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Take Steps Toward A Nuclear-Free Future

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As we head into the presidential nomination conventions this week, there's one important subject that has gotten only scant attention from candidates Barack Obama and John McCain: our global nuclear weapons crisis. Both candidates claim to have a vision for a world free of nuclear weapons, but does either of them know what it will really take to get there?

This month marks both the anniversary of the first use of a nuclear weapon - 63 years ago, when the United States bombed Hiroshima - and the anniversary of nuclear weapons' spread to other nations - 59 years ago, when the Soviet Union conducted its first nuclear test. After the Cold War, it was widely believed that nuclear proliferation would slow, if not cease altogether, but the opposite has proved to be true. Bombs are bigger than ever.

As those who have recently embraced the bomb - Iran, India, Pakistan and North Korea - have shown us, nuclear weapons have grown to represent national pride, identity and security in ways that are disturbing and dangerous.

Still, the idea of a "nuclear weapons-free" world isn't as naive or utopian as it sounds. Well-known realists such as Henry Kissinger and George Shultz are advocates of the idea, believing that the United States should take the lead in building a consensus for reducing, and ultimately disarming, global stocks of nuclear weapons. Over the last two years, they have been working with former U.S. officials in the past six administrations to develop steps for achieving nuclear disarmament. While many of their steps focus on what the United States and Russia should do to secure and reduce their nuclear stocks - fitting, because these two countries account for close to 95 percent of the world's nuclear warheads - the real task for the next U.S. president will lie in persuading the rest of the world that a nuclear-free vision is not only practical, but also desirable.

This will mean working with international organizations, a task that has not been the United State's strong suit in recent years. It will also mean persuading the American people - grown used to our own international dominance and belligerence - that for our own security, the future will require collaboration, patience and compromise.

These are tall orders, and perhaps that's why we haven't been hearing much about them from either McCain or Obama. And yet it would seem that the American people would welcome such a discussion,

especially in a scary world increasingly unwilling to listen to us. The fact that a bipartisan consensus of some of our most respected former leaders has already signed on would immunize it from the usual charge of partisan politics.

These anniversaries represent an unusual opportunity for the United States and the world to address not just our nuclear past, but what we want for our future. If we want peace and security, a new global arms race won't provide it. Maybe it's time to talk about letting go of our nukes instead.

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