

# **Nuclear Proliferation: A Gathering Storm**

**By Conn Hallinan | February 2, 2006**

*“Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.”*

## **Article VI, Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, 1968**

*“The United States will not use nuclear weapons against any non-nuclear weapon party state to the Non-Proliferation Treaty ... except in the case of an attack on the United States, its territories or armed forces, or its allies, by such a state allied to a nuclear weapon state...”*

**Addendum to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, 1978, agreed to by the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and endorsed by France. Reaffirmed in 1980 and 1995.**

*“The leaders of states who use terrorist means against us, as well as those who would consider using, in one way or another, weapons of mass destruction, must understand that they would lay themselves open to a firm and adapted response on our part. This response could be a conventional one. It could be of a different kind.”*

**French President Jacques Chirac visiting the nuclear submarine Vigilant, Jan. 19, 2006.**

Treaties are rarely scintillating, but the 30-year-old Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) has a certain sparseness of language and precision of meaning that makes it an engaging read. Boiled down, it commits the 177 non-nuclear nations that signed it not to acquire nuclear weapons and the Big Five nuclear powers—the United States, Britain, France, China, and the USSR—to dismantle theirs.

The theory behind it was simple: non-nuclear weapons states would forgo developing nukes on the conditions that, 1) they are never blackmailed with nuclear weapons, and 2) the Big Five get rid of their arsenals.

All of this seems to have gotten lost in the recent uproar over Iran. While Tehran is being accused of trying to scam the NPT by secretly developing nuclear weapons, the open flaunting of the Treaty by the major nuclear powers is simply ignored.

For almost 38 years the vast majority of the world's nations have adhered to the NPT. Only India, Pakistan, Israel, and possibly North Korea have joined the Big Five, although, at the time the Treaty was signed, a dozen more were on the verge of developing nuclear weapons. In short, the vast bulk of the signers have held to what they agreed to.

The Big Five, however, have ignored the obligation to dismantle their nuclear arsenals or to even discuss general disarmament. At the NPT Review Conference last summer the issue did not even come up, a shortcoming which UN General Secretary Kofi Annan called a “disgrace.”

Not only have the Big Five refused to consider eliminating their nuclear arsenals, in 2002 the Bush Administration's Nuclear Posture Review



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(NPR) unilaterally overturned the 1978 pledge, and the White House threatened to use nukes on Syria, Iran, and Iraq, all non-nuclear states. The Administration's rationale is that the NPT is not just about nuclear weapons, but "weapons of mass destruction," which it argues, includes chemical and biological weapons. It is a re-interpretation the French appear to embrace as well.

But chemical and biological weapons were specifically excluded from the NPT for the very good reason that they are not weapons of mass destruction.

Chemical weapons are certainly nasty, but generals in World War I found them more an annoyance than a serious threat. While artillery (the big killer), machine guns, and rifles inflicted 8.5 million deaths from 1914-1918, gas only killed about 100,000. Chemicals are simply too difficult to deliver and too volatile to do much damage.

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Bacteriological warfare is spooky, but even more difficult to make effective. Anthrax may have shut down Washington, but it only killed five people.

Nuclear weapons are quite another matter, although as memories of World War II grow dim, it is easy to fall into the equivalence trap.

A brief reminder:

The fireball that consumed Hiroshima reached 18 million degrees in one millionth of a second. It evaporated 68% of the city, demolishing structures built to withstand an 8.5 earthquake. It charred trees five miles from ground zero, blew out windows 17 miles from the city's center, and killed 100,000 people in a single blow. Another 100,000 plus would follow in the months ahead.



The mushroom cloud billowing up 20,000 feet over Hiroshima on the morning of August 6, 1945 (Photo from U.S. National Archives, RG 77-AEC)

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According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), there are presently about 27,000 such warheads in the world, many of them capable of being launched within a half hour. In accepting the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize, Mohamed ElBaradei, head of the IAEA, said "More than 15 years after the Cold War, it is incomprehensible to many that the major nuclear weapons states operate with their weapons on hair-trigger alert."

This is the price the world is paying for not insisting that the Big Five do what they agreed to do.

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And the danger is getting worse. Not from countries like Iran, but from the nuclear weapons establishment—particularly in the United States—that is systematically trying to dismantle the fragile barrier of treaties that hold the beast in check.

One of the key threads in this increasingly tattered web is the 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). The theory behind the CTBT was that banning tests would prevent any further developments in nuclear weapons technology, particularly the miniaturization of warheads. It was also assumed that no one would risk deploying a weapon which had not been tested. Nuclear devices are tricky and a substantial number of designs produce duds.

A side benefit to the CTBT was that it would also prevent the nuclear powers from randomly pulling warheads off line and testing them to make sure they still worked. The Treaty designers hoped that a lack of confidence in a weapon's reliability was all to the good. If you are not sure something will work, you may be more reluctant to use it.

But the ink was hardly dry when the United States—and, it would appear, France—figured out how to redesign weapons without actually setting them off. Using sophisticated computers, weapon labs in France, and at Livermore, Los Alamos, and Sandia in the United States, began to configure a new generation of nuclear weapons.

Indeed, India pointed to this computer-based U.S. weapons program as one of the reasons why it initiated a round of nuclear tests in 1998, although New Delhi's accusations received virtually no ink in the states.

Last year, Congress launched the Reliable Warhead Replacement (RWR) program purportedly to

insure that the U.S. nuclear arsenal would continue to work. One could certainly make an argument that RWR was a violation of the spirit, if not the letter, of the CTBT.

But according to the local anti-nuclear group Tri-Valley CARE, the program is also retooling warheads to make them smaller in yield (and therefore more likely to be used), capable of taking out deeply buried targets, and able to destroy chemical and biological weapons.

This redesign effort was revealed in a report by William Schneider Jr., chair of the Defense Science Board, who wrote in 2004 that the United States must not just simply improve nuclear weapons capacity “on the margins,” but must develop “weapons more relevant to the future threat environment.”

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It is possible the United States could accomplish this without resuming testing (although Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has openly talked about violating the test ban). But even if the United States doesn't test, other nations will certainly not allow themselves to fall behind just because they don't have fancy computers. If the United States continues on this path, other nations will resume testing, which will, in turn, encourage non-nuclear nations to begin their own programs.

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It is estimated that up to 40 nations could manufacture nuclear weapons.

“The most important thing,” El Baradei told the *Financial Times*, “is to make the big boys understand that the major league is not an exclusive club. If you are not going to dissolve that club, others are going to join it. A world of haves and have-nots is not sustainable.”

The major danger in the world today comes not from countries like Iran and North Korea, but from the unwillingness of the major nuclear powers to live up to the promise they made back in 1968.

“The central problem in halting nuclear proliferation,” says Selig Harrison, director of the Asia Program of the Center for International Policy and a former India bureau chief for the *Washington Post*, “lies in the failure of the original nuclear powers that signed the NPT to live up to Article 6, in which they pledged to phase out their nuclear weapons.”

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