

Is the United States living up to its disarmament commitments?

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While the Bush administration has voiced doubts about several multilateral arms control agreements over the past twelve months, it has reiterated strong support for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). For example, the final communiqué of the NATO Foreign Ministers meeting in May 2001 stated, “We reaffirm our determination to contribute to the implementation of the conclusions of the 2000 NPT Review Conference”.[i] In addition, a joint communiqué issued by Bush and Putin on 13 November 2001 committed the United States to undertake “efforts to strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty”.[ii] Washington’s support for the NPT was most recently reaffirmed in a speech at the UN Conference on Disarmament earlier this year.[iii]

However, while the Bush administration earnestly professes to uphold to the broad structure of the NPT, recent plans and actions casts serious doubt on Washington’s true commitment to the NPT. Undersecretary of State John Bolton told Arms Control Today in February, “We take our obligations under the NPT very seriously. In terms of what was said at the 1995 and 2000 NPT review conferences, we’re reviewing all of that in the context of our preparation for the 2005 NPT review conference.”[iv] But Washington’s plans and goals actually water down many of the 13 commitments agreed by all States Parties at the 2000 NPT Review conference. The extent to which Washington’s missile defense plans, phantom arsenal reductions, and potential development of new nuclear weapons will affect the long-term health of the NPT may prove to be the most important question at the 2002 PrepCom.

NPT Commitment: A diminishing role for nuclear weapons in security policies.

The US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), issued in January 2002, reveals the controversial thinking that drives nuclear policy decision-making in the Bush administration. Among the most contentious issues is the intention to develop new nuclear weapon systems. In particular, the NPR calls for a three-year study into developing a nuclear-tipped, earth-penetrating weapon and also establishes “advanced warhead concept teams” at the nation’s three nuclear weapons laboratories to work on new warheads or warhead modifications.[v] The NPR also calls for research to begin on fitting an existing nuclear warhead into a new 5,000-pound ‘earth penetrating’ munition.[vi]

While the NPR gives a role for conventional weapons in the new triad, the wider agenda of the Bush administration indicates an increased role for nuclear weapons in US military planning. The decision to develop new nuclear capabilities for targeting hardened targets, and the revelation that nuclear weapons could be used against non-nuclear countries that have signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), including Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea and Syria, are especially controversial.

NPT Commitment: An unequivocal undertaking... to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals leading to nuclear disarmament.

In addition to mandating a three-year study into the development of low-yield earth penetrating nuclear warhead, the NPR also outlined plans for the deployment of new missile systems, submarines, and bombers. Washington is to begin studies for a new intercontinental ballistic missile to be operational in 2020, a new submarine-launched ballistic missile and nuclear submarine in 2030, and a new heavy bomber in 2040, as well as new warheads for all of them.[vii]

Combined with the decision to accelerate U.S. plutonium pit production, these plans demonstrate the current administration’s ambition to continue, and possibly increase, the reliance on nuclear weapons in US military planning well into the 21st century. Such activities sit uneasily with the US commitment to nuclear disarmament and send a clear signal to the rest of the world that the Washington still views nuclear weapons as a unique and indispensable military tool.

NPT Commitment: To apply the principle of irreversibility to nuclear disarmament, and other related arms control and reduction measures.

President Bush promised in late 2001 to cut the U.S. nuclear arsenal to between 1,700 and 2,200 warheads within ten years. However, the NPR indicates that the “reductions” in warheads would amount to little more than moving them into active and inactive reserves, called the “responsive infrastructure”. No warhead destruction has been promised by the Bush administration to date, and reallocating them into different categories leaves the warheads available for redeployment and re-alerting.

