

# Obama administration continues Bush policy on land mines

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On Tuesday, the Obama Administration announced that after reviewing US policy it does not intend to sign an international treaty banning land mines. State Department spokesperson Ian Kelly said that the Bush administration policy of abstaining from the treaty “remains in effect.”

Kelly explained, “We determined that we wouldn't be able to meet our national defense needs, nor our security commitments to our friends and allies if we signed this convention.” The latter part of this statement refers to the border of North Korea and South Korea, which is littered with mines as a deterrent to a North Korean invasion.

The administration backpedaled slightly on Wednesday, declaring that it is carrying out a review of the policy, but will not sign the treaty while this review is still pending. “The administration is committed to a comprehensive review of its land mine policy. That review is still on-going,” said Kelly. “The review is going to take some time, given that it is the first review of our policy conducted since 2003.” No explanation was offered as to why the review suddenly went from complete to “on-going.”

The 1997 Ottawa Treaty, also known as the Land Mine Treaty, was signed by 133 countries around the world. Much of Africa, South and Central America, and Europe are among the signatories. The treaty is more limited than its name implies, as it only prohibits anti-personnel mines. Anti-tank mines, remote control mines, and “anti-handling devices” (booby traps) are not covered by the treaty.

The international campaign to ban land mines is in response to their enormous toll on civilian populations, particularly after a conflict is over. An Associated Press report states, “Land mines are known to have caused 5,197 casualties last year, a third of them children,

according to the Nobel Prize-winning International Campaign to Ban Land mines (ICBL), which links some 1,000 activist groups.”

Most land mines are fairly small devices shaped as cylinders, rectangles, or discs. They are either buried at a shallow depth, or left in debris and overgrowth. Owing to their simplicity, size, and low cost, millions have been deployed around the world.

Mines are “area-denial” weapons, designed to prohibit access to a specific territory or route. In conflict, this can encompass almost any area critical to the military strategy of the moment, including civilian areas. For example, a supply route might be mined to cut off or hamper supply chains. At the end of the conflict, the same route could be a critical transportation route for civilians, and could still be littered with unknown mines.

The removal of mines is an expensive, dangerous, and complicated process. The mines are highly volatile, and can still explode decades after their placement. In war, the process of mine laying is focused on making them impossible to detect—and post-conflict, they remain just as hard to detect.

In World War Two the metal detector was adapted to detect mines, which have metal parts like firing pins and shrapnel. Producers quickly responded by making as much as possible in a mine with plastic or wood to avoid detection.

In another mine removal process, a mechanical minesweeper (an armored truck) uses weight to set off mines. In response, mines have been created with extremely sensitive firing pins that resist heavy weights but can be set off by a human footstep.

Post-conflict, many militaries will not even reveal where the weapons have been used, or in some cases do not even know. Mine removal organizations must then

painstakingly comb a mined region with mechanical mine clearing vehicles, metal detectors, or even animals trained to smell out the explosive powders in a mine.

The scope of mine removal is vastly insufficient to the scale of mining, leaving civilian populations vulnerable for extended periods of time. Anti-personnel mines, which are banned by the Ottawa Treaty, can be particularly horrendous. They are not designed to kill. Instead, they maim, by obliterating a foot or a leg. In war this ties up resources in rescue and recover; in peace it has ruined the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians.

The major nations abstaining from the land mine treaty include China, Russia, India, and above all, the United States. Iran, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, North and South Korea, and most central Asian nations also have not signed.

On Sunday the second review of the Ottawa Treaty is being held in Cartagena, Colombia. For the first time, the United States is sending observers, though not participating directly.

Despite this steadfast avoidance of constraints on the weapons, the US military hasn't actually used land mines since the first Gulf War in 1991. It is notable that strategists found no need for the weapons in the neo-colonial occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, yet still insist that the massive American stockpile—10 million antipersonnel mines, and 7.5 million anti-tank mines—will be kept, and are open to usage.

What this points to is the acknowledgment of the possibility for a whole different type of military conflict; not one involving the suppression of a small nation or insurgent groups, but a conflict with a global competitor that would bring with it a very different type of war.

Though not mentioned in press accounts, the US policy on cluster weapons is very similar to the approach to land mines. Cluster munitions are small “bomblets” dropped from bomb or artillery shells, which disperse by the thousands over a wide area. Like land mines, cluster weapons can linger on a massive scale for long after a war, killing and maiming civilians on a regular basis. In every recent US conflict they have been used, to the outrage of humanitarian groups. The United States has steadfastly refused to sign a treaty banning the weapons, leaving its stockpile of tens of millions of bomb ripe for future usage.



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