The Moral Responsibility of the United States: Reading Barack Obama’s Prague Speech

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Hradcany Square

Shortly after taking office, President Barack Obama visited Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, and delivered a 28-minute speech to a crowd of over 20,000 in Hradcany Square, starting at sometime past 10:00 a.m. on April 5, 2009. According to the White House Press Office, the speech was part of “a strategy to address the international nuclear threat.”[1] In his remarks, the president said that for its atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki the US has a “moral responsibility to act” to bring about a world without nuclear weapons. This is an historic landmark in American politics. Not only did the president set forth a strategy to address the nuclear threat to nuclear powers and allies, but he also pledged to the world’s people that the US bears a “moral responsibility to act.”

For two days, beginning on April 6th, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace hosted the 2009 Carnegie International Nonproliferation Conference, “The Nuclear Order—Build or Break,” in Washington, DC, with the attendance of over 840 people from 46 countries, including high-ranking government officials, policy and technology experts, academics, and journalists.[2] But at least from listening to and reading through the record released on the website, there was not a single panelist who delved deeply into what “moral responsibility” the US has for having used atomic bombs, or into the nature of that responsibility and how it should be assumed. Was this because it was a “nonproliferation conference”? Or was it because Obama’s new thinking was absent from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’s plan from the outset?

President Obama’s Prague speech forces the world’s people to consider the moral responsibility for using nuclear weapons that the US has admitted to and accepts, so that humankind may survive the current nuclear age and into the future. When it is perceived in this way, the Prague remarks have a significance for the history of humankind. I can say this: The responsibility spoken of here is a new responsibility for the nuclear age, and is also the biggest responsibility. Well, then, what are the moral, political, and legal meanings of this new responsibility for the nuclear age? That is what I want to explore. If the verb “read” in my subtitle, “Reading Barack Obama’s Prague Speech,” is taken to mean decipher, then that would mean “read while interpreting.” And interpretation is also the task of pinning down the meaning of words within a certain context. Following a correct interpretation is a necessary condition for correct practice. I shall now proceed to the subject at hand with that awareness.

Getting to the Heart of Obama’s Remarks

Obama’s speech contains the following two paragraphs:

Just as we stood for freedom in the 20th century, we must stand together for the right of people everywhere to live free from fear in the 21st century. (Applause.) And as nuclear power — as a nuclear power, as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon, the United States has a moral responsibility to act. We cannot succeed in this endeavor alone, but we can lead it, we can start it.

So today, I state clearly and with conviction America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons. (Applause.) I’m not naive. This goal will not be reached quickly -- perhaps not in my lifetime. It will take patience and persistence. But now we, too, must ignore the voices who tell us that the world cannot change. We have to insist, “Yes, we can.”
There have been only two other times when the president of the United States proposed the abolition of nuclear weapons. Harry Truman, in his proposal to the United Nations General Assembly in 1946, just after the Second World War, argued for putting all nuclear energy under international control, and using it solely for peaceful purposes, but it did not come to pass. The Soviet Union under Stalin had decided to develop the atomic bomb and had no interest in accepting that proposal. The second such proposal was made at the Reykjavik Summit in Iceland in 1986. U.S. president Ronald Reagan and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev came within an ace of agreeing to full nuclear disarmament, but it fell through because of Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative. Reagan wanted to persist with the SDI, which was unacceptable to Gorbachev. Since that time it has been generally agreed that the nuclear deterrence strategy is unavoidable for the greatest civilizations.

On this recent occasion, Obama stated unequivocally to the world that the US has a moral responsibility to act to bring about a world without nuclear weapons. He admitted the “responsibility of the US” at a time when the survival of humanity is an urgent imperative. This is the third such proposal by a US president, and a landmark in US political history. But that is not all — it is a landmark event in the history of the world and the history of humankind. What does this mean? Some people express views which earnestly praise the proposal, but there are doubts about whether that alone is all right. I would like to read the implications of these words in the context of the nuclear age.

The Nuclear Age at Present

More than a year before the nuclear age began, the Danish nuclear physicist Niels Bohr foresaw the terrifying destructive power of the nuclear bombs under development, and discerned that it would create a world where humankind faced a crisis of extinction.

