President Obama and a Nuclear Weapons-Free World: A Dialogue

David Krieger and Richard Falk

Krieger: The last time that we got together to discuss nuclear weapons issues we were still in the final year of the Bush administration. Our dialogue focused on being at the nuclear precipice. We were reflecting on whether we were headed toward catastrophe or transformation. Now the Bush administration has left office, and been replaced by the Obama administration. President Obama has made a number of statements that reflect a different tone and a different set of objectives than were being pursued by the Bush administration. The question that I’d like to explore with you today is this: How seriously should we take the changes that are being proposed by the Obama administration? Do you see these proposals as a serious turning away from catastrophe toward transformation?

Falk: I think that this is a much more hopeful time to consider these various issues bearing on nuclear weapons and, at the same time, it’s a rather confusing and complicated time. Of course it’s appropriate and accurate, I think, to welcome the kind of rhetorical leadership that President Obama has so far exhibited, particularly in his Prague speech of April 5th. One has to hope that this is more than a rhetorical posture, but represents, as he said in the speech it did, a serious commitment to take concrete steps toward the objective of a world free from nuclear weapons. But one has to look at two other factors here that make me, at any rate, somewhat less optimistic about the real tangible results. The first is the continuing confrontation with Iran as a potential nuclear weapon state on the unspoken assumption that we still will be living in a world where some countries are allowed to have those weapons and others are forbidden. It would be a very different confrontation, from my perspective, if it was coupled with a call for a Middle East free from nuclear weapons altogether or a dual call to Israel and Iran that would take account of the existence of a nuclear weapon state in the region already. But as far as I can tell there is no disposition to do that.

A second concern, it seems to me, is the degree to which the bureaucratic roots of the nuclear weapons establishment are still very deep in the governmental structure and very dedicated, as near as I can tell, to pursuing a path that has some of President Obama’s rhetoric, but really aims at managing and stabilizing the nuclear weapons arsenals of the world and, particularly, the US arsenal. This would, in that sense, maintain this geopolitical structure of a world where some have the weapons and supposedly the great danger comes from the countries that don’t have the weapons. I find that an untenable and basically unacceptable conception of world order in relation to this challenge posed by the continued existence of nuclear weaponry.

Krieger: You raise important concerns, and I think we should explore these. I’ve just returned from the 2009 Preparatory Committee Meeting for the 2010 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference. One of the things that I took note of there was that many of the countries in the Middle East were drawing attention to the fact that when the Non-Proliferation Treaty was extended indefinitely in 1995, at the same time there was a pledge on the part of all the parties to the NPT to work for a Middle East Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone. And these countries in the Middle East are now saying that in their view the indefinite extension of the treaty was contingent upon fulfilling the other promises that were made at the time, including a Middle East Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone. And these countries in the Middle East are now saying that in their view the indefinite extension of the treaty was contingent upon fulfilling the other promises that were made at the time, including a Middle East Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone. So I think that issue is going to have more and more salience because there are another dozen or so countries in the region that now want to pursue nuclear energy programs in their countries and are making reference to Article IV of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which calls for them to get assistance in doing so. With regard to nuclear weapons, the Middle East remains one of the more unsettled regions of the world.
I agree with you that it’s a significant problem that the United States and other leading countries in the world don’t make reference to Israel’s nuclear weapons, while at the same time trying to shut down Iran’s program. One way of interpreting what is going on with the new administration, with President Obama, is that he is saying the right things rhetorically to give the impression that the United States seeks a world free of nuclear weapons, but he is not yet prepared—and it’s a big yet—to make the difficult decisions that involve treating those we see as friends or potential foes with a single standard rather than a double standard. It is clear that if nonproliferation is an objective of the administration, it will not be obtained without doing away with double standards on the one hand and showing by action that the United States and other nuclear weapons states are serious about fulfilling their Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Article VI obligations of actually moving toward a nuclear weapons-free world within a reasonable timeframe.

Falk: That is all very persuasive, but even in the Prague speech there’s no hint of concern about this double standards problem as I read the speech. At a time when the new prime minister of Israel is visiting the United States and there is a discussion of the future of the relationship between our two countries, they talk about Iran and they talk about the Palestinians, but there’s no willingness to raise the question of the regional nuclear weapons-free zone. Nor is there pressure for Israel to do something about its nuclear weapons arsenal if it expects the United States to exert pressure on Iran to forego that option. And from the point of view of the region, it’s perfectly tenable to view Israel as a greater threat than Iran. Israel has attacked its neighbors on a few occasions, it has kept these weapons, it has even put them at the ready apparently in the 1973 war, and yet it’s been given a kind of silent pass as far as retaining its nuclear weapons arsenal. So it’s an important issue and I believe that it’s our role in civil society to raise those uncomfortable issues that Congress is obviously unwilling to raise, the media is not very willing to discuss, much less press the issue of double standards or Israel’s exemption from scrutiny with respect to nuclear weaponry. Unless independent voices in civil society raise these issues effectively they won’t be raised at all in my opinion.

