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Bishops, experts laud nuclear initiatives

Jerry Filteau | Apr. 27, 2010

The leaders of international delegations at the Nuclear Security Summit 2010 in Washington pose for a group photo April 13. (CNS/Reuters/Jason Reed)

WASHINGTON -- Despite criticisms by conservative commentators, President Obama?s recent steps to contain the dangers of a global nuclear conflagration received praise from the U.S. bishops and many experts on nuclear deterrence and arms control.

After more than a year of his administration steadily preparing the groundwork, within nine days in April Obama:

- Issued a new U.S. Nuclear Posture Review April 6 declaring that deterrence of nuclear attack on the United States or its allies is the fundamental role of the U.S. nuclear defense system -- and practically denying almost any possibility of U.S. first use of nuclear weapons in response to a nonnuclear attack on the United States or its allies. This constituted a major departure from the implied nuclear first-use threats of the previous Bush administration.
- Signed a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with the Russian Federation April 8 that commits both countries to reducing their fully deployed or readily accessible long-range strategic nuclear capability by about 30 percent -- a moderate but still substantial build on the even more major reductions achieved through START I (finally ratified by both sides in 1994), which expired late last year.
- Convened a 47-nation Nuclear Security Summit in Washington April 13-14 at which participants agreed to voluntary compliance on a variety of international measures designed to keep dangerous nuclear materials out of the hands of non-state terrorists and rogue states.

?The path to a world free of nuclear weapons will be long and difficult,? Cardinal Francis E. George, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said in an April 8 letter to Obama welcoming the new START follow-on treaty as another step toward the church?s fundamental goal of a ?world without nuclear weapons.?

Obama?s achievements in April represent moderate but significant U.S. advances in international diplomacy on nuclear deterrence and arms control, said veteran international policy expert John Steinbruner, director of the University of Maryland?s Center for International and Security Studies.

The administration?s new Nuclear Posture Review statement ?is not a categorical ?no first use? declaration? and ?is not on the leading edge of practice, but it is progress over the U.S. historical position,? he told *NCR*.

He described the new START, the Nuclear Posture Review, and Nuclear Security Summit as ?modestly important accomplishments.?

The new policies, however, ?do not alter the fundamental Cold War pattern, whereby the United States and Russia maintain thousands of weapons on rapid-reaction alert, programmed for mass attack, claiming that that is necessary for deterrence,? he said. ?That is wildly at odds with the bishops? [1983] statement, and there is no reason for that to be continued.?

In their 1983 pastoral letter -- ?The Challenge of Peace: God?s Promise and Our Response? -- the U.S. bishops said that nuclear deterrence could be morally justified only as a temporary defensive strategy on the path to total nuclear disarmament and that any strategy involving nuclear first use is immoral. They judged that virtually any conceivable use of nuclear weapons in war would violate basic just-war principles of proportionality and civilian immunity.

?The projected nuclear deployment pattern [even at the reduced levels under the new START agreement] is completely inconsistent with the bishops? statement and is morally and strategically unnecessary,? Steinbruner said.

In his April 8 letter to Obama, George cited the pastoral in calling on the United States to take further steps to reduce nuclear arsenals, ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and reduce U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons for security.

George also expressed support for the goals of the Nuclear Security Summit, urged adoption of a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty ?to prohibit production of weapons-grade material,? and called for strengthening of the International Atomic Energy Agency?s ability to monitor nonproliferation efforts and ensure access to peaceful uses of nuclear power.

Archbishop Edwin F. O?Brien of Baltimore -- who headed the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services from 1997 to 2007 -- strongly supported the new START and ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty this February in an address to the Global Zero Summit in Paris.

O?Brien also urged U.S. adoption of a no-first-use policy on nuclear weapons, a position to which Obama moved closer with his new Nuclear Posture Review.

Where President George W. Bush said in his 2002 Nuclear Posture Review that U.S. nuclear weapons ?provide credible military options to deter a wide range of threats,? Obama said the United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against nonnuclear nations that have signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty and are in compliance with it. He reserved a right to revise that stance if faced with a grave biological weapon threat.

Steinbruner acknowledged that even the modest changes in U.S. nuclear posture adopted by the Obama administration were pushing the limits of what the president could do politically.

?You couldn?t really expect them, given the current configuration of the American political system, to do much more than they did,? he said. ?In that sense, it?s an important accomplishment. But from the viewpoint of moral and strategic imperatives, there?s a lot more to be done.?

He said there is a ?striking difference, in terms of projected intentions? between Obama?s stance and that of

Bush. ?The Bush administration was quite explicitly intimidating everyone, projecting military dominance and being unabashed about that,? he said. ?That was extremely provocative to the rest of the world. The Obama administration is much more temperate in that, in regard to its projected intention. The president?s Prague speech [at the signing of the new START], which endorsed the idea of ultimate elimination of nuclear weapons, is what the rest of the world wanted to hear.?

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent.]

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