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U.S. nuclear weapons policies headed in opposite directions

Joshua J. McElwee | Jan. 22, 2010

The Obama administration is moving ahead with the development of new nuclear weapons components at three key weapons facilities at the same time it is conducting a sweeping review of U.S. nuclear weapons policies that could lead to further slashing the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

For the moment, U.S. nuclear weapons policies appear to be running in contrary directions, and while some critics of U.S. nuclear policy are cautiously optimistic, they are also worried President Obama?s nuclear disarmament vision is not yet being supported by concrete policy actions.

New nuclear weapons projects are planned at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee and the Kansas City Plant in Missouri. In fact, the pace of nuclear component development at these sites appears to be increasing.

For example, a major new nuclear component plant is well into the planning stage in Kansas City and it is to replace the aging current plant.

Each city?s weapons facility creates parts for U.S. nuclear weapons.

Nickolas Roth, director of the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability, said the work at these plants involves ?substantial new nuclear weapons projects.? Founded in 1987 under the name Military Production Network, the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability is a national network of organizations that represent the concerns of communities dealing with nuclear weapons sites and radioactive waste dumps.

Roth said the alliance supports the vision of a nuclear-weapons-free world set forth by Obama, adding, ?There needs to be meat on the bones for that type of statement.?

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Shrouded in secrecy, precise costs for the maintenance of the U.S. nuclear weapons plants are not readily available. However, the National Nuclear Security Administration, a division of the U.S. Department of Energy, has said the new facility being proposed for Kansas City will carry an estimated price tag of $673 million for construction and $1.2 billion over the next 20 years.

The replacement Kansas City facility will manufacture electrical and mechanical non-nuclear parts. The facility at Oak Ridge, meanwhile, plans to reinvest in its capability to produce uranium components for nuclear weapons and the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement Project at Los Alamos plans to increase U.S. capability to produce plutonium pits, the core of a nuclear weapon, from 20 pits to 125 pits annually, according to Roth. The U.S. Senate has yet to approve this increase.

It?s this proposed expansion that has critics of U.S. nuclear policy worried even as Obama talks of reducing the

size of the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal.

Meanwhile, Obama has already reached a tentative agreement with Russia to reduce the number of strategic nuclear warheads on both sides from about 2,200 to between 1,500 and 1,675 in the next several years, while also slashing number of missiles designed to carry them to between 500 and 1,000.

Nuclear arms critics want substantially larger cuts, backed by policy changes.

The administration is in the final stages of a major nuclear weapons policy review. Officially called the Nuclear Posture Review, it is expected to be completed as early as March, involving a thorough look at the size, structure and mission of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Nearly two decades after the Cold War ended, the review is the third post-Cold War assessment of the roles and missions for U.S. nuclear forces. The administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush completed their nuclear posture reviews in 1994 and 2001, respectively.

In an address last April in Prague, Czech Republic, Obama set forth three guiding goals for his nuclear weapons national security strategy:

- Negotiation of a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with the Russians. The current treaty expired Dec. 5, but is still in force pending the adoption of a new agreement.
- U.S. ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.
- Strengthening of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. It is up for review this year.

Disarmament progress on each of these treaties will require U.S. Senate approval. The most politically contentious of these treaties, arms observers say, is likely to be the securing of ratification of the test ban treaty. Signed by Clinton in 1996 after negotiations at the United Nations, it was voted down 51-48 in the Senate in 1999. Treaty ratifications require a two-thirds majority.

Nuclear arms observers say Obama?s vision of reduced reliance on nuclear weapons is being challenged by a lack of consensus in the policymaking community, the federal bureaucracy, and vested interests in Congress.

Meanwhile, critics of nuclear weapons say the increased activity at the three U.S. plants puts into question the likelihood of substantial progress in achieving Obama?s stated vision.

?Do we really need to be building and adding to our nuclear weapons capability at this time?? asked Leonor Tomero, director of Nuclear Non-Proliferation at the Washington-based Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, a nonprofit nuclear watchdog group. ?What kind of message does that send??

Tomero, who is also a senior fellow at the Institute of International Law and Politics at Georgetown University, says that the new projects could jeopardize U.S. efforts to negotiate new international arms treaties.

?If other countries perceive that the U.S. is modernizing or increasing its capability to produce nuclear weapons it undermines our nonproliferation efforts and the president?s promises that we?re taking disarmament seriously,? she said.

Taking another slant, Gregory Mello, secretary and executive director of the Los Alamos Study Group, said the developing projects at the plants might be collateral in return for a chance at U.S. adoption of the treaty.

?The biggest problem in the Obama administration is the primacy of hopes to ratify the CTBT [test ban treaty],? said Mello, who has been working in the field of nuclear weapons policy since 1992. ?In terms of collateral those hopes are very costly. And the first cost,? he said, will be the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement Project at Los Alamos.

The test ban treaty mandates that signatory nations cease from carrying out any nuclear weapons tests or explosions. The United States voluntarily suspended full-scale testing of nuclear weapons in 1993, though it continues to conduct what are called ?subcritical? tests.

?What we really should be talking about is the actual disinvestment in nuclear weapons,? said Mello. ?Things like decreasing the number and types of weapons in the arsenal, decreasing the dollar expenditure that we make in the nuclear weapons field, rationally and prudently downsizing the nuclear weapons complex in a glide path consistent with achieving nuclear disarmament over a long period of time.?

Tomero agrees. In place of the ongoing projects at the nuclear weapons facilities she said she wants the National Nuclear Security Administration -- which oversees the facilities -- to be more active in supporting the Obama?s goal of nuclear disarmament.

?We think that not only should the NNSA not be coming up with efforts to build new nuclear weapons, but that they should be contributing to things that will support the president?s vision for a world free of nuclear weapons. For example, we could be doing much better in terms of getting dismantled the nuclear weapons we?re already planning on dismantling.?

Lt. Gen. Robert G. Gard Jr., chairman of the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, warned that Washington needs to be very careful in the signals it sends to other nations.

?If we send a signal that nuclear weapons are essential for use in our national security strategy for other than deterrence, it obviously tells other nations that if the most powerful nation sees the need for them, then they ought to develop them too.?

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