North Korea Agreed to Denuclearize, But US Refuses Despite Treaty Obligation

After North Korea agreed in principle to get rid of its nukes, the U.S. continues to ignore its obligation under the NPT to also eliminate its nuclear weapons, as Marjorie Cohn explains.

By Marjorie Cohn

A powerful economic incentive continues to drive the nuclear arms race. After the Singapore Summit, the stock values of all major defense contractors — including Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Boeing and General Dynamics — declined.

Given his allegiance to boosting corporate profits, it’s no surprise that Donald Trump is counterbalancing the effects of the Singapore Summit’s steps toward denuclearization with a Nuclear Posture Review that steers the US toward developing leaner and meaner nukes and lowers the threshold for using them.

The United States has allocated $1.7 trillion to streamline our nuclear arsenal, despite having agreed in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1968 to work toward nuclear disarmament.

Meanwhile, the US maintains a stockpile of 7,000 nuclear weapons, some 900 of them on “hair trigger alert,” according to the Union of Concerned Scientists.

“If weapons are used they need to be replaced,” Brand McMillan, chief investment officer for Commonwealth Financial Network has argued. “That makes war a growth story for these stocks, and one of the big potential growth stories recently has been North Korea. What the agreement does, at least for a while, is take military conflict off the table.”

Moreover, economic incentives surrounding conventional weapons also cut against the promise of peace on the Korean Peninsula. Eric Sirotkin, founder of Lawyers for Demilitarization and Peace in Korea, has pointed out that South Korea is one of the largest importers of conventional weapons from the United States. If North and South Korea achieve “a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula,” as envisioned by the agreement between Trump and Kim Jong Un, the market for US weapons could dry up, according to Sirotkin.

Even so, US defense spending will continue to increase, according to Bloomberg Intelligence aerospace expert George Ferguson. “If North Korea turns from a pariah state to being welcomed in the world community, there are still enough
trouble spots that require strong defense spending, supporting revenue and profit growth at prime defense contractors."

The US Lags Behind on Denuclearization

Last year, more than 120 countries in the UN General Assembly approved the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which requires ratifying countries “never under any circumstances to develop, test, produce, manufacture, otherwise acquire, possess or stockpile nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices.” It also prohibits the transfer of, use of, or threat to use nuclear weapons or nuclear explosive devices.

Since the treaty opened for signature on September 20, 2017, 58 countries have signed and 10 have ratified it. Fifty countries must ratify the treaty for it to enter into force, hopefully in 2019.

The five original nuclear-armed nations — the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China — boycotted the treaty negotiations and the voting. North Korea, Israel, Pakistan and India, which also have nuclear weapons, refrained from participating in the final vote. During negotiations, in October 2016, North Korea had voted for the treaty.

In advance of the Singapore Summit, dozens of Korean American organizations and allies signed a statement of unity, which says:

“Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula means not only eliminating North Korea’s nuclear weapons but also denuclearizing the land, air, and seas of the entire peninsula. This is not North Korea’s obligation alone. South Korea and the United States, which has in the past introduced and deployed close to one thousand tactical nuclear weapons in the southern half of the peninsula, also need to take concrete steps to create a nuclear-free peninsula.”

Prospects for a Denuclearized Peninsula

Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula means not only eliminating North Korea’s nuclear weapons but also denuclearizing the land, air, and seas of the entire peninsula. This is not North Korea’s obligation alone. South Korea and the United States, which has in the past introduced and deployed close to one thousand tactical nuclear weapons in the southern half of the peninsula, also need to take concrete steps to create a nuclear-free peninsula.

The jury is out on whether the statement signed by Trump and Kim after months of hurling incendiary nuclear threats at each other will prevent future nuclear threats and pave the way for global denuclearization.
On April 27, 2018, the Panmunjom Declaration, a momentous agreement between South Korea and North Korea, set the stage for the Singapore Summit. It reads, “The two leaders [of North and South Korea] solemnly declared before the 80 million Korean people and the whole world that there will be no more war on the Korean Peninsula and thus a new era of peace has begun.”

