WASHINGTON -- President Obama and Mitt Romney have staked out diverging paths for nuclear weapons policy, global nonproliferation approaches and arms control, according to a review of their positions and interviews with issue experts.

Romney is generally skeptical of the value of nuclear weapons reductions and other arms control measures, whereas Obama has largely embraced these as policy tools. Obama, for example, wants to seek Senate ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, while the Republican challenger’s advisers do not see that as a possibility during a Romney administration.

The next president might be expected to grapple with Russia’s increasing reluctance to continue Cooperative Threat Reduction efforts, despite a continuing risk of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons proliferation.

The possibility of an Israeli attack against Iranian nuclear facilities could loom early in the next presidential term, as might a decision about whether the United States should use its own military to stop any potential effort by Tehran to build a nuclear weapon.

“That undoubtedly will be a concern of any administration, assuming that force has not been used prior to the new administration taking office,” said William Potter, speaking in his capacity as a professor of nonproliferation studies at the Monterey Institute of International Studies.
Closer to home, the newly elected president will also have to contend with other major issues affecting the U.S. nuclear arsenal. These include efforts to modernize an aging stockpile and infrastructure amid potentially drastic defense budget cuts triggered by law.

Campaign rhetoric and pledges of action often run up against political and financial reality once the election is over. That means, among other matters, despite Romney and Obama’s vow to maintain a strong defense posture, nuclear weapons might face budget cuts.

“No matter what the presidential inclination is for the next four years in either administration, first and foremost the budget and the economy are the issue,” said Robert Smolen, former Bush-era deputy administrator for defense programs at the National Nuclear Security Administration. “They’re going to balance major defense needs against balancing the budget, reducing the deficit and competing with all kinds of domestic programs which have a lot more advocacy right now.”

Here is a comparative look at the issues that could face Obama or Romney over the next four years and how they might deal with them:

**Reducing Nuclear Weapons**

Obama is expected to pursue further reductions in the nation’s nuclear weapons stockpile. After signing the U.S.-Russian New START pact in 2010, the president declared that the “treaty will set the stage for further cuts,” in particular leading to talks “on reducing both our strategic and tactical weapons, including nondeployed weapons.”

Under the New START treaty, which entered into force last year, the United States and Russia agreed to cap their deployed strategic nuclear warheads at 1,550.

Media reports have indicated a Defense Department study would provide the justification for further significant reductions, possibly below 1,000 warheads, but so far there has been no word from the White House on the issue.
“The president made it an organizing principle of his nonproliferation and nuclear security strategy that we have more nuclear weapons than we need,” said Jon Wolfsthal, a former Obama White House nonproliferation official who advises the president’s re-election campaign. “Once the nuclear guidance is approved, should the president win,” the question would become “how quickly and in what manner do we pursue that,” he said.

“I think a treaty is most likely the first approach,” Wolfsthal said. Still, analysts are uncertain whether Russia would be interested in any new nuclear weapons treaty with the United States, particularly in tactical weapons where Moscow holds a significant numerical advantage.

Romney seems unlikely to have nuclear-weapon reductions as a priority. In a 2010 Washington Post commentary, the former Massachusetts governor wrote that New START was Obama’s “worst foreign policy mistake yet.”

A Romney adviser, who asked not to be named in speaking unofficially about the campaign, pointed to the “important role” of nuclear forces in U.S. and allied defense and deterrence.

“Governor Romney has made clear his position that, while global nuclear disarmament may be an ideal, we need to be realistic,” the adviser said. “We must take into account that Russia and China are modernizing and expanding their nuclear capabilities. Perhaps even more disturbing are the dangers from nuclear proliferation by North Korea and Iran.”

Russia

Obama made a “reset” in relations with Russia a first-term foreign policy goal. Romney, however, has rejected that notion and has staked out a hard-line position on both Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin. Romney has called Russia “the No. 1 geopolitical foe” of the United States.
“Russia is a destabilizing force on the world stage,” Romney’s campaign website states. “It needs to be tempered.”

Russia has been very clear about its concerns about U.S. and NATO missile defense efforts in placing interceptors in Europe in a phased effort through 2020. Its stated fear is that the system could be aimed at Russian nuclear forces rather than the Iranian missile threat cited by Brussels and Washington.

