

The NPT at a Crossroads

By Wade Huntley | July 1, 2005

The quinquennial Review Conference for the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) ended in May producing no new ideas or proposals for strengthening the NPT regime or for confronting the crucial challenges that the regime today faces. In the wake of this utter failure many nuclear disarmament advocates have warned of the pending demise of the NPT regime.

Take a deep breath. The conference failure is not a catastrophe: the NPT continues to provide the world's strongest means to constrain nuclear proliferation, as it has for the past 35 years. But the conference exposed deep chasms among NPT member states across a range of issues that puts the NPT regime at an important crossroads and does imperil its long-term viability.

The NPT emerged in the 1960s, in a nuclear proliferation climate even more foreboding than today's. By 1964, France and China had joined the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain to bring the number of overt nuclear weapons states to five; many expected that number to be two or three dozen by the end of the century. Meanwhile, the U.S.-Soviet arms race was accelerating, with over 30,000 warheads in the U.S. stockpile alone. In the face of this looming horizontal and vertical proliferation, the NPT provided a core bargain that offered something to everyone: non-nuclear member states agreed to forswear nuclear weapons (and accept intrusive international verification), while nuclear-armed states agreed to forswear nuclear threats against non-nuclear states, provide access to peaceful nuclear energy technologies and eventually to eliminate their own nuclear arsenals.

Up to a point, this bargain has worked. Today, the number of states known to possess usable nuclear arsenals is only eight. Those three additional states – India, Pakistan, and Israel – are now also the only states in the world not to have joined the NPT (Cuba's recent accession brought in the last non-nuclear state; North Korea joined but withdrew from the NPT and may now also possess nuclear weapons). Meanwhile, the arsenals of the United States and Soviet Union/ Russia have shrunk from their combined Cold War peak of 65,000 warheads to under 20,000, with that number set to shrink further under the Moscow Treaty.

More importantly, but less often noticed, the NPT has reinforced national inclinations toward nuclear restraint. In many cases, countries' strongest incentives to obtain nuclear weapons have not been desires to expand national

power and prestige, but concerns that neighbors might harbor such ambitions. The verification mechanisms of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have enabled these countries to assure others, and be assured by others, of the absence of threatening nuclear weapons development programs. From Japan to Germany to Brazil, these mechanisms provide a sturdy structure of non-nuclear security from which all nations benefit.

Facing New Challenges

But despite these successes, new challenges have emerged. North Korea's NPT withdrawal and unrestrained nuclear development program is a crack in the nonproliferation edifice yet to be sealed. Iran's recently revealed nuclear ambitions and activities have demonstrated the inadequacies of previous IAEA verification procedures and added a potent new dilemma to the volatile Middle East. Some forty countries now possess the capacity and expertise to initiate nuclear weapons programs, much obtained through the NPT's provisions for sharing nuclear technologies for peaceful uses, exposing a loophole in the NPT's core bargain unanticipated at its outset. Other nuclear sharing has taken place surreptitiously: subsidiary agreements to control nuclear technology exports are still limited and fraught with implementation challenges. Meanwhile, revelations of Pakistani nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan's private network demonstrate that non-state actors, abetted by weak, inattentive or corrupted governments, can also propel nuclear proliferation. After September 11, the prospect of such non-state actors using nuclear or radiological weapons against civilian targets is now a forefront concern, highlighting the ongoing challenge to secure the many tons of fissile and radiological materials that remain stockpiled in the former Soviet Union and some forty other countries throughout the world.

Meanwhile, reducing reliance on nuclear weapons among the NPT's five acknowledged nuclear weapons powers has waned. The limits on U.S. and Russian arsenals under the Moscow Treaty expire in 2012. The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) has not come

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into force and negotiations for a proposed treaty to end production of fissile materials have not commenced. Meanwhile the Bush administration has embarked on a variety of new nuclear weapons initiatives, including notorious plans for new warhead designs and less noticed strategies to expand nuclear use options in deterrence postures, conflict contingencies and pre-emptive strike planning – including potential first-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states for counterproliferation purposes. These actions flout commitments to work definitively toward nuclear disarmament under NPT Article VI and assurances not to threaten non-nuclear NPT members with nuclear attack codified in the 1995 resolution to extend the NPT indefinitely. Yet in testimony to Congress on the eve of the Review Conference, Assistant Secretary of State Stephen Rademaker, head of the U.S. delegation, not only defended the U.S. disarmament record but pointedly denied that U.S. disarmament efforts have any bearing on the nonproliferation commitments of other countries – a position that effectively disowns the “bargain” at the heart of the NPT.