So, what is the nuclear age? As this is related to views of history, it is a matter of whether historians recognize the concept of a nuclear age. Those who started working with this concept early were natural scientists (such as Albert Einstein, Hideki Yukawa, Mitsuo Taketani, and Toshiyuki Toyoda), the literati (Kenzaburo Oe), and international political scientists (Yoshikazu Sakamoto). A historical scientist dealing with this was Seiji Imahori, but in historical science it appears that this concept has yet to gain acceptance. However, the concept of the nuclear age should be clearly specified in the history of philosophy, as argued by the philosopher and sociologist Shingo Shibata in the January 1984 issue of the Journal of Historical Studies.

The concept of the nuclear age can be described as follows along the lines of Shibata’s summary.

- The emergence of the milestone scientific revolution called nuclear physics
- The emergence of nuclear energy as a technological revolution by applying nuclear physics
- Existing production relationships — including that of existing socialism — cannot mesh
- Therefore, the political superstructure — including that of existing socialism — cannot mesh
- Further, ideologies cannot mesh, and people are bound by old-fashioned ways of thinking
- As a result, the rulers and power-holders of the nuclear powers are capable of using nuclear energy only as the absolute violence of nuclear weapons, or more accurately, a “world system for exterminating humanity.”
- Such an age may perhaps be specified as a time when all life and cultures go extinct, and history ends.

This is how Shingo Shibata explained how the “nuclear age” concept comes into existence based on the “formula of the materialistic view of history,” but he said he wanted people to understand that the formula itself requires a number of reservations. He made the following statement on “the possibilities of world history” in 1980:
Since August 6, 1945 the history of the world has been that of unlimited struggle between “the first crime of humankind’s extinction” and “acts to stop humankind’s extinction.” […] We must re-conceive world history as a struggle between the two possibilities of “extinction” and “survival,” reform the image of world history, mobilize all of humankind in a “mobilization for survival,” and by that means abolish the “world system for exterminating humanity.” [7]

There is something here which appeals to people who are living the present as historical entities: We are shown the importance of choosing the theme of social struggle in the real world by knowing the world-history possibilities of the nuclear age.

Here is how I see it. At this time, 64 years after the atomic bombings, the Soviet Union nuclear superpower has already been dismantled. Nuclear weapons, that is, the “world system for exterminating humanity,” have brought forth a new view of the “nuclear threat” among the rulers and power-holders of the US nuclear superpower. The US and Russia together have 95% of the world’s nuclear weapons, but the current situation no longer allows their maintenance. At the same time, it has also become evident that the existence and reinforcement of nuclear weapon systems can no longer avoid the intensification of contradictions in domains such as imperial economy, politics, society, and culture. The US dollar, which has been the key currency of the post-Second World War world, is no longer subject to the management and control of the US government amid economic globalization, and that created an unprecedented financial crisis. This indicates that the conditions for the continuation of the US-style capitalist system no longer exist. Can the mode of control by the capitalist system stop the advance of a global panic by transitioning from the G8 to the G20? In this nuclear age it appears that the prospect for sustainable development has vanished, and nuclear weapons could suddenly bring the end of human society. In this context, the sense of crisis about humankind’s survival, including the “nuclear threat”[8] as a catalyst to help realization, was partially reflected in Obama’s Prague speech.

A New Issue in the Debate on Responsibility

Various religious, political, scientific, and legal institutions have contributed to the debate surrounding the issue of nuclear arms and responsibility to date. The Vatican, for example, clearly interested in questions of morality, lamented the atomic bombing of Hiroshima immediately after it happened – much earlier than other European or North American institutions; however, the Catholic Church’s stance on the responsibility for the bombing is still somewhat unclear. For their part, the Japanese government (the government of the Japanese Empire) issued a statement saying that the “new type of bomb” violated present international law on war.

In time, scientists advocated a new theory of responsibility in various forms. A scientific view of social responsibility emerged, with a strong moral character[9] Beyond a general code of ethics for professional associations and the cultural influence of key scientific personalities such as Albert Einstein, however, scientific concepts of morality and responsibility regarding the creation and use of nuclear weapons have remained marginal to the legal and political debate.