Krieger: I agree with that. The question is: Should we be pushing for President Obama to call for a Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone in the Middle East and for Israel to be a party to that zone? Is that where our efforts should be focused, or should they be focused on taking some large steps, such as negotiating a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with Moscow? The United States and Russia have most of the nuclear weapons in the world, so that is where a good deal of progress could be made at this moment. Other issues have been stalled for the eight years of the Bush administration, including the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty, gaining control of loose nuclear materials, and dealing with the potential threat posed by nuclear weapons falling into the hands of non-state extremists. There is space at this time for considerable progress on those issues before moving to some of the tougher issues. I would put a Middle East Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone into that tougher issue category, and a Northeast Asian Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone as well, dealing with concerns in North Korea, South Korea, Japan and China. There are many practical questions, such as which issues should we be focusing on now, which ones can come later, as we actually move towards zero? There seems to be some momentum now, at least in comparison to what we’ve had for the Bush years and largely for the Clinton years as well.

Falk: Yes, I think certainly there is a case to be made in favor of moving forward on these avenues of arms reduction and stabilization that have been blocked over a period when the conservatives controlled security policy for the US. But I’m convinced that unless the difficult issues are raised alongside these other issues, they will never be raised, and there is, I think, a quite serious urgency in the Middle East, to some extent in the Indo-Pakistan region, central and south Asia, as well as in the Korean peninsula that you referred to. And maybe one perspective to bring into the debate about next steps is to talk about these kinds of regional conflict zones, because they pose immediate problems that could lead to serious deterioration. There is the possibility that Pakistan could come under the control of very extremist leadership and that India would be very nervous by such a development, and one could have the first war between nuclear weapon states easily taking place. So
I’m not convinced myself that these general denuclearizing steps should be privileged at this early stage of the Obama presidency. I think they should certainly be supported, but to allow them to dominate the political agenda at this stage is, in my view, a tactical as well as a strategic mistake.

Krieger: In the Prague speech, President Obama talked about the importance of moving toward a world free of nuclear weapons, but he didn’t really indicate that it was something that needed to be done with a sense of urgency. He said something to this effect: “I’m not naïve; this may take a long time. It may not happen within my lifetime.” Surely there is cause for concern in that lack of urgency because it’s a deferral of the end state until some time in a future that can’t yet be foreseen. And that’s a similar point of view to what former officials like Kissinger, Shultz, Perry, Nunn and others are also articulating. They think that a world free of nuclear weapons would be a good thing, but they can’t see “the top of the mountain,” as they put it.

Falk: I disagree with you a little bit there. I think there is a difference between the visionary approach embodied in Obama’s Prague speech and the very realist assessment of the status of nuclear weapons in the Kissinger, Shultz, Perry and Nunn statements. In their case, ironically, they see getting rid of nuclear weapons as a strategic benefit to the United States at this stage. They’re worried about the spread of nuclear weapons, which they don’t think can be contained by the present nonproliferation regime, and they further believe that any further proliferation will neutralize whatever benefits nuclear weapons have had up to this point in serving American security interests since the end of World War II. Kissinger initially made his career as a policy advisor on the basis of advocating the reliance on US military superiority when it comes to nuclear weapons in confronting the Soviet Union, even endorsing the Cold War idea of ‘limited nuclear war.’ I believe Kissinger hasn’t changed his worldview; he just sees, and I think probably correctly from a realist point of view, that the US military dominance would be less inhibited in a world without nuclear weapons.

Krieger: And the United States would be less threatened in a world without nuclear weapons because of the power imbalance that nuclear weapons make possible?

Falk: Yes.

Krieger: I agree with you that they’re looking at nuclear disarmament from a realist point of view, and I think their greatest concern is that nuclear weapons could end up in the hands of extremist groups, which could lead to the destruction of United States’ cities, inflicting serious harm on the country.

Falk: They’re also concerned about proliferation because they don’t want to see a lot of other countries having these nuclear weapons because then it would likely make the United States much more cautious in pursuing its overseas interests, especially when these involve military intervention. So it’s partly vulnerability, but it’s also partly military asymmetry that favors the United States that is at risk if further proliferation takes place.

