

U.S. Pre-emptive Strike Doctrine Bane of Nuclear Non-Proliferation Watchdogs

By Martin Schwarz | July 13, 2003

U.S. President George W. Bush's new doctrine of preventive war and pre-emptive strikes is turning the UN's nuclear watchdog into a lapdog.

After decades of low-profile work to promote cooperation on peaceful use of nuclear energy, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is being forced to mediate between the United States and certain members of what the Bush administration terms the axis of evil—namely Iraq, Iran, and North Korea—, with the unfortunate outcome of a likely increase in nuclear weapons.

Until the crisis over Iraq, the 2,200 employees and diplomats at the IAEA in Vienna led a relatively relaxed life, carrying out their duties to inspect and enforce the UN Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and encourage disarmament of atomic weapons of mass destruction.

But something changed for them when they didn't find what Bush wanted them to find in their inspections of Iraq: nuclear weapons, or at least a clandestine nuclear program. That seriously damaged relations between Washington and the IAEA. "The U.S. was very angry with the way we presented our findings at the UN Security Council," one IAEA diplomat said. Since then the IAEA has found itself in both the U.S. and world spotlight. Mohamed El-Baradei, director general of the IAEA, has come under "immense pressure from the U.S.," as one diplomat at the UN in Vienna told me.

There has been no time for a diplomatic reconciliation between the U.S. government and the IAEA, as the Bush administration has hastened to frame Iran and North Korea as the new nuclear threats to justify its doctrine.

At the moment, the IAEA is the uneasy mediator between Tehran and Washington: "We have to find a compromise between them," one IAEA diplomat

said, after the board of governors of the IAEA decided not to follow the U.S. recommendation to refer the problem with Iran's nuclear program to the Security Council. The Bush administration wanted to see Iran as a defendant at the Security Council. But this idea was rejected by the other board members, who opted to try to convince Tehran to agree to a stricter inspection regime.

Concretely, Washington wanted Iran to sign an additional protocol to the NPT, allegedly to improve IAEA inspectors' effectiveness. But Washington refuses to let IAEA inspectors work in the United States, and its main allies in its war on terrorism haven't signed this protocol, raising doubts about Bush's commitment to non-proliferation.

Bush's use of the specter of nuclear threat to legitimate his intimidation policy can also be seen as just another excuse if reports from occupied post-war Iraq are taken into account. When the reports about massive looting in Iraq's biggest nuclear facility Al-Tuwaitha emerged after the war, the U.S. administration rejected the IAEA's request to send inspectors to that facility for more than a month. El-Baradei didn't even get an answer to his letters to U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell. Meanwhile, strange things must have happened in Al-Tuwaitha: The IAEA in Vienna received several phone calls from U.S. soldiers based at the facility to secure it, who didn't know what to do with nuclear material they had found.

In North Korea, where good reasons exist to believe nuclear weapons are being developed, the IAEA inspectors were thrown out at the end of last year, prompting agency officials to surmise that their organization is in the middle of a bilateral game



between the Asian nation and the United States. Saddled with the duty to resolve the conflict between the two over North Korea's nuclear program, but without the power to do so, the IAEA is facing the best example to date of problems it may face in the future.

North Korea seized on its international obligations under the NPT only to provoke the United States to restart financial and humanitarian aid. For North Korea, bankrupt in every sense, nuclear weapons seem to be the only way to put pressure on the U.S. superpower. Pyongyang banished IAEA inspectors, not because of its dissatisfaction with the inspection regime, but due to fear of Bush and a possible pre-emptive strike. So North Korea is the first regime to learn this lesson from the standoff over Iraq: If you

represent a real nuclear threat to the United States, it may have the will to solve bilateral problems not by force, but by negotiations.

“The U.S. has destroyed our work,” an IAEA official said. In other words: Washington's policy will not support non-proliferation efforts, but rather will lead into a new era of nuclear armament.

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p. 2

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