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A Prize Worth Having?

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When the Nobel Peace Prize was announced there was surprise if not astonishment in many circles. This year's prize had been considered to be very open, but several potential recipients had been identified, including Piedad Cordoba of Colombia, Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan and Dr Sima Sanar of Afghanistan. These and others were people involved in long-term human rights activism or specific campaigns on issues such as inter-faith dialogue. The awarding of the prize to President Barack Obama was far from being the first time that it had gone to a head of state or other leading political figure, but on most previous occasions it had been for defined achievements over some years. In the case of President Obama, the award was "for his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples", but critics pointed to the very short space of time involved, with the nominating process actually having been completed within days of his taking office last January.

A consequence of the decision was very strong opposition from the political right in the United States, sometimes bordering on apoplexy and frequently seeing it as interference in domestic policies, especially at a time of intensive controversy over health care reform. There were also criticisms from progressive circles, mainly that the prize committee should not have made the award to a politician who, whatever the changes he was seeking, was still involved in a war in Iraq, and was considering an escalation in Afghanistan and heavier involvement in counter-insurgency in Pakistan. Even so, while the award undoubtedly is controversial, it fits into a pattern of concerns that have been quite long-term features of the Peace Committee, with a frequent focus on the prize as a matter of process rather than achievement.

The 2009 Prize in Context

The Nobel Peace Prize has seen a number of controversial awards, including Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho at the end of the Vietnam War in 1973, Anwar Sadat and Menachim Begin in 1978 after the Camp David Accords and Yasser Arafat, Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin in 1994. Previous heads of state have received the award at times of intense controversy within the states concerned, the most notable examples being Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990 and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Kim Dae-jung of South Korea a decade later.

Both the Sadat/Begin and Arafat/Peres/Rabin awards were, from the committee's perspective, examples of "process". Whatever might be said in public, there would appear to have been an intention to help a major peace process that was already under way. In both cases it can be argued that the prize made little difference in the light of subsequent events and there are arguments that such awards can diminish the value of the prize as a whole. There are, though, other examples where "process" has been encouraged, one notable example being the joint award to Nelson Mandela and F W de Klerk in 1993 when the political future of South Africa was still very much in the balance. Other examples were two awards relating to Northern Ireland, the first to peace activists Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan at the height of the conflict in 1976, and the second to two key political figures, John Hume and David Trimble, in 1998 when the peace process was certainly under way but far from a successful conclusion.

None of this goes too far in explaining the Obama decision but we are helped by some other features of the prize, especially the issue of arms control and disarmament and also the risk to international security coming from environment and poverty. The latter is particularly significant because it is a reminder that the Nobel Peace Prize has long reached well beyond immediate issues

of peace and war, and Obama's stated commitment to a nuclear free world does clearly relate to the first of the committee's key concerns.

This is shown by some of the previous recipients, who include the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War in 1985 and Joseph Rotblat and the Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs in 1995, Rotblat and the Pugwash group having done so much to keep East-West channels of communication alive during some of the most difficult periods of the Cold War. The nuclear "thread" was re-visited only four years ago when the prize went to Mohamed ElBaradei and the International Atomic Energy Agency. This IAEA focus was an indication of the concern that the Nobel committee has had over nuclear proliferation and it is likely that they would endorse that particular aspect of Barack Obama's agenda.

Obama has been quite specific that he would want to see progressive moves towards a nuclear-free world. It is easy enough to dismiss this as mere political rhetoric or even to see it as a means of removing potential threats to US conventional military superiority, but Obama has been consistent in expressing this view in a manner that suggests a genuine motivation. Apart from a modest offer from Gordon Brown in the UK, none of the other existing nuclear powers is talking this language, and the Nobel committee may hope that the award will, in part, provide a focus on this theme in the run-up to next year's Five-Year Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty

Another recurrent theme in the work of the Nobel Peace Committee is that of international development, especially in relation to food security. In terms of international development as a whole, previous recipients have included Willy Brandt (1971), Lester Pearson (1957), UNICEF (1965) and, more recently, Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank in 2006. In relation to world food issues, awards go right back in 1949 and Lord Boyd Orr, the nutritionist and first Director-General of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation. Over twenty years later, in 1970, the prize went to the plant breeder, Norman Borlaug, a key figure in the early Green Revolution.

The issues of food security and international development have come together more recently in relation to the committee's concern over climate change. This was demonstrated in the award of the prize to Al Gore and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2007. This itself was a highly controversial decision in the United States, given the deep scepticism expressed by the George W Bush administration over climate change in general and its possible human origins in particular.