Krieger: But nonetheless, I don’t see that they have articulated or even suggested that this is something that can be done relatively quickly. Mayors for Peace have an agenda that calls for a nuclear weapons-free world by the year 2020. The Kissinger group only talks, at this point, about building a base camp to get to the top of the mountain. It has not talked about achieving the goal by a certain time, or even delving into that to look at what might be needed. Two things are needed if there is going to be a serious attempt to go from where we are now to zero nuclear weapons—whether driven by the former officials’ view of the world or by President Obama’s view of the world. The two things that are needed are: first, political will to go beyond a rhetorical commitment to actual action; and second, US leadership. Without US leadership the project is going to be stalled. If the US doesn’t lead, Russia won’t be particularly inclined to change its reliance on nuclear weapons more than it is being
forced to do by economics, and other states won’t be pressed to move in that direction. So, I see the real starting point is the United States now moving from the rhetoric that Obama has put on the table to the actual steps that will move us closer to a nuclear weapons-free world, not only in numbers of weapons but in how we treat the weapons, how we view them in our strategic outlook, and how much we rely upon them militarily.

Falk: Yes, I think those are certainly good ways of assessing the motivations associated with whatever steps are advocated by the United States in its natural position of leadership. I am a little bit less convinced that the US has this special vocation of providing the leadership. The most successful setting for real momentum toward the goal of elimination would be for mutually reinforcing developments to occur in the other nuclear weapon states, because that would both create a kind of encouragement here as well as not make others suspicious that this was a kind of US tactical, Kissinger-like move to shift the pieces on the global chess board so as to give the US a tighter grip on world politics. So I would put a lot of emphasis on engaging the other nuclear weapon states in a more global process of denuclearization. I think it would be very good, for instance, to have speeches by other leaders that responded in some way to the Obama Prague speech, and to have civil society alerted and mobilized to a much greater extent than it is at present in these other countries to see this as a moment of opportunity—stark opportunity. I think as long as the climate in civil society is as passive as I believe it still remains, even here, there will not be much significant progress toward zero. There will be some progress toward stabilization and management and reducing the risks of unintended use of nuclear weapons or perhaps making them more secure in relation to non-state actors and other essentially managerial initiatives.

I believe quite strongly that without a movement from below there will be no challenge to the nuclear weapons establishment that is well situated in the governmental structure that operates from above. I think President Obama’s political style is very much one of responding to pressure and not being willing to take big political risks to get out ahead of what he regards as the relation of forces within society. I think he’s shown that in everything he’s done so far, including his appointments to important positions, the way he has handled the economic crisis, the way he has handled the Palestine-Israel conflict. In all these areas he’s taken a very low-risk, low-profile strategy except rhetorically.

Krieger: So that leaves us with an important question: Whether it’s possible to generate such a citizen movement around this issue? Of course, that’s the reason for being of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, and we’ve struggled with generating such a movement for 27 years and continue to struggle with it. I sense that Obama’s rhetoric has made our job somewhat easier because it has alerted people to the possibility that there may be some hope. I think the years of Bush and to a lesser extent also Clinton before him, were on the side of the scale that tipped toward despair. When you tip toward despair of change, it’s very difficult to engage people in action. So now, with Obama, because of his rhetoric, we have a better chance to build a movement from below. But, as you know, it’s a difficult challenge to get people to directly confront nuclear issues and believe that they can have an effective voice in those issues. Even for civil society groups, like ours, that have been engaged for nearly three decades, it’s not so easy to believe that we can have a strong influence on policy, partly for the reasons you mentioned earlier having to do with the entrenched bureaucracy that surrounds this issue and seeks to maintain at least some level of superiority, if not dominance, with regard to maintaining the weapons.

Falk: Yes, I think it is difficult, but unless that difficulty is overcome I think we have to guard ourselves against an orgy of wishful thinking because over this kind of issue it’s very difficult to achieve meaningful change unless there is a sufficiently altered climate of opinion in the society. Some of that has occurred, as you point out, but I think there’s a long way to go. It’s not an issue that currently is very high on the public’s agenda. There are other concerns that seem more immediate, and pressing, and in the past when the nuclear issue has become briefly prominent, the prominence has resulted from fear rather than hope. I don’t know how strongly a political pillar hope is as the basis of change.
I’m not sure about fear either, which evinces concern but not often any transformative actions. When one considers where and when change does occur and where and when it does not occur, it seems to me to be very dependent on some kind of significant mobilization of civil society that exerts pressure on the government and alters the way in which political officials in positions of responsibility understand and interpret these kinds of issues, and how they weigh the political consequences of their various policy options.

Krieger: Ordinary people need to understand that this is an issue of self-interest for them to push forward. But the complexities of the issue are such that it’s very hard for ordinary citizens of the United States, and I’m sure of other countries, to make informed decisions about what’s in their interest regarding nuclear weapons. There are important psychological issues at play. One, and this is long-standing, is a mistaken sense that nuclear weapons actually protect people. This idea has been sold by the nuclear weapons bureaucracy fairly well, so that people really have to stop and think to grasp that these weapons don’t protect them. In fact, nuclear weapons make them and their families vulnerable to a counterattack if they happen to live in a country that has these weapons. The other side of that coin is that when somebody like Obama comes along and says that he wants to move toward a world free of nuclear weapons, and it’s profoundly in America’s interest and the world’s interest to do so, the people who already have the glimmer of understanding that nuclear weapons aren’t in their interest are immediately mollified. They have the sense that the problem is now taken care of because the president tells us that he sees the problem and he is going to do something about it. They think that we can check that problem off and move on to more immediate and pressing problems having to do with the economy, health care, and other issues that are more tangible.