In a dig at Obama, who told then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in March he would have more flexibility in discussing missile defenses after the election, Romney talked tough about the Russians.

“I'm not going to wear rose-colored glasses when it comes to Russia or Mr. Putin, and I'm certainly not going to say to him, I'll give you more flexibility after the election,” the GOP contender said during the final presidential debate on Oct. 22. “After the election he'll get more backbone.”

“Conservatives in general would be a lot more skeptical" of making concessions to Moscow, stated Kim Holmes, a Romney adviser who said he was speaking for himself and not the campaign.

“We don’t expect a bolt out-of-the-blue attack from Russia,” he said. “The Russians always want our relationship defined by nuclear weapons because it elevates their position.”

**Cooperative Threat Reduction**

The 1991 Nunn-Lugar CTR agreement, aimed at securing and eliminating nuclear material and weapons in the former Soviet Union, could be imperiled early in the next administration as Putin continues his efforts to assert Russian power.
Russian officials are already publicly signaling that they are not interested in renewing the CTR agreement with the United States as it currently stands.

The threat to drop joint CTR efforts “is a challenge for whoever the next president is,” said Kenneth Luongo, president of the Partnership for Global Security. “And it’s not an issue that’s totally within our control.”

**CTBT Ratification**

Obama has vowed to seek Senate ratification of the nuclear test ban treaty that was rejected by the Senate in 1999. In contrast, Romney has shown no indication of support for the accord. Potter called it “perhaps the most clear divide” between the candidates. “I don’t think there would be any interest in a Romney administration,” he said.

Some Romney advisers agree with that notion. “I would be very surprised if you had a Republican administration lead the charge on that,” Holmes said.

Another Romney counselor was clear on his view of the subject. “I believe that the Senate did the right thing when it soundly rejected the CTBT treaty,” the adviser said. “The reasons underlying that rejection remain valid today.”

Obama administration officials, though, say things have changed since the 1999 rejection, noting that the International Monitoring System for detecting illicit nuclear test explosions has moved toward completion.

Still, Obama has not made a major treaty ratification push during his first term. White House officials acknowledge they would not have the required votes in the Senate. In a second term, “they’re going to push hard to get the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty through, but I know they are going to be facing the same problems,” said Robert Grey, former U.S. ambassador at the international Conference on Disarmament.
Former White House national security official Wolfsthal said the issue “is clearly high on the president’s agenda.” However, because of political realities, he sees the odds as against early action on the treaty in a second Obama administration.

“If the votes are there -- or they’re gettable -- then it will come up. If the votes are not there, there is a possibility CTBT will not be submitted,” he said. Wolfsthal said he currently thinks it is a post-election “long shot … that the CTBT is going to be taken up in the first year.”

Former U.S. official Smolen seconded the possibility of a further delay in treaty submission.

“I think CTBT, for the time being, is going to be on the back burner,” he said. “My guess is if the administration tried to bring it forward, the Republicans would insist on moving the ball forward on a lot of infrastructure and defense issues that Obama probably doesn’t want” to come up.

**Preventing a Nuclear-Armed Iran**

On paper, it is difficult to distinguish between Obama’s and Romney’s positions on the Iranian nuclear threat, a point noted by observers following the challenger’s recent foreign policy speech in Virginia and the presidential debates.

Romney has pointed to seeking additional sanctions on Iran, which the president noted is already being financially squeezed by tightened economic penalties pursued by the Obama administration.

Both candidates have vowed to stop Iran from obtaining nuclear arms, with a slight difference in phraseology during the Oct. 22 debate.

“As long as I’m president of the United States Iran will not get a nuclear weapon,” Obama said.
“They must not develop nuclear capability,” Romney said. “Iran is the greatest national security threat we face.”

Romney has also expressed a more sympathetic view to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s call to remove the Iranian nuclear threat by force if necessary, according to some observers.

“The Romney position sounds a lot more like Netanyahu that we ought to hit them right away,” Barry Blechman of the Stimson Center in Washington remarked before the Israeli leader’s speech in September to the U.N. General Assembly. “Maybe if he’s elected commander in chief, he’d be more concerned than as a candidate in starting a new war.”

