

Nuclear treaty talks at a stalemate

Washington threatens North Korea, Iran while expanding US arsenal

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In recent months the US government has escalated threats against both North Korea and Iran on the grounds that both countries are allegedly developing nuclear weapons programs. The hypocrisy of the American threats is highlighted by the position Washington has taken in an ongoing international review of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), held every five years. The US is also developing new nuclear weapons and plans that include first-strike nuclear attacks.

The Bush administration has suggested that North Korea is planning to test a nuclear weapon, which according to National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley will provoke some unspecified retaliation by the US and its allies. There have been various threats to take North Korea to the United Nations Security Council to push through further economic sanctions, and for the Bush administration the military option is always a possibility.

At the same time, the US government has denounced Iran for supposedly developing a nuclear weapons program, based on the fact that Iran has acquired the capacity to enrich uranium. The enrichment process is part of peaceful nuclear energy projects, and Iran has declared a willingness to open up its nuclear program to international inspection to confirm that it has no intent to develop a nuclear weapon. Nevertheless, the major European powers, backed at present by the US, have insisted that Iran give up all uranium enrichment activity. US officials, including Vice President Dick Cheney, have suggested that if Iran goes ahead with its nuclear energy program it could be the target of a preemptive military strike on its nuclear facilities, either from the US or Israel.

The strident denunciations of North Korea and Iran, accompanied by sensationalist press coverage in the US of their nuclear plans, are being made as Washington itself rejects any constraints on the maintenance and augmentation of its own weapons stockpiles.

The American attitude has produced irreconcilable differences at the month-long 7th Review Conference of the NPT, currently under way at the United Nations in New York. The US has staked out a position that aims either to completely undermine the treaty, or else fully transform it into an instrument for the promotion of American interests against small non-nuclear countries.

Since the NPT entered into force in 1970, 189 countries have signed on. These include the five large nuclear powers—the United States, the Soviet Union (now Russia), France, Britain and China. The three smaller nuclear states—Israel, Pakistan and India—have not signed the accord, and in 2003 North Korea withdrew.

The treaty was designed by the major powers to help ensure that the number of states with nuclear weapons capacity remained confined to

the original five. In return, the treaty acknowledged that non-nuclear powers have “an inalienable right to develop, research, produce, and use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes” (Article IV of the treaty). The treaty set out procedures by which the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) would verify that nuclear energy programs were not being used as a cover for nuclear weapons programs. (The material used to run a nuclear power plant can be further refined in order to produce material suitable for weapons use.)

The nuclear powers also agreed to gradually eliminate their own nuclear stockpiles, although no precise procedures or benchmarks have ever been established for this commitment.

The Bush administration, however, is pursuing a policy that would undermine the basic compromise contained in the treaty. It has called for Article IV to be eliminated or revised, while at the same time continuing to develop the US military’s own nuclear capacity.

On March 7, the administration issued a statement calling for NPT members to “close the loopholes that allow states to produce nuclear materials that can be used to build bombs under the cover of civilian nuclear programs.” It continued, “We cannot allow rogue states that violate their commitments and defy the international community to undermine the NPT’s fundamental role in strengthening international security.” The “loopholes” that he referred to are the Article IV provisions setting out the essential rights of non-nuclear powers under the treaty.

Washington has not defined what it means by “rogue state” in this context; however the clear aim of the new policy is to deny any nuclear capacity to states that the US deems to be acting contrary to its interests.

In particular, the US would like to use the treaty as a hammer against Iran. The refusal of the IAEA to completely follow the American line on Iran—including accepting the charge that the country is clearly planning to construct nuclear weapons—has infuriated administration officials. It comes after the agency likewise refused to sign on to pre-war Bush administration claims that Iraq was developing nuclear weapons. The US wants to shift the terms of the treaty to criminalize all uranium enrichment for select countries, thereby giving it a justification for attacking Iran, which has publicly acknowledged plans to enrich uranium for energy use.

Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi argued on May 3, the second day of the NPT review conference, that the position taken by the US and the European powers represents a violation of “the spirit and letter of the NPT and [would] destroy the balance between the rights and obligations in the treaty.” The other non-nuclear powers

have also indicated that they would be unwilling to accept a modification of the treaty that undermines their existing right to nuclear energy.