Falk: Yes, I think that’s a good way of describing the challenge and difficulty, and I think those of us that are involved in trying to make this rhetorical moment into a real political project are ourselves challenged to figure out what is the best way to do that. How do we take this rhetorical moment given to us by President Obama and in a different way by the Kissinger group, how do we make this into something that is more than rhetoric, that becomes a political project that envisions a real process that ends with the elimination of nuclear weapons? There’s no plausible reason that I understand why, if the project is meaningful at all, it needs to be treated as something that can only happen in the distant future. If it can happen at all, it can happen in a meaningful chronology that is well within the dimensions of a human generation, which allows for reliable verification of a disarming process, for confidence to be built and trust to be established, and for international institutions of inspection and verification to gain respect and experience. One way of testing the seriousness of the commitment to zero is to find, to concretize the process by which one moves from where we are to where we would like to be. As long as zero nuclear weapons remain purely an abstract goal, I’m very suspicious about the contribution of small steps taken to this goal, even if these steps are not so small from a stabilization perspective. Unless there is an influential roadmap to zero that has been adopted by political leaders and known to the public, I don’t believe these steps are likely to lead us toward the elimination of nuclear weapons.

Krieger: I think a roadmap is a litmus test of whether a country is serious. If you say you want a world with no nuclear weapons, the logical next step is to figure out how we get from here to there. That’s been done by civil society groups. They’ve worked out a Model Nuclear Weapons Convention, a treaty similar to the treaties banning chemical and biological weapons. I recently created a roadmap to satisfy my own curiosity about timeframes, and I think that a generous timeframe at the outer end would be somewhere around 17 years or perhaps 20 years. But, at the same time, with the proper political will and leadership, the elimination of nuclear weapons could be accomplished in a 10-year timeframe with far lower risks of cheating than currently exist. If there was a serious desire to move to zero nuclear weapons that was driven by an understanding that the people of any nation would be more secure in such a world, then I think it could happen relatively quickly. There would be adjustments that would be necessary, and it would open up a lot of discussion about changes in the international system so that some countries wouldn’t end up being bullied by those countries with the strongest conventional power. But you would end up, at a minimum, with an international system in
which nuclear weapons would not continue to threaten the destruction of civilization, if not the species, and that seems like an intelligent starting point for moving this project forward.

Falk: Yes, I think it is. It still raises the question of where an organization like the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation should put its major emphasis: Whether it should be primarily developing a framework and support for the process of total nuclear disarmament, or it should be reinforcing and encouraging the support for the initial steps in a denuclearizing process that would hopefully build some sense of momentum that would carry forward beyond that? I feel that one needs some rather clear benchmarks that would give the Obama presidency both a kind of test of whether the goal of zero is merely rhetorical, or whether it was something that they are willing to fight for politically. That’s why I would put stress both on the roadmap as something to be endorsed and look toward an early and largely symbolic renunciation by the United States of discretion to use these weapons as instruments of statecraft. That’s why I feel the No First Use declaration by the U.S. would be an extremely significant affirmation of the claim that Obama is pursuing nuclear disarmament as well as reviving nuclear arms control. I think such a pledge would also encourage other nuclear weapon states to join us—if the US has made a firm commitment to not use these weapons as instruments of statecraft, but temporarily retained only as instruments kept available for ultimate survival purposes until the end point of a roadmap is achieved.

Krieger: For the United States to commit publicly to limiting the use of its nuclear weapons under any circumstances to retaliation for a nuclear attack, that it was adopting a No First Use policy, would be a major step forward in demonstrating actual leadership toward diminishing the military importance of nuclear weapons. Once there’s been sufficient diminishment of the importance of the weapons in any country’s military doctrine, then it would seem to me that the next steps toward actual abolition would be much easier to take. China currently has a No First Use policy and it actually backs up that policy by not keeping its warheads attached to its delivery vehicles. It would have to put them together in order to use them. It has a declaratory policy that it will not under any circumstances use nuclear weapons first. India has made a statement similar to that. So, two of the nine nuclear weapon states have already taken this position. At one point, the former Soviet Union had that position as well, but when the United States refused to adopt that position and as the Soviet Union was losing conventional military power, it withdrew its No First Use pledge. It would be a significant area for leadership by the Obama administration to join China and India, and make a declaration of No First Use and urge others under our influence—which would include Britain, France, Israel and Pakistan—to adopt similar positions. I think that would be a landmark step from which a roadmap would certainly follow.