Putting all this together we can get some idea of the perspective of the committee and can also make a very preliminary assessment of the longer-term impact of this year's award. What comes across in the recent history of the prize is the frequent emphasis on individual activists but within the context of a deep-seated opposition to militarisation and a positive concern over human development prospects in an insecure global environment. While strongly supporting individuals, including in recent years Wangari Maathi, Shirin Ebadi and Aung San Suu Kyi, the committee avidly seeks progress in arms control and disarmament and is continually conscious of the wider context of an environmentally constrained world replete with deep socio-economic divisions.

Whatever President Obama's domestic political controversies and however great the problems in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq, it is undeniable that his election represents a major change in attitude in the United States. This is evident in his call for a nuclear-free world and for action on climate change but perhaps even more so in his Cairo speech on relations between the west and Islam (see May 2009 Briefing). In this context the prize may be geared much more to the possibility of a process that is still in its very early stages, but it does serve as a reminder of the sheer scale of the changes in Washington.

Nuclear Issues

That still leaves us with the question of whether these changes will end up being superficial or enduring, and on both issues they relate to forthcoming events. In terms of nuclear futures, next year's review of the Non Proliferation Treaty will be far more likely to be a success if there is progress before the conference in three main areas. One is the issue of US/Russian relations, especially the prospect for further substantial cuts in nuclear arsenals. By withdrawing from the Bush administration's plans for forward-basing of missile interceptors in Eastern Europe, the Obama administration has removed one blockage to progress. That may not be enough to ensure further negotiations with Russia, given the determination of the Kremlin to regain its status as a world centre and its belief in the political value of a large nuclear force. If that turns out to be the case between now and early next year, the Obama administration may then be forced to take the risk of offering a significant unilateral gesture. Even if that did not catalyse early negotiations it would be a powerful indicator of US attitudes in the run-up to the review conference.

The second issue links indirectly to the first and concerns the status of Iran's presumed nuclear weapons programme. The Obama administration is currently operating in a difficult area in that the intention is clearly to remain committed to diplomatic engagement with Iran in order to discourage any nuclear ambitions, but the political environment in Iran itself is not conducive to this. The Ahmadinejad regime is facing significant internal opposition and would much prefer to have a clear external enemy in order to divert attention away from its domestic problems. The Obama administration is hardly being helpful in this regard, but the domestic circumstances in Tehran mean that there is a reluctance to respond positively to Washington. Furthermore, the situation is complicated by internal Iranian power-play in which the Revolutionary Guard is vigorously consolidating its power and needs an external enemy even more than the Ahmadinejad regime. All this means that Obama is not likely to be greatly helped on this issue, but there is still a sense in which the problems regarding Iran are powerful reminders to other states that the Non Proliferation Treaty deserves strong support.

The final issue is the need for the Obama administration to get a boost from the actions of other nuclear powers. Given current political circumstances, it is highly unlikely that France or China will be particularly helpful in making unilateral gestures, and India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea are hardly relevant. This leaves the UK, where Gordon Brown has already announced a modest cut-back in future nuclear forces by planning to reduce the number of nuclear missile submarines from four to three. This does not involve any reduction in nuclear warhead numbers, yet it is in this area that the UK could make a useful gesture that would certainly aid Obama. There is a strong argument for the Brown government announcing a reduction in warhead numbers to under one hundred, roughly half the current figure. There is no military requirement for more, and even the most fervent supporter of the supposed value of a nuclear deterrent can hardly argue that an ability to destroy more than a hundred cities is an aid to great power status.

Climate Change

If the main "nuclear event" is next year's NPT review, then climate change progress revolves around the much more imminent Copenhagen meeting in December. This issue does not currently loom large in US domestic politics and there remains much scepticism, yet the Obama administration has transformed US policy at a time when China is also showing clear signs of recognising the need for action. The central problem is that the indications of accelerating climate change mean that radical cuts are required in the per capita carbon emissions of existing industrialised countries and these need to be in the range of 40% by 2020 and 80% by 2030. This is far more radical than existing intentions. Furthermore, newly industrialising and developing countries will have to evolve towards low carbon economies to an extent that will only be possible with considerable financial aid.

The Copenhagen meeting is highly unlikely to achieve the required results and will therefore be a work in progress. In such circumstances there is a risk that limited success will lead to a false sense of security. It is in this precise area that the attitude of the United States will be crucial. If the Obama administration sees Copenhagen as one relatively small step towards a really comprehensive and radical move towards a low carbon future, then there is a greater chance that further rapid progress will still be possible.

A Prize Worth Giving

It is easy enough to argue that the award of the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize to President Barack Obama is at best premature and at worst a wasted opportunity. Putting it in context, though, and relating it to the possibility of progress on two of the crucial issues of the day - nuclear proliferation and climate change - it is far less clear that it was a bad decision. If, instead, it turns out to be one further factor that aids progress on these issues, then the 2009 Prize may turn out to be a much more far-sighted decision than many people believe.