The Trump-Kim statement explicitly reaffirmed the Panmunjom Declaration and said North Korea “commits to work towards complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”

However, when the summit was in the planning stages and before Trump anointed John Bolton as National Security Adviser, Bolton skeptically predicted the summit would not deter North Korea from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Bolton wants regime change in North Korea. His invocation of the Libya model – in which Muammar Qaddafi relinquished his nuclear weapons and was then viciously murdered – nearly derailed the summit. Bolton cynically hoped the summit would provide “a way to foreshorten the amount of time that we’re going to waste in negotiations that will never produce the result we want.”

Sirotkin said in an interview, “Sadly, [the summit] may be set up in this way to please the John Bolton neocon wing as this offers nothing but the peace we agreed to after World War II for all countries of the world in the UN Charter.”

Meanwhile, Trump claims he has achieved something his predecessors – particularly his nemesis Barack Obama – were unable to pull off. “There is no longer a Nuclear Threat from North Korea,” Trump tweeted upon landing in the United States after the summit. Five minutes later, he again took to Twitter, declaring, “Before taking office people were assuming we were going to War with North Korea. President Obama said that North Korea was our biggest and most dangerous problem. No longer – sleep well tonight.”

In an analysis shared via Facebook, H. Bruce Franklin, professor emeritus at Rutgers University, pointed out that – in a sideways fashion – Trump was correct when he tweeted there is no longer a nuclear threat from North Korea:

“[Trump] of course omitted the simple fact that there never was a realistic nuclear threat from North Korea, which has been frantically building a nuclear capability to act as a deterrent against U.S. aggression. If the U.S. stops threatening North Korea, North Korea will have no motive to threaten the U.S. with retaliation. The United States never faced any nuclear threat until we forced the Soviet Union to create one in 1949 to serve as a deterrent against our aggression.”
The significance of the Singapore Summit should not be underestimated. Trump is the first U.S. president to meet with the leader of North Korea. Trump showed Kim respect, and Kim responded in kind. Trump and Kim made a major commitment to peace. We should applaud and support it, and encourage Trump to sit down with Iran’s leaders as well.

The joint agreement signed by the two leaders in Singapore was admittedly sketchy, and denuclearization will not happen overnight. But the agreement was a critical first step in a process of rapprochement between two countries that have, in effect, been at war since 1950.

Indeed, the United States has continued to carry out military exercises with South Korea, which North Korea considers preparation for an invasion. In a critical move, Trump stated at the post-summit press conference that the United States would suspend its “very provocative” war games.

Trump also announced a freeze on any new US sanctions against North Korea and indicated that the United States could lift the current harsh sanctions even before accomplishing total denuclearization. Kim promised to halt nuclear testing and destroy a testing site for ballistic missile engines.

Ultimately, however, it is only global denuclearization that will eliminate the unimaginable threat of nuclear war.

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Might Israel Ever Surrender Its Nukes?

Just as apartheid South Africa once secretly possessed nuclear weapons and vowed to hold down its black majority forever, Israel is approaching a crossroads where it must decide if it will accept Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza as citizens and then what to do with its nukes, a dilemma that Joe Lauria explores.

By Joe Lauria
Israel last week sent its first observer in 20 years to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference, which is held every five years at U.N. headquarters in New York. Israel, which is not a NPT member and has never confirmed that it possesses nuclear weapons, also has taken part in five rounds of negotiations in Geneva on establishing a WMD-free zone in the Middle East.

However, the veil fell away for the world’s worst kept secret when the U.S. Defense Department recently released a document making it clear that Israel indeed has the bomb. A 1987 Pentagon document declassified in February unequivocally declares that Israel’s nuclear weapons program was then at the stage the U.S. had reached between 1955 and 1960. It also says Israel had the potential to develop hydrogen weapons.

The document was released just days before Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made his highly controversial March 3 speech to a joint session of Congress in which he argued why Iran had to be stopped from getting the bomb. As the only nuclear power in the region, Israel has an unequaled strategic advantage.

There doesn’t appear to be any scenario in which Israel would willingly give up its nuclear arsenal to fulfill a 1995 Security Council resolution calling for a nuclear-free Middle East. Or is there?