Falk: But you have to ask the question, because it seems so persuasive, why hasn’t it been proposed? It’s a no-brainer from a moral, legal, and political perspective to insist that if you are genuinely dedicated to a world without nuclear weapons such a step should be taken. It also follows from the 1996 International Court of Justice advisory opinion. It follows from any kind of moral calculus of the role of nuclear weapons, recollecting Hiroshima and Nagasaki, giving a sense of what it means humanly to use these weapons, and even to contemplate and plan for their use. So the refusal and the failure to move toward such a declaration has to raise questions about whether this whole rhetoric that President Obama has deployed, whether wittingly or unwittingly, is really a blueprint for stabilizing the nuclear weapons arsenals of the world so as to avoid accidental and unintentional use or the diversion of these weapons to non-state actors. These may be, no doubt are, desirable goals, but they should not be confused with a project to get rid of the weapons altogether. Until we have more indication from the Obama administration that their substantive commitments go beyond arms control, we should mount pressure to reinforce our enthusiasm for his visionary rhetoric.

Krieger: Another possibility is that President Obama doesn’t necessarily understand the implications of a first use policy. That may be an area he hasn’t considered to any serious extent because the issue of No First Use hasn’t come up in any of his statements. His administration has been more focused on bilateral engagement with Russia, strengthening the Non-Proliferation Treaty,
gathering up loose nuclear materials, and preventing terrorists from getting nuclear weapons. But it seems to me within the realm of possibility that even an intelligent individual like President Obama hasn’t given serious consideration to what it means to have a policy that allows for first use. I think he may understand that a policy that allows for preemptive use is a bad policy, but I wonder whether he fully understands the implications of a first use policy.

Falk: If this is a matter of oversight or ignorance, then it provides a good reason for anti-nuclear activists to convey a deeper understanding to the society as a whole and hopefully to the leadership in Washington. As I say, I think it’s a very good litmus test of what the real intentions are behind the advocacy of this new approach to nuclear weapons. The embrace of a No First Use posture would, it seems to me, a very specific departure from past American policy on nuclear weapons, and it would be a very powerful signal to other nuclear weapon states the US doesn’t intend any longer to base its military planning on a nuclear weapons dimension. Until that is done, there is an inevitable ambiguity as to what the US is up to in trying to prevent its adversaries from getting these weapons, while sheltering its friends from criticism about possessing them and continuing to develop them. What does it mean to enter a positive relationship with India on nuclear technology, which seemingly rewards the country for becoming a nuclear weapon state in defiance of nonproliferation goals? Such developments confirm that, as far as nuclear weapons are concerned, geopolitics is alive and well, and as long as it is alive and well, I don’t think there’s been a real break or rupture with past American approaches to its nuclear weapons agenda, and if this is the case, then it is time for vigilance and criticism, not cheerleading.

Krieger: Most of what you refer to and particularly the US-India agreement, for the United States to supply nuclear materials and technology to a known proliferator of nuclear weapons, occurred primarily under the Bush administration. So it’s too soon to tell whether that’s a policy that President Obama intends to follow.

I think we agree that a No First Use policy would be a strong signal to the world that the United States is serious about moving toward a nuclear weapons-free world. I think that we also agree that another signal would be for the United States to end its silence about Israel’s nuclear arsenal, and to be more proactive about a Middle East Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone.

Falk: A third point that I think is important is the serious commitment, either in collaboration with other governments or on our own, to develop a roadmap that sketched in a process that leads toward a world without nuclear weapons.

Krieger: I was just moving to that. One of the actions that President Obama called for in his Prague speech was a Global Summit on Nuclear Security. When he called for that global summit, what he was saying was in essence that we want to prevent nuclear terrorism. If this Global Summit on Nuclear Security could be broadened, it could be a really valuable project. The United States has the convening power to bring together the nations of the world that would be needed, including the nine nuclear weapons states, for such a global summit. These states could actually look at the security issues related to nuclear weapons in all their dimensions, including the dimension of the existing nuclear weapons in the hands of the nine nuclear weapons states, and the potential for accidents, proliferation, and all of the other security issues that nuclear weapons pose. It could include nuclear policy issues, such as No First Use. It seems to me that if the Global Summit on Nuclear Security were broadened, that could actually be the place to initiate a joint effort at developing a roadmap on the way to a new treaty that would lead, with the appropriate confidence-building measures and assurances against cheating, to the phased, verifiable, irreversible, and transparent elimination of nuclear weapons.

