Trust, but Don't Verify

The dangers posed by today’s non-conventional weapons necessitate prompt and vigorous action to dismantle arsenals and block the transfer, stockpiling, and production of highly enriched uranium and plutonium—the fissile material needed to build nuclear weapons. U.S. leaders have long recognized that such arms control efforts must be reinforced with effective means to monitor compliance. As President Ronald Reagan told the Soviets, “Trust, but verify.”

Fittingly, the negotiation of a global, verifiable fissile material cutoff treaty (FMCT) has been a major U.S. nonproliferation priority at the Conference on Disarmament (CD) for more than a decade. But not any more.

Following a lengthy policy review, the Bush administration has adopted a new and counterproductive “trust, but don’t verify” FMCT position. Although the administration says it supports negotiations for a treaty to end the production of fissile material for weapons purposes, it has indicated it will oppose negotiations on an “effectively verifiable” treaty.

The goal in past years has been to negotiate a global treaty with an effective verification regime focused on facilities that are capable of uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing. This could provide high confidence that no country is secretly producing bomb-grade nuclear material for weapons.

The FMCT would reinforce the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and lock in the halt on production of fissile material for weapons currently observed by the five established nuclear-weapon states: China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Perhaps more significantly, a verifiable FMCT would cap the supply of bomb material available to NPT holdouts India; its nuclear rival, Pakistan; and Israel.

The U.S. policy shift is a body blow to the long-delayed FMCT talks, however. The United States wants the 65 member states at the CD to reach consensus on a new mandate for negotiations, an exceedingly difficult task that will further postpone the start of FMCT talks. The new U.S. policy is yet another shameful rejection of key disarmament commitments made at the 1995 and 2000 Review Conferences of the NPT.

According to the Bush review, an FMCT inspection program would be “so extensive that it could compromise key signatories’ core national security interests and so costly that many countries will be hesitant to accept it.” No verification system is 100 percent effective, nor is it free. But as major U.S. allies still insist, verifying such a treaty is technically feasible and politically possible, and it is in everyone’s core interests to make the treaty more than a symbolic gesture.

The additional financial cost of expanding the scope of current nuclear inspections to cap the size of the world’s arsenals is well worth the price. As recent events in Iraq, Iran, and North Korea show, when international arms inspectors have the political and legal authority to visit relevant sites and investigate suspicious findings, they can detect and deter cheating and, if necessary, help mobilize international action against violators. In many cases, the IAEA can visit and take measurements at sites and facilities about which national intelligence agencies can only raise suspicions.

So, what is really behind the reluctance to negotiate an effectively verifiable FMCT? The policy is yet
another symptom of this administration’s strong allergy to multilateral arms control. It also reflects the Bush administration’s insufficient regard for the effect of Israel’s and Pakistan’s unregulated nuclear weapons programs on regional security and nonproliferation objectives. Pressing forward with a verifiable FMCT would help bring those states, along with India, into the nonproliferation mainstream and enhance efforts to ensure that other states comply with their treaty obligations.

The Pentagon has resisted FMCT negotiations altogether. Officials there fret about protecting information related to Navy programs that supply enriched uranium fuel for nuclear-powered ships, despite the fact that the FMCT would not prohibit production for such purposes.

This is not the first time the Bush administration has torpedoed verification provisions designed to improve compliance with arms control treaties. In 2001 the Bush administration blocked approval of a verification regime for the Biological Weapons Convention. In 2002 it declined to seek additional monitoring and inspection measures as part of its Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty with Russia. Absent better verification, illicit national bioweapons programs may continue, and our knowledge about the size and security of Russia’s nuclear arsenal will be far less certain.

President George W. Bush said in February that he is committed to stopping weapons of mass destruction “at the source.” The United States cannot achieve this objective by itself or without more new and verifiable initiatives such as the FMCT. Tragically, the Bush approach on the FMCT and other nonproliferation agreements denies our nation and the international community the chance to more effectively monitor and enforce compliance with the global nonproliferation standards essential to our security.

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