

In Prague, Obama lays out vision for nuke-free world

By Todd Milbourn, Associate Editor

U.S. President Barack Obama called for a vast reduction in the world's nuclear weapons this week, telling a huge crowd at Prague Castle that the spread of atomic technology "is the most immediate and extreme threat to global security."

Obama, in a half-hour address capping his two-day visit to the Czech capital, laid out an ambitious plan to reduce U.S. stockpiles, strengthen international agreements and lock down nuclear material.

Arms control experts said Obama's proposal marked an abrupt shift from the policy of the George W. Bush administration, which placed nuclear capacity at the center of its defense agenda and sought to isolate, rather than engage, so-called rogue regimes.

"It's clear that no longer is the U.S. going to be simply paying lip service to Article 6 of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty," Stephen Schwartz, editor of U.S. journal *The Nonproliferation Review*, told CBW. He was referring to the 1968 agreement that requires countries to reduce their nuclear arsenals. "It sets the stage for dramatic reductions in the future."

Obama's speech was given greater urgency when, just hours before he took to the podium before a cheering crowd of 20,000, North Korea violated international protocol and tested a long-range ballistic missile that splashed into the ocean near Japan. The test was largely deemed technically unsuccessful, but Obama said it underscored the need for the global community to take a tougher line against countries that seek nuclear technology for nonpeaceful use.

"Rules must be binding. Violations must be punished. Words must mean something," the president said in calling for a United Nations Security Council rebuke.

Obama acknowledged that his vision of a nuclear-free world might not happen in his lifetime, but he said his administration would take the lead by reducing the

role of nuclear weapons in its national security strategy, and would encourage other countries to do the same. He pointed to an agreement reached April 3 with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev to start negotiations on reducing warheads. Obama also promised to aggressively pursue American ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

Overall, arms control experts said Obama's strategy was based on the notion that if the U.S. shows it is willing to significantly cut the size of its atomic arsenal, ban nuclear testing and halt the worldwide production of bomb material, reluctant leaders around the world will be more likely to rewrite nuclear treaties and enforce sanctions against countries such as North Korea and Iran.

"The most important message in the speech is just articulating the goals," said Leonard Spector, deputy director of the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS) in California. "The fact that he did this so early in his administration shows the world just how serious he considers this issue." Spector said the battle to stop the spread of nuclear weapons should focus most intensely on Iran, which has yet to build a nuclear weapon but has sought the technology.

"North Korea is so weak politically that it's kind of a pygmy nation with weapons. Iran, I won't call it a giant, but it's a regional powerhouse—a very large country with oil wealth and a revolutionary ideology that is determined to assert itself," Spector said.

Options set out for Iran

To that end, Obama's speech offered a stark choice to Iran. He said Iran could pursue peaceful nuclear energy with rigorous inspections. "Or the government can choose increased isolation, international pressure and a potential nuclear arms race in the region that will increase insecurity for all," he said.

Obama linked Iran's disarmament to the fate of a controversial U.S. plan to station a radar base in the Czech countryside as part of a larger missile defense shield in Europe. The plan was fiercely promoted by the Bush administration to protect European allies against a potential Iran missile launch. Russia has considered it a threat to its influence in the region.

Obama said that "as long as the threat from Iran persists, we intend to go forward with a missile defense system that is cost-effective and proven." If the Iranian threat is eliminated, the system won't be needed.

Catherine Vojtísková, 22, an international relations student at Charles University in Prague, said she was disappointed that Obama left an opening to cancel the radar project. After Russia's war last summer with Georgia, she said the missile system would send a message to Russia that the former Soviet satellite states in Central and Eastern Europe "are with the West."

Jan Jireš, a Czech scholar at the Center for Transatlantic Relations in Washington, D.C., said Obama appeared to be trying to “put the ball in Russia’s court” by giving it an incentive to pressure Iran to disarm. “In the end, I think it will be clear that Russia is either unwilling or unable to deliver on Iran, but then the administration can say we have done everything we could to engage Russia and start meaningful cooperation,” Jireš said.