Falk: I suspect that there will be a lot of pressure to keep the global summit narrowly focused on the terrorist issue, making the argument that if the focus is diluted nothing will come out of the summit.
I think it’s important to bring into the discussion the role of the UN system and possibly regional groupings of states, as well as to look at what groups in civil society can do in relation to their own governments. One of the important achievements in the latter stages of the Cold War was the transnational peace movement in Europe, which had a very strong, positive effect on opposition politics in Eastern Europe and created a kind of collaboration that was often described as détente from below. A public climate of opposition was built through the mobilization of civil society that created a context able to take advantage of other opportunities for fundamental change. The most notable of these opportunities was presented by the new style of leadership in the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev. Important changes that were completely unanticipated began to take place. One has to try to think through the conditions under which a movement for the elimination of nuclear weapons can take shape and reinforce this kind of rhetorical initiative that President Obama has inserted into the whole dialogue on the role of nuclear weapons.

Krieger: His rhetoric provides a point of focus for civil society, a point of focus that wasn’t there previously. The question I’m wrestling with is this: How can we make use of that point of focus, how can we take it as a serious commitment on his part and enlist civil society to stand up and support it with a strong enough voice that, even if it was more rhetoric than intention on the part of the administration, they won’t be able to back away from the expectations that they've engendered? But, still, we’re faced with questions of how do we more effectively encourage more people to engage in this issue: How do we awaken people to the importance of the issue and the need to engage? I think already at some basic level most people would agree that we would be better off in a world without nuclear weapons. Then the question is: How do we get those people to engage in doing something about that and not simply deferring to leaders taking it in their own direction at their own pace? That would require a very proactive citizenry and a democracy that was really working. The Nuclear Age Peace Foundation was formed on the basis that democracy can work and, at its best, does work, and that people do awaken to issues of importance to themselves and don’t always act against their interests, but can find a way to act in their interests. I think our job continues to be to point out to more and more people and to create more enthusiasm for the idea that a world free of nuclear weapons is in the common interest of all Americans and all people of the world.

Falk: Yes, I completely agree, but we have to acknowledge that the place where democracy seems to be least effective is in relation to the national security agenda, and that ineffectiveness has been reinforced now for by decades of an essentially militarist state having emerged out of first World War II and then the long decades of the Cold War and intensified after 9/11. In all these situations, what one has observed is a continuity of a governmental structure that is organized around the primacy of using military power in the world. Eisenhower, of course warned long ago, about the military-industrial complex in his farewell address, but that’s almost 50 years ago and we now spend as much as the whole world put together on our military budget. It’s an extraordinary thing. I mean Defense Secretary Gates was quoted recently as saying that the American navy is stronger than the navies of the next 13 powers in the world, but despite this disparity we must still make it even stronger. One needs to understand that a leader like Obama is faced with that enormous antidemocratic, militarized, bureaucratic structure and that he would probably receive a vicious backlash from this military establishment if he makes clear that his advocacy in favor of eliminating nuclear weapons is intended to become a real political project. At the same time, such a move would be very, very reinforcing for his leadership and for US leadership, but it would almost certainly involve a fierce struggle with the national security bureaucracy and its links to the media and to certain think tanks and so on. I think this entrenched militarism is a formidable obstacle astride the path to a nuclear free world. It’s not so much just that the public is ill-informed; it is a matter of a hidden, unaccountable power structure that does not want to make basic changes. Incremental changes are acceptable, but seeking basic changes invariably arouses formidable bureaucratic resistance.

Krieger: We’ve seen some examples of that in the aftermath of Obama’s Prague speech. There have been a number of opinion pieces that have taken the position that Obama is engaging in a fantasy, that his thoughts on a nuclear weapons-free world are an illusion, that there’s no possibility of
achieving such a world, and that we should get back to reality as they see it. Their reality is based on the premises that we’re the dominant military power, we’ll continue to be so, and nuclear weapons are essential to that dominance. However, Obama’s rhetoric and his Prague speech seemed to be popular with a majority of Americans, if not with that bureaucratic elite. To succeed, what Obama probably needs to do is to enlist elements of the military in support of his position. That seems possible to me. Without knowing the players specifically, it seems to me that a military leader, as opposed to a civilian bureaucrat, would be less likely to think that nuclear weapons are useful as a matter of national defense to the United States.