“You don’t start a war with [78 million people] lightly,” ex-diplomat Grey added on Iran. “I think he’s more inclined to take a military option than Obama is. Beyond that, one can’t know.”

With Iran, “at some point, they have to believe a military option is ... on the table,” said Holmes.

**Missile Defense**

One significant difference between an Obama and Romney White House might be on missile defense efforts.

“I think at the end of the day, the Obama administration will subordinate the U.S. missile defense program” to higher priorities such as arms control, nuclear disarmament and the desire for improved relations with Russia, said analyst Baker Spring of the Heritage Foundation. “I don’t think a Romney presidency would do that. A Romney administration will have a greater emphasis on what would go to protect the U.S. homeland,” he said.

“Governor Romney has been explicit about the need to deploy effective missile defenses to protect our homeland and our allies,” noted the Romney campaign adviser who was speaking...
not-for-attribution. “As Iran and North Korea continue to develop long-range missiles,” said the adviser, “I believe we must restore the priority of defending the United States.”

However, Obama administration officials say they have done a great deal to plan for and build a realistic missile defense system.

“The Obama administration has not only talked about supporting missile defense, we’ve actually done it. And, we have focused on effective systems,” Ellen Tauscher, then-State Department special envoy for strategic stability and missile defense, said in a March speech. “We have worked to protect and enhance our important homeland defense capabilities and to expand our regional missile defense capabilities.”

Now with the Atlantic Council, Tauscher earlier this year also said the Obama team has provided ample funding for ballistic missile defense in its future-year plans.

“In the [fiscal 2013] budget request, where every program and every agency is subject to cuts,” she added, “we protected our most critical BMD capabilities to protect the U.S. homeland, our deployed forces, and our allies and partners.”

Still, the Obama administration sought a nearly 7 percent cut in its fiscal 2013 ballistic missile defense budget request of close to ten billion dollars.

Though the Romney campaign has made general statements that Obama has jeopardized missile defense, there are few specifics. During the final presidential debate, Romney criticized Obama for “pulling our missile defense program out of Poland.” In a more detailed description of its position, though, the Romney campaign accepted Obama’s missile defense plans in Europe, with a few caveats.

The Romney campaign seemingly signed on to Obama’s efforts in agreeing to deploy interceptors in Poland and Romania, and also placing a radar system in Turkey. This staged deployment would be completed in 2020.
“As president, Mitt Romney is willing to commit to deploying missile defenses in Europe along that timeline,” his campaign website states.

However, the campaign added two qualifications. Romney might move more quickly if Iran makes faster progress on developing long-range missiles than Obama’s plan assumes, or if new technologies don’t develop as quickly as planned. Secondly, “Russia must abandon any backdoor scheme to constrain our missile defenses,” according to the campaign.

Smolen predicted there would be substantial movement to increase missile defense efforts if Romney won and had a Republican-dominated House and Senate to work with him. “They could pretty much ram through the kinds of projects that they want,” he said.

The Effects of Presidential Appointments

If re-elected, Obama is widely expected to reshuffle the deck in some key positions, but has an established pool of leaders who have served or worked with him.

While Hillary Clinton is ultimately expected to depart as secretary of State, potential replacements include such familiar figures as Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-Mass.) and Susan Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. In picking a nominee for undersecretary of State for arms control and international security, Obama recently turned to Rose Gottemoeller, who had already been serving as an assistant secretary and arms control envoy.

With the limited specifics spelled out in Romney’s arms control and nonproliferation campaign stances, experts say who he appoints to key posts could have a substantial impact on his policies if the Republican is elected president.

“If they bring in all the Bush people, I think that you are going to see the same problems you had in the Bush administration” internationally, Luongo said. “If they bring in more moderate
people, they can work with anyone."

In the end, the realities of power might serve to temper how ambitious the agenda can become in either Obama’s second term or a Romney presidency.

“When you confront the responsibilities and the potential consequences of action,” analyst Blechman said, “it tends to moderate people from the left or from the right.”

Back