The only country to ever voluntarily relinquish its nuclear weapons is apartheid South Africa. President F.W. de Klerk gave written instructions to that effect in February 1991 (the same month Nelson Mandela was released from prison). When he announced in March 1993 that Pretoria’s six, airplane-borne weapons had been dismantled, De Klerk said it was done to improve South Africa’s international relations. (It was also the first time South Africa had ever confirmed that it had the bomb).

De Klerk’s reason has not been entirely accepted by experts. Speculation has led to various theories. One was that with the Soviet Union gone, South Africa no longer needed its nuclear deterrent. Another was that it no longer needed the bomb as a means of blackmailing the U.S. to come to its defense.

One credible theory is that Pretoria saw the writing on the wall: apartheid was doomed and South Africa would soon be led by a black government. The apartheid rulers concluded that it would be better to ditch the bomb altogether rather than letting it fall into the hands of the African National Congress and possibly shared with other African governments.

A former South African diplomat was quoted as saying Pretoria was “motivated by concern that it didn’t want any undeclared nuclear material or infrastructure falling into the hands of Nelson Mandela.”
De Klerk had already scrapped apartheid laws and released Mandela by the time the bombs were dismantled. When he announced that the nukes had been destroyed, de Klerk said, “This country will never be able to get the nuclear device again, to build one again, because of the absolute network of inspection and prevention which being a member of the NPT casts on any country.”

The parallels between South Africa and Israel are on the rise. After Netanyahu renounced his support for a Palestinian state in the heat of the final days of his re-election campaign (only to try to reverse it immediately afterward), both the United States and the United Nations strongly implied that the alternative would be an apartheid Israel.

“A two-state solution is the only way for the next Israeli Government to secure Israel as a Jewish and democratic state,” said Jen Psaki, the State Department spokeswoman, on March 18, the day after Netanyahu’s re-election. U.N. spokesman Farhan Haq said the same day that Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon “firmly believes” that a two-state solution and an end to the settlements is “the only way forward for Israel to remain a democratic State.”

Not quite believing my ears, I asked Haq if what he meant was that the alternative was an apartheid Israel. “I’ve said what I said,” he responded.

While many critics of Israel say it is already running a de-facto apartheid system in its rule over 4 million Palestinians without rights, legal apartheid would come with annexation of the West Bank and Gaza. That appears to be the reason annexation has been resisted. But the longer a two-state solution remains a dream, the more a one-state solution becomes possible.

No less than two former Israeli prime ministers have said so. “As long as in this territory west of the Jordan River there is only one political entity called Israel it is going to be either non-Jewish, or non-democratic. If this bloc of millions of Palestinians cannot vote, that will be an apartheid state,” said Ehud Barak in 2010.

Three years earlier, former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said, “If the day comes when the two-state solution collapses, and we face a South African-style struggle for equal voting rights (also for the Palestinians in the territories), then, as soon as that happens, the State of Israel is finished.”

A former Israeli Ambassador to South Africa, Alon Liel, put it even more bluntly. “In the situation that exists today, until a Palestinian state is created, we are actually one state. This joint state, in the hope that the status quo is temporary, is an apartheid state.”

Without full Palestinian suffrage, Israel is increasingly facing a hostile
international reaction. Israel **fears** the budding boycott, divestment and sanctions movement could grow to the scale of sanctions that pressed Pretoria to end apartheid.

A one-state solution, in which all Palestinians would have a vote, would almost certainly mean the election of a Palestinian government to rule both Arabs and Israelis, much as a black South African government rules blacks and whites. Despite its violent past, South African has shown how the communities could coexist.

It seems nearly inconceivable today that Israel would become a single state with a Palestinian Arab government. But it was once inconceivable that South Africa would be led by a black government. If that day of a peaceful transition to a single, democratic state to replace Israel should come, is it conceivable that Israeli leaders would allow their nuclear arsenal to be controlled by an Arab government?

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**The Risk of Not Worrying about the Bomb**

The nuclear sword of Damocles has been dangling over humanity for so many years that it’s taken for granted, even amid the U.S. State Department’s juvenile jousting over Ukraine. But carelessness could make it more likely to fall with unspeakable consequences, as Lawrence S. Wittner notes.