Falk: Yes, I hope so. We’ll have to wait and see whether this issue is sufficiently alive on his policy agenda to elicit this sort of more constructive response and to what degree he follows up on the Prague rhetoric with a renewal of that kind of rhetoric, and gives evidence of a serious intention to move toward implementation. We need to recall that there have been past well-intentioned attempts by American leaders to talk about getting rid of nuclear weapons in a serious way. Jimmy Carter did it at his Notre Dame speech. Very early in his presidency he said he would work every day of his administration to get rid of nuclear weapons, but the backlash from the national security establishment was so strong that he dropped the issue altogether, and even moved in the opposite direction by issuing Presidential Directive 59, a thinly disguised threat to use nuclear weapons if provoked by the Soviet Union in the Middle East. Of course, this was during the Cold War. And then Reagan, even Reagan, had the backlash experience after Reykjavik where he and Gorbachev seemed to have come very close to an agreement on getting rid entirely of strategic nuclear weapons. As soon as he returned to Washington he was savagely attacked as naïve about the role of nuclear weapons and their importance for national interests by bipartisan circles. So we have to see first, whether zero nuclear weapons is a policy priority and second, whether the assured backlash from places like The Wall Street Journal and elsewhere will be sufficiently intimidating. Perhaps even then Obama would not explicitly abandon the disarming goal, but would likely signal an intention not to challenge any further the nuclear weapons establishment.

Krieger: Another signal may be what comes out of the US-Russia negotiations that have begun. The last agreement that Bush made in 2002, which is still being implemented, is to reduce the deployed strategic arsenals on both the US and Russian sides to between 1,700 and 2,200 nuclear weapons each. Under the Bush agreement with Putin, the strategic weapons that are taken off deployed status can either be put in storage—the core can be placed in storage—or they can be dismantled and destroyed. There’s no limit to the number of weapons that can be kept in reserve. The Bush-Putin treaty only dealt with deployed strategic weapons, so there’s no limit to the number that can be kept in reserve. Right now the US does have, as does Russia, a number of weapons awaiting dismantlement, but they also have a number of other weapons that are considered strategic reserve weapons. How to count remains an issue. Should there be one overall number—strategic, tactical and reserve—or should there be several numbers? Under the Bush plan, there was one upper limit specified (2,200), but only for deployed strategic weapons. Other numbers, for the overall arsenal, for instance, were unspecified and unknown. They were not subject to accounting. I think there should be one number of nuclear weapons, and it should be the same formula for each country. It should include reserves and deployed weapons.

Falk: That seems to me essential to the credibility of any kind of disarming process in relation to other nuclear weapon states.

Krieger: We don’t yet know how the new negotiations will handle the number, and we also don’t know if they’ll actually make any significant reduction below the current level that has been agreed to. There have been a number of people who have suggested that going down to 1,000 or less would be a good next step, but the numbers that I’ve heard referred to in relation to the Obama administration are around 1,500, which would be a rather minimal incremental step downward. I’m not sure how much emphasis to put on that kind of incrementalism, or even on the number itself, when in the bigger
picture it is not the number that is critical as much as it is the demonstration of political will to achieve zero. At the same time, if it turns out that it’s not a very significant reduction, I think that may be a warning sign that the bureaucrats working on stabilization and wanting to continue American nuclear dominance are in more control than perhaps Obama is.

Falk: That’s always a question as to how much leadership is possible in the national security domain of policy because of the strength of the permanent bureaucracy—its nonaccountability and its links to influential media. That’s why I feel it is so important to have this counter pressure mounted by a mobilized civil society to the extent possible. The question is whether it is possible to mobilize civil society around this kind of issue in the absence of existential fear of the sort that existed from time to time in the Cold War. When the American or European public became very scared about the prospect of a nuclear war, then the climate of opinion changed in favor of denuclearizing initiatives and visions.

Krieger: But it was mobilized for lesser objectives. It was mobilized last for the nuclear freeze, and that was a minimalist demand. It was only to stop the increase in the size of arsenals. One thing that I do take heart from is that there is at least a discussion going on beyond civil society and into the level of former policymakers and, in Obama’s case, up to the presidency, talking about a world free of nuclear weapons as though it is a serious possibility. You mentioned Carter and Reagan as also taking it seriously at some level in their presidencies. In both cases the presidents appeared sincere in their desire and were stymied by the advisors and bureaucracies that surrounded them. If we had to make an informed guess at this point, it would be that there will be a serious attempt by the advisors and bureaucracies that surround Obama to limit his degrees of freedom in moving toward a nuclear weapons-free world.

Falk: Do you think the Obama speech would have had more resonance if it had been given, let’s say, at the commencement at West Point or in the United States rather than at Prague?

Krieger: That is a good question. It seems to me he chose Prague because he saw it as a global issue, and I think he saw it as an issue that would have resonance for people around the world. I suppose, though, that had he given that speech at the Air Force Academy, for example, it would have focused far more attention in the country on the speech and on his expressed desire to eliminate nuclear weapons. My guess is that cadets would have reacted quite favorably to it.

Falk: That would have been very positive. Doesn’t that suggest that one objective of anti-nuclear activists should be to encourage some kind of follow-up speech here in the United States, preferably delivered in a national security venue. Such an undertaking would convey a seriousness of intention that went beyond making a rhetorical appeal to world public opinion. It would give more ground to believe that we have a president who is dedicated, as I believe Obama may be, to serve the global public interest, and not just a champion of American national interests.

