VERIFICATION RESEARCH, TRAINING AND INFORMATION CENTRE

Development House, 56–64 Leonard Street London EC₂A 4LT, United Kingdom

> Tel +44 (0)20 7065 0880 Fax +44 (0)20 7065 0890 Website www.vertic.org

PRAUGE AND BERLIN: TWO SPEECHES, SAME VISION

Delivered to 'The Global Zero and Beyond: Theory, Politics and Regional Perspectives' The Mirror Hall, Czernin Palace, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague, Czech Republic

By Andreas Persbo, Executive Director, 6 September 2013

Introduction

First, let me thank the Czech Ministry for Foreign Affairs for its kind invitation to yet again participate in its series of meetings on the Prague agenda. I'm honoured to appear on such a distinguished panel and, of course, very pleased to appear alongside my good friend James Acton for the second time this year.

I have been asked to give a few thoughts on the Prague agenda after President Obama's speech in Berlin on 19 June earlier this year. Like so many others, I welcomed the speech delivered here four years ago. It was ambitious, and it injected a breath of optimism into a field mostly plagued by negative thinking. It also served an important function: to galvanise our thoughts and our actions around a single vision, namely a world without nuclear weapons.

Yesterday, I heard someone say that the 'vision thing' isn't that important. That it is more important to engage in practical things. I am not sure I agree. Formulating and expressing a vision is a brave thing, and it is also a necessary one. Every building needs an architect. Four years ago, the president presented his blueprint. It was ambitious, and difficult to achieve. Unsurprisingly, the president was criticised for precisely that: delivering an action plan that many felt was unachievable.

Delivering a vision is a difficult thing. As Michael Krepon wrote in June 2013, 'Getting the vision thing right is hard. The ability to deliver a stirring speech enunciating idealistic goals is a start, but without successful follow up, the vision seems hollow.' So four years on, can one say that president Obama's vision is hollow? I would not go that far.

Some things did get implemented, and I will touch on that. Some issues were left on the to-do list. For arms controllers, admittedly, the Berlin speech was much more muted than the one delivered in Prague. It is possible to draw fundamentally different conclusions from this. My conclusion is that Mr Obama's fundamental position on nuclear issues remains unchanged.

Here in Prague, he referred to nuclear weapons as the 'most dangerous legacy of the Cold War'. In Berlin he added that 'so long as nuclear weapons exist, we are not truly safe'. I would say that Mr Obama's vision is intact—and that he remains committed to an abolitionist vision. But I would also say that while the Prague speech was characteristic of the president's first term—enthusiastic and full of ambition—the Berlin speech was coloured by five years experience in international affairs. Some things are easy to achieve, others more difficult. All things come at a price.



Promises delivered

Let us start by looking at what has been delivered since Prague. The Prague speech set off the nuclear security summit process, the outcome of which I think will be the enduring legacy of the president's agenda. Much more work has now gone into making radioactive materials more secure. The summit process has involved a very large cross-section of the nuclear arms control community. Even VERTIC has been involved, by preparing a National Legislation Implementation Kit on Nuclear Security, at the request of the Indonesian government, as their gift to next year's Nuclear Security Summit. At the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Office of Nuclear Security has grown steadily over the years. It will not stop there; I understand that plans are in place to make it a division.

In Berlin, the president announced that the United States is going to host a summit in 2016. It is widely rumoured that this will be the last summit, after which the process is likely to transform into something less high profile. This is not necessarily a bad thing—nuclear security is here to stay. I think that this is an endurable good. Fully formulating and implementing a nuclear security regime will take many more years, this is undeniably true. But one cannot deny that the summit process has accelerated this process.

Another, more high-profile check-box was also ticked. Four years after Prague, the US and the Russian Federation signed a verifiable arms reductions treaty. The negotiations were difficult and from time to time painful. But progress does not come without pain. The treaty, signed here in Prague, entered into force on 5 February 2011. It will remain in force until 2021—unless superseded by another agreement—and may be extended for another five years. According to the president, the two countries are now on track to cut 'deployed nuclear warheads to their lowest levels since the 1950s.' This achievement cannot be understated, and the international community should welcome it, despite the challenges that may lie ahead.