By Lawrence S. Wittner

Your doctors are worried about your health — in fact, about your very survival. No, they’re not necessarily your own personal physicians, but, rather, medical doctors around the world, represented by groups like International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW).

As you might recall, that organization, composed of many thousands of medical professionals from all across the globe, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985 for exposing the catastrophic effects of nuclear weapons.

Well, what seems to be the problem today? The problem, as a new [IPPNW report](#)
indicates, is that the world is showing growing symptoms of a terminal illness. In a nuclear war involving as few as 100 weapons anywhere in the world, the report noted, the global climate and agricultural production would be affected so severely that the lives of more than 2 billion people would be in jeopardy.

Even the use of the relatively small nuclear arsenals of India and Pakistan could cause terrible, long-lasting damage to the Earth’s ecosystems. The ensuing economic collapse and massive starvation would throw the world into chaos. And this is just a small portion of the looming nuclear catastrophe.

Today, some 17,300 nuclear weapons remain in the arsenals of nine nations, and their use would not only dramatically exacerbate climate disruption, but would create almost unbelievable horrors caused by their enormous blast, immense firestorms, and radioactive contamination.

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), founded by IPPNW in 2007, reports that a single nuclear weapon, detonated over a large city, “could kill millions of people in an instant.” Subsequently, many additional people would die of burns and other injuries, disease, and cancer.

Residents of the United States and Russia, two nations currently engaged in an international brawl, might be particularly interested in the fact that their countries possess over 16,000 nuclear weapons, including about 2,000 of them on hair-trigger alert, ready for use within minutes.

According to the ICAN report, if only 500 of these weapons were to hit major U.S. and Russian cities, “100 million people would die in the first half an hour, and tens of millions would be fatally injured. Huge swaths of both countries would be blanketed by radioactive fallout.” Furthermore, “most Americans and Russians would die in the following months from radiation sickness and disease epidemics.”

These unnerving reports from IPPNW and ICAN are reinforced by warnings from the World Health Organization (WHO). “Nuclear weapons constitute the greatest immediate threat to the health and welfare of mankind,” that respected international organization has reported. “It is obvious that no health service in any area of the world would be capable of dealing adequately with the hundreds of thousands of people seriously injured by blast, heat, or radiation from even a single one-megaton bomb.”

The WHO went on to declare: “To the immediate catastrophe must be added the long-term effects on the environment. Famine and diseases would be widespread, and social and economic systems would be totally disrupted.”

Despite the warnings from the medical profession that, in the words of ICAN,
"nuclear weapons are the most destructive, inhumane, and indiscriminate instruments of mass murder ever created," the nine nuclear powers seem in no hurry to get rid of them \( \frac{1}{4} \) or at least to get rid of their own. The United States has possessed nuclear weapons for almost 69 years; Russia for almost 65.

Despite their repeated promises, in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1970 and in later circumstances, to engage in nuclear disarmament, they still possess about 95 percent of the world’s nuclear weapons. Both countries, in fact, are now engaged in nuclear “modernization” programs, with the Obama administration proposing to upgrade nuclear weapons and build new nuclear submarines, missiles, and bombers at an estimated cost of somewhere between $355 billion and $1 trillion over the next 30 years.

Although the other kinds of weapons of mass destruction are banned by treaty, there are no plans by the nuclear powers to negotiate a treaty banning nuclear weapons. Indeed, given the current U.S.-Russia confrontation, it seems unlikely that there will be progress on much smaller-scale arms control and disarmament agreements.

That’s the bad news from your doctors. The good news is that you and other people around the world aren’t dead yet and that there’s still time to change the destructive behavior of your national leaders.

Actually, some opportunities are opening up along these lines. At a February 2014 conference in Mexico drawing official representatives from 146 nations (but boycotted by the nuclear powers), there was strong support for a treaty banning nuclear weapons, and the Austrian government will host a follow-up conference later this year.

Also, an international NPT Preparatory Conference will begin in late April and an international NPT Review Conference will be held the following spring.

Meanwhile, two pieces of legislation have been introduced in the U.S. Congress — the SANE Act in the Senate and the Rein-In Act in the House — that would cut the bloated U.S. nuclear weapons budget by $100 billion over the next ten years.