Over 30 years after the 1963 Shimoda Case Decision in Japan, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), a specialized body of the UN, issued an advisory opinion in July 1996,[10] but legal scholars used a method of indentifying legal infringements associated with the bombings, and published research that affirmed the tort liability of the atomic bombings. [11] Further, an international people’s tribunal found that those who dropped the bombs had committed war crimes, and crimes against humanity.[12] A very small number of scholars of international law have long pointed out the criminality of using nuclear weapons.[13] But in the area of international law dealing with state responsibility, it appears that international law studies has yet to delve deeply into the matter of responsibility for nuclear weapons use.

On the usual thinking about responsibility, I would like to focus on the following point because I think it is important for an in-depth discussion on moral responsibility at this time:

Since early modern times human autonomy has been emphasized, and finally in the modern period, when
the “death of God” was pronounced, the essence of the concept of responsibility of course had to change. In considering responsibility as response, the question is who, to what, and before what… Further, as basic conditions for constituting responsibility, [the objectivity] of values and the identity of personal character are requirements. [14]

However, if one assumes that these two conditions cannot be advocated in a forceful manner, “it would be necessary to fundamentally transform thinking on values, personal character, and responsibility.” An example of that would be considering the responsibility for a war that happened before one was born. [15]

Incidentally, the 2009 Carnegie International Nonproliferation Conference, which I brought up at the beginning, had a panel discussion on its first day, April 6, called “International Expectations of the Obama Administration.” This lasted nearly an hour and 20 minutes, and one of the speakers (the second-from-last man) made the following statement:

I don’t represent any government, but since we are talking about challenges and international expectations before Obama administration, there are two discrete steps Obama administration can take. This first one does not require going to Senate. It just requires some executive order by the president of the United States. And that is extending of formal, sincere, unconditional apology to the people of Japan about use of nuclear weapons in their country. That would be one model confidence booster that will generate confidence in the rest of the world. And that action has not been taken after five decades of the first use. And actually it’s time for change and hope is now. It’s on President Obama to meet that kind of sincere, formal apology which U.S. government has not given so far. It’s symbolic, but it is important. [16]

The person spoke English with an Indian accent, and his name was inaudible, but I felt that he articulated one important way in which state responsibility for nuclear weapons might be assumed. There are two possible levels in the debate on responsibility for using nuclear weapons: that of moral responsibility, and that of state responsibility under international law. I hope that on both levels discussion will proceed further while taking a hint from the above statement.

Below I shall explore “the viewpoint of international law studies” and “political demands” for the purpose of gaining an awareness of the objectivity of new values, while learning from the achievements of axiology.

The Viewpoint of International Law Studies

International law studies divide the obligation for disarmament into two categories. One is related to substance, and is the “obligation for conclusion,” meaning the achievement of abolishing nuclear weapons. The other is procedural, and is the obligation for an “implementation method” that will bring about this result, in other words, the obligation to negotiate in good faith. [17]

The obligation to bring about the result of nuclear disarmament was set forth in the 1996 International Court of Justice advisory opinion. This is shown with the term “unequivocal undertaking” in the 13 steps set forth by the 2000 NPT RevCon. Obama’s April 5th speech has the possibility of linking with this “unequivocal undertaking,” specifically his statement that the US has a “moral responsibility to act” for nuclear disarmament.

Next, it is important to note that the duty to negotiate in good faith also appears in the ICJ advisory opinion, and is expressed in the 13 steps with the words “systematic and progressive efforts” to reduce nuclear weapons. Another job with regard to Obama’s speech will perhaps be to understand his words “responsibility to act” in connection with this obligation, or interpret them in relation to it.

But because Obama’s speech goes no further than identifying a “moral responsibility,” much caution is required on this point. The task we are presented with is to once again undo the connections of the concept “responsibility” with the distinctions of morality, politics, and law, examine it logically, and build it anew. At the same time, another urgent and crucial task with regard to the nuclear weapons system, that is, the “world system for exterminating humanity,” is to conduct an historical inquiry from a history-of-humankind perspective aimed at
abolishing nuclear weapons.

