

All Our Nuclear Futures?

On 5 November 2008, the day following the historic election that made Senator Obama the 'President-elect', Ken Booth participated in a public debate at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, on 'Nuclear futures after the US election'.

The topic of the debate was set by world events, but the occasion was the launching of an issue of the journal *International Relations* in which a dozen or so well-known experts on nuclear weapons speculated about nuclear futures in the Middle East, and specifically the prospects for creating a WMD Free Zone in that volatile region (Vol. 22, no.5, September 2008). The other participants in the debate were Dan Plesch, Director of the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy at SOAS and a well-known analyst of disarmament issues, and Mark Fitzpatrick, who worked in the State Department for 26 years, attaining the rank of Deputy Assistant Secretary for Non-Proliferation, and who is presently Senior Fellow for Non-Proliferation at the IISS.

In his presentation, Ken Booth began by stressing the importance of thinking about the risks coming from the possible breakdown of the global nuclear non-proliferation regime. These risks must be understood in relation to other converging 'morbid symptoms' in the 'Great Reckoning' facing human society globally in coming decades. A possible collapse of non-proliferation norms threatens to combine with other dangerous trends, such as 'climate chaos', energy depletion, and 'clashes of ignorance' – all in the context of a huge global population increase.

The choices relating to nuclear weapons are stark. One road is business-as-usual (risking the erosion of the NPT regime and the spread of nuclear power through a civil nuclear renaissance). The risk here is of an unregulated nuclear world – 'radical nuclear multipolarity' – with 20/30/40 nuclear powers by the 2020s/2030s/2040s. The other road involves a radical recommitment to saving the NPT as a step towards building a denuclearising global order – the goal agreed in Article 6 of the NPT.

As the world's dominant nuclear power, the US is central to the direction we all take in the critical decades ahead. This is why the election of Barack Obama is potentially so significant.

There has been justifiable euphoria about Obama, given the appalling image of his predecessor, but this confronts the new President with the burden of hopelessly inflated expectations. While there are good reasons for investing hope in Obama – on nuclear issues as on others – we should never exaggerate the power of even the world's most powerful individual:

First, at the level of the candidates in the election (Obama and McCain), it was interesting to note, item by item, how many positions on nuclear matters were broadly shared – supporting the NPT and being tough with Iran and North Korea, for example. Neither candidate spent much time on nuclear issues – these were not priority issues for voters- though both indicated a general commitment to arms control. While Obama was clearly the smarter candidate – possibly the smartest ever – a further warning is that even smart people cannot always deliver. The now saintly Jimmy Carter, for example, who also came to power with a reputation for smartness (and a commitment arms control), became engulfed by politics, bureaucracies, and world events, and lasted only one term.

Second, at the level of the political parties, it is noteworthy that there has been an emerging bipartisan consensus on nuclear strategy and non-proliferation for a couple of years. Again, however, it is important to note that these issues are not today's policy priorities. The latter are dominated by withdrawing from Iraq, rescuing the situation in Afghanistan, and getting the economy back on course. Much in the nuclear field will depend on who is put in key positions. In this regard it is worth remembering the Clinton Nuclear Posture Review in the mid-1990s. Coming a few years after the end of the Cold War, it looked like an opportunity to radically change the place of nuclear weapons in world affairs, but in the event, the Clinton administration lacked the bureaucratic skill and failed to make the political investment necessary to overcome the vested interests in continuing a highly nuclearised defence posture. That said, there are a couple of reasons for being somewhat more hopeful. First, nuclear weapons are today less central in US strategic thinking than any time since 1945. And second, there has been the rise of the so-called 'new abolitionists' (most notably Henry Kissinger) who have legitimised discussion of moving to nuclear elimination for hard-headed security reasons.

The third level is that of nuclear weapons in relation to US primacy in global politics. Here again, there is the glimpse of positive possibilities. Washington has witnessed a revival of interest in arms control as an explicit and desirable goal. For example, there has been a growing realisation that: some sort of arms control must be part of any US commitment to Article 6; arms control must be part of any credible attempt to change the image of the US globally; and Congress is likely to require arms control measures as part of making deals with the White House on other things (such as military modernisation)

The prospects for nuclear disarmament in Washington look better than they have been for a long time, therefore, though the base-line against which that remark is made (the Bush years) is a terribly low one. Obama does not have a hard act to follow. What is more, it is easy to exaggerate the prospects for 'change' – the incessant drumbeat of Obama's campaign. 'These United States' look rather different from the streets of Sao Paulo or Tehran than from within Manhattan or among a group of pundits in a Washington TV studio. From the perspectives of many parts of the world, change in the occupancy of the White House might appear more one of style rather than substance; continuity is represented by one privileged US nationalist replacing another; there is continuity in the US still seeking to be the world's dominant power, telling everybody else how to behave; there will be no change in the way the US will still greedily demand and consume more than its fair share of global assets; and while there may be a shift from the assertion of unilateralism to the language of something called 'multilateralism', the latter will be pursued only so long as everybody goes along with Washington's preferences - which, of course, are not always the worst ones imaginable.

The central question of world politics at this point in history can be simply put. It is: How can we organise globally to handle more fairly and more harmoniously the consequences of the fact that on an ever-smaller planet there are ever more of us who need to eat every few hours, who have sex, who need jobs, and who have massively evolved minds collectively stuck in regressive ideas about how the world should work? It cannot be simply answered, but how we respond at all levels, from individuals to governments, will be a critical part of the context for engaging with the issues surrounding all our nuclear futures.