Stonewalling by the Bush Administration

The Bush administration’s determination to stonewall the 2005 NPT Review Conference was reportedly engineered well in advance by John Bolton, then U.S. Undersecretary of State and now ambassador-designate to the United Nations. Ironically, and tragically, this position obstructed U.S. efforts during the Conference to forge accord – that otherwise would have been forthcoming – to confront immediate nonproliferation challenges. For example, the United States, the UN Secretary General and the head of the IAEA all endorse some form of international control of nuclear fuels to close the “loophole” that allows states to obtain for peaceful purposes nuclear technologies that could later be diverted to weapons programs. But devising an effective scheme to “internationalize” the fuel cycle will require artful consensus building involving compromises among non-nuclear states who greatly value the NPT’s promise of support for peaceful nuclear development and whose indigenous capabilities vary widely. The Bush Administration’s impenetrable obstinacy on its disarmament commitments diverted attentions and energies away from such urgent problem areas, overshadowing similar obduracy by states such as Iran and Egypt, and precluded even a hope of achieving consensus on meaningful responses.

If the United States is serious about generating concerted global action on immediate nonproliferation dangers, it

will also have to be serious about acting on its own disarmament obligations. The United States cannot achieve sturdy global nonproliferation unilaterally, or only through “coalitions of the willing” or ad hoc arrangements such as the Proliferation Security Initiative. Genuine multilateral accord among key diverse nations is a prerequisite to effective global nonproliferation – and that, in turn, depends upon agreement by all partners that the core “bargain” of the NPT regime is in force and respected. That legitimacy cannot be generated by U.S. military power alone.

At the same time, the United States is not solely responsible for the failure of the NPT Review Conference to face the regime’s current challenges. Several other key states, ranging from U.S. allies Israel and Pakistan to U.S. adversaries North Korea and Iran, are indulging nuclear ambitions that also erode non-nuclear norms and global nonproliferation efforts. To suggest that such countries’ nuclear efforts are mainly defense reactions to U.S. threats, as some U.S. critics have, ignores and demeans the behavior of the many other states that have abjured nuclear weapons development despite facing similar international motivations. If it is the responsibility of the United States to lead global nonproliferation efforts, it is equally the responsibility of other key states to commit themselves to that goal with equal sincerity.

The NPT has been a sturdy bastion of nonproliferation for 35 years. Today, its membership is more universal, and its verification mechanisms are sturdier, than ever before. The progress made at the 1995 and 2000 Review Conferences still stands. The NPT is not broken and it is very far from dead.

The NPT at a Crossroads

The NPT regime however, now labors under great new strains. It faces new challenges while suffering an eroding unity of purpose among key member states. Sustaining the regime’s ongoing successes and meeting today’s emerging new challenges requires strengthening the core “bargain” that defines the NPT – the linkage between nonproliferation among non-nuclear states and disarmament by nuclear-armed states. The deadlock at the NPT Review Conference reflects the breakdown of that bargain. The central question placing the NPT at a crossroads is whether consensus on the bargain, and on a program of action flowing from it, can be restored.

From this crossroads lay very divergent future paths. Failing to address current challenges could catalyze conta-

gious acceleration of reliance on nuclear threats and acquisitions of nuclear capabilities among states and non-state actors alike, dramatically increasing dangers that nuclear weapons eventually, in some context, will once again be used. As the United Nations' recent report *A More Secure World* warns, erosion of the NPT regime might soon pass a point of no return, releasing a "cascade of proliferation." However, an equally compelling alternative future is also possible: a reinvigorated NPT regime successfully meeting current challenges offers the prospect of dramatically deflating all states' incentives for nuclear weapons acquisition. Workable resolutions to North Korea's and Iran's challenges would prop up other "dominos" and potentially contain nuclear proliferation for the foreseeable future, and set in motion a tangible process of serious progress toward global nuclear disarmament.

Thus, the crossroads is real. Today's choices are seminal. Paradoxically, the NPT is somewhat a victim of its own success: that today's dangers are not quite as dire as the apocalyptic prospects at the depths of the Cold War makes more difficult coalescing global public determination to revivify the sense of urgency born of that earlier time. But the NPT's past success is more importantly a foundation for the future. The task at hand is not to replace or reinvent the NPT, but to build on this existing foundation: to usher the regime into the emerging post-Cold War nuclear era by empowering it not only to meet this era's new challenges, but also to seize this era's new opportunities to move meaningfully toward a nuclear-free world.

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By the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change
<http://www.un.org/secureworld/>

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS).
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Recommended citation:

Wade Huntley, “The NPT at a Crossroads”, (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, July 1, 2005).

Web location:

<http://www.fpiif.org/commentary/2005/0506crossroads.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Wade Huntley

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

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