy. He said in his Prague speech in April that he has a "commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons." He has re-launched nuclear negotiations with Russia, stated that he will "aggressively pursue" US ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), started work on a verifiable fissile material ban, and announced he will host a global summit on nuclear security next spring.

All this will prepare the US for a leadership role at the 2010 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, preparations for which have already been energized by the stunning U-turn in US nuclear diplomacy. From being the biggest obstacle to nuclear disarmament, the US, under Obama, is poised to become a vigorous proponent.

The nuclear weapons abolition movement sees news rays of hope.

But wait a minute. A landmine is waiting to trip up Obama. The nuclear defenders, led by the military-industrial complex and their Congressional spokespersons, are by no means succumbing to the aspirations of their president. They are determined that the US maintain what they call a "safe, secure, effective and reliable nuclear deterrent."

Former US defense secretary Jim Schlesinger is trying to frame the all-important US Nuclear Posture Review, now being brought up to date, around the concept of "extended deterrence." The US, it is argued, needs an effective, if smaller, nuclear arsenal to counter a nuclear threat anywhere.

This means that the US would keep its nuclear weapons to protect not only itself but its allies who do not possess nuclear weapons. In other words, so the argument goes, the US would be weakening itself and also letting down its friends if it gave up its nuclear weapons. If Schlesinger & Co. can get "extended deterrence" written into the new Nuclear Posture Review, scheduled for publication in December, this will stop Obama cold in his quest for a nuclear weapons-free world.

The nuclear defenders have already signalled that they will not oppose US ratification of the CTBT if they get "extended deterrence" codified. This will allow them to modernize US nuclear arsenals indefinitely through lab work rather than explosive testing. They think this "carrot"—CTBT ratification—will be enough to get the US safely through the 2010 NPT Review.

A huge fight is looming because Obama knows he cannot be left in an incoherent position: calling for a nuclear weapons-free world while the US modernizes its nuclear arsenal on the supposed grounds that it must do so to protect

its allies. This is but a perpetuation of the two-class nuclear world and is completely unsustainable in the 21st century.

There is only one way to prevent North Korea and Iran and any other aspiring nuclear state from acquiring nuclear weapons, and that is through a global, verifiable ban on all nuclear weapons. Putin of Russia and Singh of India, to name just two of the other leaders of nuclear powers, understand this and are ready to move to comprehensive negotiations toward a global ban. In Obama, we see for the first time the abolition of nuclear weapons moving from aspiration to the strategic centre.

This final dismantling of the Cold War architecture will be a Herculean task. Fearmongers who pretend nuclear weapons bring security will shout from the rooftops. Though such former US officials as Henry Kissinger and George Schultz have given their support to the abolition of nuclear weapons, they have been countered by others, such as Richard Perle and Sen. John Kyle, who are urging the US to keep nuclear weapons "for the foreseeable future."

In short, Obama, no matter how well motivated, cannot bring us to a nuclear weapons-free world alone. In addition to powerful domestic support, he needs strong international backing. The countries that are friends of the US—those very states that are said to be depending on the US nuclear umbrella—now need to speak up and blow away the phony "extended deterrence" argument. This brings us to Canada.

A nuclear weapons-free world has always been a value and a goal of Canada. We have been prevented from fully exercising that value because of the need to support the US, which until now has always wanted to maintain its nuclear stocks. Suddenly, the Obama moment gives Canada an opening to demonstrate its seriousness in nuclear disarmament.

The Harper government must be urged to recognize the importance of this moment. Sadly, the government seems tongue-tied. There is no program of work, no clear-cut statements from political leaders, and indeed the last round of UN voting showed Canada clinging to negative votes on time-bound measures for nuclear disarmament.

To me, this is politically incomprehensible. This is the very moment that Canada should be openly and loudly supporting the president of the United States (a posture that otherwise Canadians are accustomed to). Obama desperately needs the help of his friends. Let us give it to him. When Harper meets with Obama on Sept. 16 in Washington, the Canadian leader should put this support high on the agenda.

There's plenty of support in Canada for the prime minister to move: 280 recipients of the Order of Canada have called for international negotiations to achieve a Nuclear Weapons Convention, which would be a verifiable treaty on the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons; four major peace groups (Canadian Pugwash, Science for Peace, Physicians for Global Survival and Voice of Women) are planning a "Zero Nuclear Weapons" forum at Toronto City Hall Nov. 13-14 where the keynote speaker will be the pre-eminent author Jonathan Schell; the Canadian Network to Abolish Nuclear Weapons is scheduling a major meeting in Ottawa in January.

Besides this public support, there are a couple of other political points the government might consider. If Canada wants to reject any overtures from the US and NATO to extend our combat role in Afghanistan beyond 2011, how better to match this rejection than with whole-hearted support for Obama's nuclear disarmament plans. And then there's the matter of Canada wanting a seat on the UN Security Council. Would there be a better demonstration of our sense of international responsibility than playing a serious role with Obama and other like-minded states in working actively to make a reality the vision of a world without nuclear weapons? In politics, that's called win-win.

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Order of Canada Recipients Who Want a Nuclear Weapons Convention

Bruce Aikenhead	Bonnie Cappuccino	Sorel Etrog	Raymond Heimbecker	Edmond Landry	Michael Marrus	Walter Ostrom	Claude Roussel	Murray Thomson
Lincoln Alexander	Fred Cappuccino	Paul Fazio	Gerald Helleiner	Eva Landry	Elizabeth May	Bridglal Pachai	Jean-Louis Roux	Shirley Thomson
Mary Allodi	Robert Carsen	Paterson Ferns	David Helwig	Michele Landsberg	Gordon McBean	Charles Pachter	Muriel Rent Roy	Kenneth Thorlakson
Richard Alway	Adlan Carswell	Sheila Fischman	Martha Henry	Dennice Leahey	Don McKay	Daniel Paul	Susan Rubes	Setsuko Thurlow
Fernand Arseneault	Joan Chalmers	James Fleck	Meg Hickling	Claude LeBoufflier	Audrey McLaughlin	Timothy Parsons	Ann Saddlemeyer	Vincent Towell
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Lloyd Aworthy	Victor Cicarsky	Morris Flewelling	Margaret Hilson	Viola Léger	Roy McMurty	Landon Pearson	Annette Saint-Pierre	Peter Trueman
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Harvey Banks	Michael Clague	Maegot Franssen	Myer Horowitz	David Leighton	Alexander Meisels	Walter Pitman	William Schabas	Tony Urquhart
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