While attempting to curtail the nuclear energy rights of other countries, the US has been quietly developing its own nuclear weapons capacity, in particular by researching the development of low-yield devices designed to attack underground bunkers or weapons production facilities. The current US budget proposal from the administration includes sizeable provisions for funding research on these so-called “bunker-busting” nuclear weapons.

These bunker-busting weapons would be specifically designed for use against smaller powers (e.g., in an attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities or on underground facilities housing North Korea’s weapons).

During the course of the NPT negotiations, the Bush administration declared that it would not rule out using nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear country, arguing that it had the right to respond to a biological or chemical attack with a nuclear strike. In reality, the administration would like to be able to include nuclear weapons in its regular arsenal, whether other “weapons of mass destruction” are used or not. With its forces stretched thin in Iraq, Washington wants to be able to leverage all of its military superiority when attacking small countries, reversing a policy in which nuclear weapons have been considered off limits for offensive use.

The concrete American plans in this direction were outlined in a May 15 *Washington Post* article by William Arkin, a former Army intelligence analyst with close contacts within the military (“Not Just a Last Resort? A Global Strike Plan, With a Nuclear Option”). Arkin writes that last summer Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld approved a top secret “Interim Global Strike Alert Order” to assume and maintain readiness to attack countries in different parts of the world, specifically naming North Korea and Iran.

“In the secret world of military planning, global strike has become the term of art to describe a specific preemptive attack,” according to Arkin. “When military officials refer to global strike, they stress its conventional elements. Surprisingly, however, global strike also includes a nuclear option, which runs counter to traditional US notions about the defensive role of nuclear weapons.”

The military’s Strategic Command, or Stratcom, has overseen Rumsfeld’s directive. “Once, Stratcom oversaw only the nation’s nuclear forces,” Arkin notes; “now it has responsibility for overseeing a global strike plan with both conventional and nuclear options. President Bush spelled out the definition of ‘full-spectrum’ global strike in a January 2003 classified directive, describing it as ‘a capability to deliver rapid, extended range, precision kinetic (nuclear and conventional) and non-kinetic (elements of space and information operations) effects in support of theater or national objectives.’”

According to Arkin, who has written a book on secret US military codenames, a Stratcom contingency plan to attack countries such as North Korea or Iran, known as CONPLAN 8022-02, includes the option of deploying a bunker-busting nuclear bomb.

A parallel “Global Strike” plan developed within the Air Force includes a plan for American military domination of space. The *New York Times* reported on May 18 that the Air Force is pushing for a presidential directive sometime in the next few weeks that would bring the US closer to fielding offensive space weapons. The goal of such a space-based weapons system would be to give the US capacity to attack any country anywhere in the world within an hour.

Among the proposals for development is a program nicknamed

“Rods From God,” which, according to the *Times*, “aims to hurl cylinders of tungsten, titanium or uranium from the edge of space to destroy targets on the ground, striking at speeds of about 7,200 miles an hour with the force of a small nuclear weapon.” Another program “seeks to turn radio waves into weapons whose powers could range ‘from tap on the shoulder to toast,’ in the words of an Air Force plan.”

These chilling military plans and the US position on the NPT reflect a determination on the part of the Bush administration to eliminate all potential constraints on American military dominance. Facing a persistent decline in its economic hegemony, the American ruling elite sees its unrivaled military power as the only means of maintaining itself as the principal world power.

The fundamental conflicts between the US and the non-nuclear powers have almost completely stalled negotiations at the NPT conference. It took nearly two weeks of the month-long session for the participants to even agree to an agenda, and actual discussions only began on Thursday. It is unlikely that any comprehensive agreement will be worked out by the end of the month.

If it cannot push through its proposed changes, the NPT appears likely to be headed for the dust bin, at least as far as US policy is concerned. The Bush administration has demonstrated little interest in finding a compromise with the non-nuclear states. Indeed, John Bolton, the former undersecretary of state for arms control (and the likely future ambassador to the UN), cut off pre-conference negotiations six months ago, according to a Bush official cited in the May 11 issue of *Newsweek*.

Treaties such as the NPT, to the extent that they limit American military freedom, are anathema. The Bush administration withdrew from the Antiballistic Missile Treaty with Russia in 2002. In addition to limiting missile defense systems, the ABM Treaty also prohibited space-based weapons. Early in its first term, the administration scuttled the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, declining to resubmit the treaty to the US Senate for confirmation. The CTBT would have banned future nuclear tests, including tests that will be required to develop bunker-busting weapons.



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