Krieger: The negotiators are acting right now on the US-Russian talks, so there is going to be a need for President Obama to speak to the public about those negotiations. When he speaks to the public about the progress that’s been made and that he hopes to see achieved in those negotiations toward a new treaty, he can also take that opportunity to reiterate that this is a step toward a nuclear weapons-free world and that it is only a step. As important as negotiations may be after these many years without them, we in this country need to view the progress as only a next step on the way to going to zero. I’d love to see him do that, and I’d love to see him do it in front of the cadets as well. I can’t think of a better audience for him than the Air Force Academy.

Falk: There are a number of places where it would be more or less equivalent, but I think doing that in the United States, especially in a security-oriented venue, would be a very clear indication that this is a genuine and principal commitment of his presidency.
Krieger: When you expand the conversation to look at the larger picture of US militarism, you have to also ask what is the relationship of nuclear weapons to the build-up now taking place in Afghanistan. I think that deserves some more thought and exploration. The other issue that I think deserves more thought and exploration is built into the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and that is the promise of assistance in spreading so-called peaceful nuclear technology, particularly nuclear power plants, around the world. The question that comes up is whether that is compatible with actually moving to zero nuclear weapons; whether there is a means of oversight that could be implemented that would sufficiently control fissionable materials so that countries could feel assured that they could go to zero nuclear weapons without the risks of weapons proliferation stemming from nuclear power plants being too great.

Falk: In order to do that convincingly, it would be necessary to begin treating equals equally. In other words, it is untenable to have some of the older nuclear states retaining this capacity to convert fissionable materials into weapons while insisting that other states are not entitled to develop a full nuclear fuel cycle.

Krieger: I think it’s a given that, if we’re going to get anywhere with any of these major global issues related to nuclear weapons abolition, double standards need to be eliminated from the international system.

Falk: But double standards are deeply embedded in the structure of the Nuclear Age.

Krieger: Right. I think the greater problem in relation to nuclear energy is the intense desire of many countries around the world to proceed with development of nuclear energy, in part because they believe it shows a high level of technological achievement. They have bought-in to the promotional arguments that nuclear power will provide a country with its energy needs at a relatively low cost. I don’t think that’s a correct understanding, but it’s widespread. When I was at the 2009 Non-Proliferation Treaty Preparatory Committee meeting, I didn’t hear one country denounce the idea of the spread of nuclear energy technology, and most of them were continuing to enthusiastically embrace it.

Falk: I think the oil squeeze with rising prices and the prospect of supply scarcities, as well as skepticism about the contribution of solar and wind energy, is making opposition to nuclear energy a losing battle. I don’t think you can stop the spread of nuclear energy capabilities. What can be done is to insist on a safeguarding and monitoring superstructure that makes diversion for military development much more difficult. Even this will be difficult to accomplish without reciprocating denuclearizing moves by the nuclear weapons states.

Krieger: You absolutely have to stop the production and use of highly enriched uranium; convert existing stockpiles of highly enriched uranium to low-enriched uranium only for power plants; have safeguards that involve international challenge inspections; and control all fissionable materials, including any reprocessing of plutonium. It will be a major undertaking. It will make the job of achieving a world free of nuclear weapons harder by many degrees.

Falk: Incredibly difficult, and it will be very difficult to get countries, like the US, to accept the same kind of regulatory standards that it would want to impose on others and without mutuality nothing very significant can be achieved.

Krieger: We’re very accustomed to such double standards. But going back to Obama, he’s a ‘pretty good dad, and in that sense he must understand something about double standards. If he gets it at a basic level, maybe he will be able to apply it to global politics.
Falk: He may get it at a level of equity and fairness, but he’s also a person that is very adept at the power game and he may conclude that unless he feels very strong counterpressure from peace groups, that the only way he can be effective as a leader is by adhering to this two-tier, double standard structure. It is built very deeply into the way in which world politics has been practiced for centuries, and especially in the Nuclear Age where membership in the nuclear club has operated as such a prime geopolitical status symbol.

Krieger: I’d like to end on a positive note. Even should it prove that Obama’s statements are only rhetoric, which I don’t believe they are, he has raised the expectations of civil society and hopefully energized civil society to believe that there is a greater opportunity now than we’ve experienced in decades, perhaps ever, to end the nuclear weapons era. Hopefully these expectations will be transformed into a larger level of public support and a course of action on the part of the Obama administration that will prove to be irreversible.

About the Author

David Krieger is President of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation (www.wagingpeace.org) and a Councilor on the World Future Council.

Richard Falk is Albert G. Milbank Professor Emeritus of International Law at Princeton University and Visiting Distinguished Professor in Global and International Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.