So who knows? If you and others take some preventive action, you might even avoid the terminal illness that now awaits you. Anyway, good luck with it. You deserve a chance to survive. In fact, we all do.

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Big-Power Foot-Dragging on Nukes

Most recent talk about nukes has focused on Iran, which doesn’t have one – and is accepting new constraints to show it won’t build one. But there’s been a long-delayed debate on a 44-year-old commitment by existing nuclear states to get rid of theirs, as Lawrence S. Wittner reports.

By Lawrence S. Wittner

It’s heartening to see that an agreement has been reached to ensure that Iran honors its commitment, made when it signed the 1970 nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), to forgo developing nuclear weapons.

But what about the other key part of the NPT, Article VI, which commits nuclear-armed nations to “cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament,” as well as to “a treaty on general and complete disarmament”? Here we find that, 44 years after the NPT went into force, the United States and other nuclear powers continue to pursue their nuclear weapons buildups, with no end in sight.

On Jan. 8, U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel announced what Reuters termed “ambitious plans to upgrade [U.S.] nuclear weapons systems by modernizing weapons and building new submarines, missiles and bombers to deliver them.” The Pentagon intends to build a dozen new ballistic missile submarines, a new fleet of long-range nuclear bombers, and new intercontinental ballistic missiles.

The Congressional Budget Office estimated in late December that implementing the plans would cost $355 billion over the next decade, while an analysis by the independent Center for Nonproliferation Studies reported that this upgrade of U.S. nuclear forces would cost $1 trillion over the next 30 years. If the higher estimate proves correct, the submarines alone would cost over $29 billion each.

Of course, the United States already has a massive nuclear weapons capability – approximately 7,700 nuclear weapons, with more than enough explosive power to destroy the world. Together with Russia, it possesses about 95 percent of the more than 17,000 nuclear weapons that comprise the global nuclear arsenal.

Nor is the United States the only nation with grand nuclear ambitions. Although China currently has “only” about 250 nuclear weapons, including 75 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), it recently flight-tested a hypersonic nuclear missile delivery vehicle capable of penetrating any existing defense system. The weapon, dubbed the Wu-14 by U.S. officials, was detected flying at ten times the speed of sound during a test flight over China during
early January 2014. According to Chinese scientists, their government had put an “enormous investment” into the project, with more than a hundred teams from leading research institutes and universities working on it.

Professor Wang Yuhui, a researcher on hypersonic flight control at Nanjing University, stated that “many more tests will be carried out” to solve the remaining technical problems. “It’s just the beginning.” Ni Lexiong, a Shanghai-based naval expert, commented approvingly that “missiles will play a dominant role in warfare, and China has a very clear idea of what is important.”

Other nations are engaged in this arms race, as well. Russia, the other dominant nuclear power, seems determined to keep pace with the United States through modernization of its nuclear forces. The development of new, updated Russian ICBMs is proceeding rapidly, while new nuclear submarines are already being produced. Also, the Russian government has started work on a new strategic bomber, known as the PAK DA, which reportedly will become operational in 2025.

Both Russia and India are known to be working on their own versions of a hypersonic nuclear missile carrier. But, thus far, these two nuclear nations lag behind the United States and China in its development. Israel is also proceeding with modernization of its nuclear weapons, and apparently played the key role in scuttling the proposed U.N. conference on a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East in 2012.

This nuclear weapons buildup certainly contradicts the official rhetoric. On April 5, 2009, in his first major foreign policy address, President Barack Obama proclaimed “America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.” That fall, the UN Security Council – including Russia, China, Britain, France and the United States, all of them nuclear powers – unanimously passed Resolution 1887, which reiterated the point that the NPT required the “disarmament of countries currently possessing nuclear weapons.” But rhetoric, it seems, is one thing and action quite another.

Thus, although the Iranian government’s willingness to forgo the development of nuclear weapons is cause for encouragement, the failure of the nuclear nations to fulfill their own NPT obligations is appalling. Given these nations’ enhanced preparations for nuclear war – a war that would be nothing short of catastrophic – their evasion of responsibility should be condemned by everyone seeking a safer, saner world.

