

## **A critical mass for disarmament**

Change, failure and fear are propelling us toward a world without nuclear weapons.

By Joseph Cirincione

Speaking to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council on March 26, Sen. John McCain surprised many listeners when he said that "the United States should lead a global effort at nuclear disarmament."

It has been a long time since a Republican candidate for president said anything close to this, let alone seemed to think it would help him win election. But McCain senses what many may have not: This is a rare moment in national and international politics, a period of rapid change that promises a transformation in global nuclear policy.

This transformation is the result of four converging factors. The first is the deep and ongoing concern about existing nuclear threats. These threats include the possibility that a terrorist group might get hold of a nuclear weapon; the fact that there are still 26,000 existing nuclear weapons held by nine nations today; the efforts of a few countries -- most prominently Iran and North Korea -- to develop their own nuclear weapons for the first time; and the possible collapse of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty regime triggering a cascade of proliferation.

The second factor is the widespread sense, among policymakers and the public, that existing U.S. policies have failed to lessen these dangers. President Bush sought to maintain U.S. supremacy through a reduced but still large nuclear arsenal, new nuclear weapons (like his "nuclear bunker buster" or the artfully dubbed "reliable replacement warhead"), rejection of treaties limiting U.S. freedom of action and preemptive military action against hostile states. But nuclear threats only increased as confidence in American leadership decreased.

Third (and in response to this policy collapse), there is a new drive for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. This once utopian dream (held a few decades ago only by those on the left of the foreign policy mainstream) is now the focus of a bipartisan appeal from Republicans George Shultz and Henry Kissinger and Democrats William Perry and Sam Nunn in two Wall Street Journal Op-Ed articles for "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons." They are not alone. The foundation I lead funds dozens of institutes working on plans for sweeping change in nuclear policy, including the Council on Foreign Relations, the Monterey Institute for International Studies and the Physicians for Social Responsibility.

Finally -- and this is what may make it all come together at last -- there is a nearly simultaneous leadership turnover in most of the world's major

nations, creating openings for new leaders less rigidly wed to the failed policies of the past. By early 2009, four of the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, seven members of the G-8 and a number of other major states will have installed new executives. Among them: Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, Pakistan, South Korea, Britain, the United States and possibly Israel and Iran.

Together, these factors offer an extraordinary opportunity to advance new policies that can dramatically reduce and even eliminate many of the dangers that have kept political leaders and security officials worried about a nuclear 9/11.

How extraordinary? Consider this: The drive to reduce and eliminate nuclear weapons comes from the very center of America's security elite. The conservative Hoover Institution at Stanford University, where Shultz and Perry are both scholars, is the epicenter of this nuclear policy earthquake. Of the 24 former national security advisors and secretaries of State and Defense who are still living, 17 have endorsed the Hoover campaign for a series of practical steps leading toward nuclear abolition.

They favor deep reductions in our and others' nuclear arsenals, as well as a complete ban on nuclear tests and on the production of bomb materials. They've also called for the rapid securing of all bomb materials to prevent nuclear terrorism and taking U.S. and Russian missiles off hair-trigger alert so a president has more than 15 minutes to decide if he should initiate Armageddon.

These former officials -- including former Republican Cabinet members from every administration going back to President Nixon -- recognize that the current strategy has not worked.

The clearest failure is the Iraq war. The war was the prototype for what the Bush administration hoped would be ongoing U.S. policy: the use of military means to stop proliferation preemptively. Bush said on its eve, "Facing clear evidence of peril, we cannot wait for the final proof -- the smoking gun that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud."

But there was no Iraqi nuclear weapons program -- and there were no chemical or biological weapons either -- and the war, in the end, actually provoked Iran and North Korea to accelerate their programs. Both have made more progress in the last five years than in the previous 10.

The idea that we and our allies could keep our nuclear weapons and simultaneously prevent others from getting them also proved bankrupt. While opposing, correctly, nuclear efforts in Iran, the Bush administration blessed, incorrectly, the nuclear weapons program in nearby India with a special trade deal and looked the other way while Pakistan continued work on its bomb program and nuclear trade until it was too obvious to ignore.

Indeed, the most dangerous country in the world today is not our adversary

Iran, which is still five to 10 years from a nuclear capability, but our ally Pakistan. Its unstable government, growing mountain of nuclear weapon material and tolerance of Al Qaeda bases within its territory give Osama bin Laden the best chance he has ever had of acquiring the nuclear weapon he seeks.

This is one reason realists like Kissinger have concluded that we must turn "the goal of a world without nuclear weapons into a practical enterprise among nations." This policy is in tune with the American people, with 70% favoring nuclear elimination in polls. McCain has now adopted some of the new policies; Sen. Barack Obama has embraced the entire plan, including his pledge to secure all loose nuclear materials -- thus preventing nuclear terrorism -- in his first term.

We cannot know for certain if these plans will work. But we do know these policy moments do not last long. As quickly as they open, they close. The next two to three years will tell if the leaders we elect will have the wisdom and courage to make the change they promise and the people desire. We may not get another chance.

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