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Eyes on the Prize

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President and C.E.O.

It certainly was an “October surprise” when the Norwegian Nobel committee awarded President Obama the Nobel Peace Prize. The immediate reaction was to wonder

what this would mean – for the president’s agenda at home and abroad, and for the American people.

The U.S. is entering a season of key international negotiations, during which two arms control treaties that have been languishing for years will hopefully be completed. The stature conferred by the Nobel Peace Prize, as well as the inspiration it may give the president, should assist Mr. Obama both at home and abroad in bringing these treaties to a positive conclusion.

On December 5th of this year, the only treaty limiting U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear weapons, originally completed by the first President Bush, is set to expire. After a long hiatus, U.S. negotiators led by Assistant Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller are now working rapidly with their Russian counterparts to meet this deadline for a follow-on treaty.

Similarly, the only treaty banning nuclear weapons testing, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) has now awaited U.S. Senate ratification for 13 years, ever since the UN General Assembly adopted it in 1996.

Of these two, the most imminent, and most important, is the so-called “START Follow-On” agreement. START II (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) was signed in 1993, but it never came fully into force. An interim treaty inked in 2002 keeps the U.S. and Russia on track to reduce our deployed strategic nuclear warheads from 2200 to 1700 each by 2012. It is that interim agreement that expires on December 5. Without a follow-on treaty confirming and extending these ceilings, all limits are off and the U.S. and Russia could potentially once again engage in an expensive and risky nuclear arms race.

A Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty is also desirable because we are not keen on countries seeking nuclear weapons having the unrestricted ability to test them, the crucial step in having a usable nuclear weapons capability. Not all the countries we worry about have acceded to this treaty, but many have, and we would rather they remain bound by its provisions. For it to come into force, though, the U.S. Senate must ratify the treaty.

And these two arms control treaties add up to more than the sum of their parts, because in the spring of 2010 an international conference will convene to review the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the main global agreement through which 184 countries have agreed to forego nuclear weapons. Five countries are recognized as nuclear weapons powers, including the U.S., and just four nations – North Korea, India, Pakistan and Israel – have declined to be members.

While not a perfect treaty, the NPT still contains important powers governing its members, such as the requirement for inspection of nuclear facilities by the International Atomic Energy Agency that is currently being used to open up Iran’s nuclear enrichment plant. Failure by the U.S. and Russia to agree on limiting their own nuclear weapons could be used as an excuse by other countries to drop out of the NPT when it comes up for review next spring.

Some serious issues remain in the negotiations between the U.S. and Russia over the shape of the START Follow-On. My hope is that the sense of international approval conveyed by the Nobel Peace Prize will strengthen President Obama in these negotiations. It is a declaration of approval for the path he seeks that will hopefully enhance U.S. credibility and influence.

Perhaps even more important, a battle is shaping up at home over Senate ratification of the START Follow-On treaty. Treaty ratification requires a two-thirds majority of the Senate, or sixty-seven votes. Several Republicans must thus join the Democrats in ratifying both the START Follow-On and CTBT Treaties.

Much talk is afoot now in Washington of exacting prices for these votes, including modernizing U.S. nuclear weapons and even adding new weapons programs. While maintaining our remaining nuclear weapons in good working order is prudent, costly pork-barrel military programs that could defeat the very purpose of the START Follow-On Treaty are not smart and don’t make the country safer.

I am a fan of the old adage that “politics stops at the water’s edge.” That is, the U.S. should present a unified face to the outside world. To protect our security, our foreign and defense policies should be bipartisan and not tools of partisan politics. I hope the Nobel Peace Prize will strengthen President Obama to complete and gain ratification of these two important treaties, with bipartisan support and free of pressures that would further burden the federal budget while not improving our security. That is the real prize now within his reach. Ω

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