

President Names First Government wide Coordinator of WMD Policy

By Adam Graham-Silverman, CQ Staff

In a sign of the importance of non-proliferation to the new administration, President Obama has picked a “czar” to coordinate issues related to weapons of mass destruction across the government.

Gary Samore, a nuclear proliferation expert and former National Security Council official now at the Council on Foreign Relations, has been tapped for the post, Samore confirmed to Congressional Quarterly.

His portfolio will be broad, he said, including proliferation, nuclear and conventional arms control, threat reduction, and terrorism involving weapons of mass destruction. **Samore offered few specifics on his approach. For example, he has called for more engagement, diplomatic and otherwise, with Iran , but he declined to say what new carrots or sticks would be on the table.**

“These are all issues that, as far as I know, the administration doesn’t have a position on,” he said.

Nuclear proliferation and weapons of mass destruction have been a foreign policy priority for Obama during his campaign and since taking office. He called the threat of a nuclear attack by terrorists the gravest danger to the United States and pledged to gather all the world’s loose nuclear material by the end of his first term.
Bypassing the Senate?

Samore said his position, which will sit within the National Security Council, will not require Senate confirmation. That may go against a provision in the 2007 law (PL 110-53) implementing recommendations of the Sept. 11 commission, which requires that the president create the job and subject it to Senate confirmation.

The Bush administration never filled the post, arguing that mechanisms to coordinate WMD efforts already existed and that Congress lacked the constitutional authority to create offices within the White House.

“The intent is to perform the same role [as a Senate-confirmed person] in terms of coordinating all elements to the U.S. government’s policy,” Samore said.

Key senators praised the appointment in general terms, including Joseph I. Lieberman , chairman of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, and Richard G. Lugar of Indiana , the ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee.

“It’s a good step forward,” said Lieberman, I- Conn.

In its final report in December, the congressionally mandated Commission on the Prevention of WMD Proliferation and Terrorism endorsed a high-level White House position to coordinate U.S. efforts, noting that the issue has been overlooked in the

current configuration. But the commission recommended that the requirement for Senate confirmation be repealed out of concerns about conflicting authority between Congress and the White House.

Handling Iran

Samore declined to say whether the administration will also appoint a separate envoy for Iran, as has been speculated. “Obviously that’s one of the issues that will be on my plate,” he said. “But in the government, nobody does anything by themselves.”

Samore said Obama’s chances for stopping Iran ’s nuclear program have been strengthened by falling oil prices and Obama’s potential to marshal international support against Iran .

“Of course it’s hard to tell how it will turn out, but I think there’s reason to believe that the Obama administration has an opportunity here that President Bush didn’t have,” he said.

Samore has said that the United States could offer Iran a lifting of bilateral sanctions, normalized political relations and security assurances. He has also suggested that the United States could strengthen its ties with countries that have thwarted attempts to impose multilateral sanctions, such as Russia . If such diplomacy fails, he said, the United States would have two options: containment and deterrence, or military action.