Lawrence Wittner (http://lawrenceswittner.com), syndicated by PeaceVoice, is Professor of History emeritus at SUNY/Albany. His latest book is What’s Going On at UAardvark? (Solidarity Press), a satirical novel about campus life.
Taking an Iran Option Off the Table

President Obama’s repetitious warning to Iran that “all options are on the table” carries with it the implicit threat of a nuclear strike against a non-nuclear state, a violation of previously declared principles and a provocation that encourages Iran to build an atomic bomb, as Tad Daley explains.

By Tad Daley

March 15, the Ides of March on the Roman calendar, was the anniversary of the assassination of Julius Caesar. On that date 2,057 years later Western media outlets reported that President Barack Obama had flourished a dagger of his own.

In an interview broadcast on Channel Two in Israel, on the eve of his first presidential visit to the country, Obama said that regarding his efforts to dissuade Iran from crossing the nuclear Rubicon, “I continue to keep all options on the table. The United States obviously has significant capabilities.” Those words, “all options,” are the same ones used repeatedly by both Obama and his predecessor, George W. Bush.

Of course, the most fearsome of those American capabilities remains the nuclear option. Nobody’s been talking about that much recently (assuming that Obama and Bush were referring to America’s still-terrifying “conventional” arsenal of weapons). But if you think that an American nuclear first strike on Iran is not one of those “options on the table,” then you haven’t been listening very closely.

Nearly a half century ago, when the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) was under negotiation, the non-nuclear states made a simple request. In return for their promise to remain non-nuclear, they asked that the nuclear states promise not only to pursue universal nuclear disarmament, but also to promise never to threaten them or to attack them with nuclear weapons.

This, said the late Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and U.S. Ambassador Thomas Graham, Jr., “could be the most reasonable request in the history of international relations.” But the nuclear states refused, insisting that such a promise would intolerably constrain their “military flexibility.”

The issue arose again 25 years later, shortly before the 1995 NPT Review Conference. Under intense pressure from several non-nuclear states that were seriously threatening to withdraw from the treaty, France, Russia, Britain and the United States issued “harmonized security assurances,” declaring that they would neither use nor threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear
states. (They included one caveat regarding nuclear retaliation against non-nuclear states aiding and abetting any kind of attack by a nuclear state.)

On April 11, 1995, they incorporated this promise into U.N. Security Council Resolution 984. And in the final document adopted by the Review Conference a few weeks later, the signatories noted their hope that someday it might “take the form of an internationally legally binding instrument.”

That tortuous process was certainly not as good as if such an unambiguous promise had made it into the original text of the NPT itself (or been added later as an amendment). Nevertheless, most international legal experts now agree that the promise neither to threaten nor to launch a nuclear attack against non-nuclear states has become an integral part of the NPT bargain.

**Bush’s Warning**

Flash forward a single decade. George W. Bush’s administration, completely disregarding the 1995 agreements, issued formal nuclear policy documents that explicitly envisioned attacking non-nuclear states with nuclear weapons. These materials even named seven particular non-nuclear states as possible targets of an American nuclear attack.

Moreover, both The Washington Post and Seymour Hersh in The New Yorker revealed in 2006 that the administration was at that moment considering an American nuclear first strike upon Iran. When President Bush was asked directly by a reporter, in a televised White House press conference, whether this was in fact true, he replied, “All options are on the table.”

Just a few months after he took office, in Prague on April 5, 2009, President Obama captured the imagination of many when he declared to an adoring crowd, “I state clearly and with conviction America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.”

Even though some of that enthusiasm diminished when he added that the abolitionist objective “will not be reached quickly perhaps not in my lifetime,” it was nevertheless by all accounts a significant component in the Norwegian committee’s decision to award the President the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize.

But flash forward again, this time only a single year. During a press conference at the Pentagon on April 6, 2010, announcing the Obama administration’s new “Nuclear Posture Review” (NPR), Defense Secretary Robert Gates said that the document pledged that now the United States unlike under the Bush administration would not launch nuclear attacks against non-nuclear states.