Political Demands

There is the question of what, for the time being, discharging the “responsibility to act” would entail. For example, after Obama, in his speech, calls for further nuclear arms reductions by the US and Russia, he says that “we will seek to include all nuclear weapons states in this endeavor.” But Obama mentions nothing about his thoughts on when he would propose convening all nuclear weapons states for nuclear disarmament negotiations. He has indeed said that he will hold an international summit meeting next year to address the nuclear threat. But what is the substance of this pledge? We need an answer to the question of whether that summit will concentrate on the nonproliferation or nuclear weapons, or recognize that nonproliferation and complete nuclear disarmament are closely linked, and indivisible. [18]

David Krieger, president of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, makes a proposal for this conference to be held by Obama: “Organize to convene a meeting of all nuclear weapons states prior to the 2010 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference to negotiate a new treaty for the phased, verifiable, irreversible and transparent elimination of nuclear weapons.” As a statement that in a political sense makes good use of the core of Obama’s remarks, I think this is an appropriate proposal.

After Obama had been elected but before his inauguration, the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation proposed a 100-Day Nuclear Disarmament Agenda for the first 100 days of the Obama Administration. This agenda had three areas: First, “secure loose nuclear materials from terrorists”; second, “strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty”; and third, “move toward a nuclear free world.”

As soon as Obama took office, his administration published an agenda on the third area. The agenda established the goal of a nuclear weapons-free world, and said that the administration would pursue it. On April 1, in London, President Obama had his first talk with Russia’s President Medvedev, and discussed nuclear disarmament and reductions. They agreed to perform their duties under Article 6 of the NPT. That was followed on April 5 by the landmark speech in Prague.

However, the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation expressed concerns about these two commitments: (1) “These include [Obama’s] indication that the timeframe for achieving a world without nuclear weapons may be a long one, perhaps not in his own lifetime”; (2) “his emphasis on nuclear deterrence in the interim, although without indicating who is being deterred”; and (3) his full support for nuclear energy for the development of renewable energy sources [19].

These three are serious concerns about the Obama Administration until early April. Much wisdom and concrete action will be needed to put those concerns to rest. Such a struggle is being steadily advanced at the currently in-session Preparatory Committee meeting for the 2010 NPT Review Conference. [20]

Conclusion

The core of Obama’s Prague speech is revealed in the following words: “The United States has a moral responsibility to act [to bring about a nuclear weapons-free world].” The doctrine of responsibility appearing in these words is the first such commitment that has been public acknowledged by the US in the nuclear age. In the sense that it will be of use in spreading the objectivity of a new value — assuring the survival of humankind — it could define a new era in world history.

Unfortunately, the doctrine of responsibility itself is merely words, and is further limited to morality. Furthermore, throughout this speech as a whole, the overall message is that maintaining the status quo will be the Obama administration’s way of dealing with the “nuclear threat” for the time being in the areas of military affairs and diplomacy, or politics, law, and culture. The Prague speech demonstrates hardly any proper awareness regarding the essential nature of the nuclear age.

As such, what is the question being put to us? It is the job of accurately determining, in a certain context, the meanings that can be implied by this doctrine of moral responsibility. Moreover, a policy-formation awareness
is also needed. That would, for example, extend from the US budget[21] Quadrennial Defense Review, Nuclear Posture Review, and the like to dismantling the very “world system for exterminating humanity.” Only when we actively link this doctrine of moral responsibility to the doctrine of political and legal responsibility will it have the enormous significance it should. [22]

References


Footnotes


[8] It is notable that according to the White House, Obama’s Prague speech “announced a strategy to address the international nuclear threat.”


[12] Held by the Executive Committee of the International Peoples’ Tribunal on the Dropping of Atomic Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on July 15–16, 2006, it found that the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were serious “war crimes” and also brutal “crimes against humanity.” The entire text of the judgment was handed down on July 16, 2007. See:


[15] For example, if one looks for the characteristics of Obama’s doctrine of moral responsibility, one characteristic would specifically be the link with the doctrine of responsibility in Christianity. This approach should be used in a careful examination of whether the The World Crisis and American Responsibility (1974, first edition 1958), by Reinhold Niebuhr, a Protestant theologian who served as President Truman’s unofficial advisor, upholds the preexisting thinking on this kind of responsibility, or changes it fundamentally.


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