Promises tempered by reality

Not everything is rosy, however. Two principal items from Prague remain on the to-do list, and the president repeated those items in Berlin. Negotiations on a Fissile Material Treaty have not started, and the United States still has not ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

The president's language on both these points is considerably more cautious today. Four years ago, Mr Obama's language on the FMT implied a US leadership role. Four years later, he simply calls on all nations to begin negotiations on a treaty that ends the production of fissile materials for nuclear weapons. As we all know, negotiations on a FMT have been deadlocked in the Conference on Disarmament for more than a decade. Breaking this deadlock may be beyond the gift of the US president. Several CD members appear unconvinced that this treaty is in their national interest. South Asian diplomats privately often raise arguments about the need to shore up their own stockpiles before committing to a cut-off. Unless the proposed treaty aims to regulate material that is already produced, getting a deal here will be very difficult.

Mr Obama's statement on the FMT is nothing more than a simple recognition of the boundaries of the US's influence. We are unlikely to see much progress here unless states are willing to negotiate this treaty in a smaller group of nations, and accept the obvious risks that entails. A FMT negotiated among, say, the P-5 may not later be adhered to by the other four. It does not appear to me that Mr Obama is willing to take those risks—instead he prefers to await a broadly multilateral outcome.

Another issue relates more to domestic policy. In 2009, the administration stated it would 'immediately and aggressively pursue' ratification of the CTBT. However, this decisiveness quickly subsided once it became



clear that ratifying a new arms reduction agreement with the Russian Federation would require expending a large amount of political capital. The CTBT became the victim of political expediency, and the window of opportunity to seek its ratification appears to be closing. One does not need to live in Washington DC to understand that politics there is at a divisive high point right now; it's enough to open an edition of the New York Times. This is reflected in the president's Berlin speech. He is now content to simply 'work to build support' within the United States for this important treaty. Many in this room may feel disappointed by this. However, I think it is important to manage expectations—and I don't think it does the treaty any good if the US president promises something he knows may be too difficult to deliver.

One way or another, the CTBT will enter into force. The drafters of the treaty did not do anyone any favours by inserting an entry-into-force clause that was exceptionally difficult to achieve. Even if the US ratifies, there are many more hard cases among the remaining Annex-II states. It may still be an unpopular thought, but provisional entry-into-force will need to be considered one day. I for one think that day should come sooner rather than later—and I have held this position for many years now.

New initiatives

So what future initiatives were in the Berlin speech? James has already spoken about this, so I don't intend to take up much time elaborating on that. The first principal element is a undertaking to reduce the deployed arsenal by up to one-third. The second element is to seek a 'bold' reduction of US and Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.

Let me first say that I agree with those that say that there does not appear to be any appetite amongst decision makers in the Russian Federation to talk about tactical weapons. I do not have great expectations here, and it would appear that there still is quite a bit of diplomatic work to do, both within NATO and vis-à-vis the Russian Federation, before any progress on this is foreseeable. I note, however, that the president is talking about a reduction, not elimination or a complete withdrawal, and this constructive ambiguity opens some room for manoeuvre.

The president's disarmament undertaking is, of course, well within his gift to deliver. The marginal utility of nuclear weapons in both the United States and Russia is at present zero. After all, if weapons had marginal value, there would be no incentive to disarm. Consequently, neither country's stockpiles are at Pareto-efficient levels. And as one warhead less won't make the country worse off, there is a natural pressure to reduce stockpiles. Expect this downward trend to slow down and stabilize over time, when stockpiles have reached an optimal level. Many observers point to 1,000 warheads as the optimal level, but whether that's the case remains to be seen. In any case, if you are an abolitionist, one warhead less is certainly something worth welcoming.

Conclusion

The Prague agenda has, on balance, delivered on its main promises, and this a good thing. Some initiatives remain unimplemented, but for good reasons. The combined Berlin-Prague agenda shows promise as well, but is more tempered by reality. Like a good wine, the president's nuclear policies appear to have matured, but without loss of the underlying taste and vision.