So far so good. But then, Gates indicated that states “not in compliance with
the NPT” had been placed in an entirely different category, and were not exempt from American nuclear attack. It was an entirely new principle, never before contemplated in any way as part of the NPT bargain.

Then, for good measure, he specifically named two states – North Korea and Iran. For these countries, said Secretary Gates, “there is a message if you’re going to play by the rules, if you’re going to join the international community, then we will undertake certain obligations to you. But if you’re not going to play by the rules, if you’re going to be a proliferator, then all options are on the table in terms of how we deal with you.”

What Iranians Hear

The “options on the table” phrase has been uttered so often by Western leaders that it has become commonplace for the Western media to pay no attention to it at all. Not so Iranian leaders. Shortly after the 2010 Pentagon press conference, Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei told his senior military commanders that these direct threats to unleash nuclear arms against Iran “are very strange and the world should not ignore them. The head of a country has threatened a nuclear attack. In recent years the Americans made many efforts to show that the Islamic Republic of Iran is unreliable in the nuclear issue. It is now clear that the governments that possess atomic bombs and shamelessly threaten to bomb others are the unreliable ones.”

The speaker of Iran’s parliament, Ali Larijani, emphasized that any kind of nuclear threat against Iran directly violated the agreements of the NPT. And President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad weighed in as well, declaring, “I hope these published comments are not true. ... He has threatened with nuclear and chemical weapons those nations which do not submit to the greed of the United States. Even Bush did not say what Obama is saying.”

Similarly, after President Obama’s statement on Israeli television, Revolutionary Guard Brigadier General Masoud Jazayeri declared, “Mr. Obama, do not make a mistake: we too have all our options on the table.” Which doesn’t seem to indicate that using the phrase is doing anything to defuse the situation.

It’s difficult to imagine, since President Obama’s most recent pronouncement on the subject used the exact same phrase, that it does not in fact mean the exact same thing. It’s also difficult to escape the towering irony even if only a hypothetical possibility that one country might employ nuclear weapons to demonstrate that it’s unacceptable for another country even to possess nuclear weapons.
And it’s difficult finally to suppose that a nuclear hypocrisy of such towering proportions could lead to anything other than a relentless determination, on the part of Iran and the many other nuclear have-not nations, for decades to come, to join the nuclear club.

Imagine the positive outcomes that might emerge on multiple fronts if the President were to make an alternative pronouncement, which said instead something like this:

“I am announcing today that the time has come to take one option off the table. The nuclear option. There are no circumstances under which the United States will attack a non-nuclear armed Iran with nuclear weapons.

‘Indeed, I can imagine no situation where it would be appropriate for any nuclear-armed nation to launch a nuclear attack on any state which does not possess nuclear weapons. The promise not to do so has become a fundamental part of the NPT bargain. So just as we expect Iran to fulfill its NPT commitments, we declare today that we will fulfill this NPT commitment of our own.

‘Both the United States and Israel are fully capable of protecting our national security with our conventional forces alone. The only conceivable purpose for possessing nuclear weapons is to deter the use of nuclear weapons by others. And as I indicated in Prague four long years ago, someday we hope to eliminate that purpose, by eliminating every last nuclear weapon from the face of the Earth thereby fulfilling another of the commitments we made under the NPT several long decades ago.

‘Iran must know that until it rejects the false seductions of nuclear security, for us, all options but one must remain on the table. But Iranians should also be assured that we do not expect them to endure a nuclear double standard forever until the end of time. We invite them to join us, now, on the road to abolition.”

Such a statement could transform the nuclear policy debate overnight. It would, in a stroke, delegitimize the “employment doctrines” manifested by each of the nine nuclear-armed nations. It would express as a bedrock American principle that the nuclear weapons deployed by us remain only to prevent nuclear weapons from being used against us and would put enormous pressure on the other nuclear states to declare likewise.

It could go a long, long way to persuading Iran, North Korea, and perhaps others to abjure the nuclear course. And it might even give a substantial kick start to the long-stalled abolitionist project, and move the international community to begin discerning and negotiating a universal, verifiable, and enforceable
Nuclear Weapons Elimination Convention. And bringing us a nuclear weapon-free world.

Who knows? Perhaps, even, within Barack Obama’s lifetime.

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