To his credit, Russian President Putin has engaged Bush in dialogue about reciprocating these proposed reductions. Russia also expressed interest in codifying these cuts in writing. Washington has shifted from its initial stance of refusing to document these cuts to agreeing that the two countries should aim to produce a written agreement in time for the May 2002 summit in Moscow. However, regardless of what agreement is made in May, the United States seems determined to maintain its “responsive infrastructure” and therefore the ability to reverse any cuts made to the arsenal. Recent studies indicate that the United States could have 2,400 strategic nuclear warheads in its “responsive force” in 2012, in addition to the 1,700 to 2,200 operationally-deployed warheads.[viii]

NPT Commitment: Strengthening the CTBT and maintaining the testing moratorium

Not only has the United States refused to participate in test ban discussions, but it has left the door open for future testing. While upholding the self-imposed testing moratorium, enacted in 1991, administration officials have indicated that future testing may be necessary to maintain the integrity and safety of the U.S. arsenal. The NPR calls on the Department of Energy to accelerate the amount of time required to prepare a site for a nuclear weapon test and asserts that maintaining the test-ban moratorium “may not be possible for the indefinite future.”[ix]

Added to that, the United States also sanctioned extended research into the development of a new nuclear warhead, and anticipates a new generation of nuclear weapons (air-, land- and sea-based systems) to be deployed starting in 2020 (see above). Development of new weapons will necessitate renewed testing, with the administration claiming that new designs will not follow the models derived from previous testing.

Steps Forward at the PrepCom

A weakening of the NPT would be an enormous blow to the security of all countries around the world, including the United States. A recent report from the US Defence Threat Reduction Agency supports this assessment. It concludes that the collapse of the NPT would encourage countries “to review their nuclear policies and to adopt more aggressive policies. In the long run, this strategic environment would likely foster vertical and horizontal proliferation of nuclear weapons.”[x]

However, the extent to which the Bush administration is reneging on prior commitments under the NPT threatens the very existence of the agreement. Jayantha Dhanapala, UN Undersecretary General for Disarmament Affairs, highlighted this point in his comments on the NPR:

[The NPR] flies in the face of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty undertakings. Under Article VI, one is expected to reduce nuclear weapons and ultimately eliminate them. So this is to me a very serious contradiction of that and will be a very major stumbling block as we begin the process of preparing for the 2005 NPT Review Conference, which begins in April.[xi]

If the Bush administration is to convince other States Parties of its long-term commitment to the NPT, it will have to go some way towards explaining, tempering, or reversing many of the nuclear policies it is currently pursuing. The National Resources

Defense Council pointed out in a recent report that the US plans outlined in the NPR are “tantamount to a U.S. ‘breakout’ from the NPT.”^[xii] Unless the Bush administration reinforces the NPT with deeds as well as words, the world’s pre-eminent nuclear non-proliferation agreement may very quickly experience a crisis of confidence leading to dangerous levels of nuclear proliferation.

At the April PrepCom, States Parties to the NPT have a responsibility to address the policy failings of the nuclear weapon states. It is imperative that their voices are heard and their concerns addressed.

Endnotes

[i] “Final Communiqué, Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Council”, Budapest, 29-30 May 2001

[ii] “Joint Statement by President George W. Bush and President Vladimir V. Putin on a New Relationship Between the United States and Russia” Office of the White House Press Secretary, 13 November 2001.

[iii] “Text: New U.S. Envoy to CD: Peace, Security are Disarmament Goals” Washington File, 7 February 2002

[iv] “A New Strategic Framework? Detailing the Bush Approach to Nuclear Security: An ACT Interview with Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John R. Bolton” Arms Control Today, March 2002

[v] “Nuclear Plans Go Beyond Cuts, Bush Seeks a New Generation Of Weapons, Delivery Systems” by Walter Pincus, Washington Post, 19 February 2002

[vi] “Secret Plan Outlines The Unthinkable” by William M. Arkin, Los Angeles Times, 10 March 2002

[vii] “Nuclear Posture Review [Excerpts] Submitted to Congress on 31 December 2001” Courtesy of GlobalSecurity

[viii] “U.S. Will Hold 2,400 Warheads in Short-Term Reserve” By Jonathan Wright, Reuters, 22 March 2002

[ix] “Nuclear Posture Review [Excerpts] Submitted to Congress on 31 December 2001” Courtesy of GlobalSecurity

[x] “The Future Integrity of the Global Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime Alternative Nuclear Worlds and Implications for US Nuclear Policy”, Defense Threat Reduction Agency, Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, April 2001

[xi] “U.S. Plan Concerns Top U.N. Official”, UN Wire, 13 March 2002

[xii] “Faking Nuclear Restraint: The Bush Administration’s Secret Plan For Strengthening U.S. Nuclear Forces”, NRDC Backgrounder, February 13, 2001