Correcting the Record: Arms Experts Respond to Secretary Rice’s Claims about Bush Administration Nuclear Control Accomplishments

- Pressroom

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(Washington, D.C.): Early this week, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal published articles in which Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice extolled the Bush administration’s record in limiting global nuclear dangers. Those articles apparently stemmed from an extended response that Rice delivered to a reporter’s question at a Sept. 7 press conference in Rabat, Morocco. Rice asserted that the administration’s record on nonproliferation and counterproliferation was “very strong” and “left this situation...in far better shape than we found it.” In making her case, Rice claimed success on a raft of issues, including progress on nuclear affairs with India, Iran, and North Korea.

Analysts with the independent Arms Control Association (ACA) disagree. The Bush administration’s nuclear control record falls far short of Rice’s inflated claims. Indeed, there is more to lament than to cheer.

To be sure, some nonproliferation gains have occurred during the Bush administration’s tenure, but Rice’s recounting exaggerates, distorts, and omits certain details and developments concerning the administration’s sub-par record.

Secretary Rice is correct that the nuclear challenges facing the world cannot be “resolved overnight” or necessarily “resolved by any single administration.” Effectively addressing nuclear dangers is a long-term challenge that requires cooperation and engagement not only from one administration to the next, but also across party lines and with foreign governments, including those that might be hostile to the United States.

But instead of taking a consistent approach to reducing weapons, the administration sought to selectively apply rules on the basis of whether a regime was deemed a friend or foe, thereby weakening the very rules that place pressure on all countries to abjure unconventional arms. Contrary to Rice’s conclusion, a preliminary analysis of her claims and omissions reveals that the nonproliferation regime has been weakened on the Bush administration’s watch.

Below are the ACA responses to each of Rice’s claimed successes, as well as issues not covered in her response that must be taken into account when judging the Bush administration’s nuclear nonproliferation and counterproliferation record. The issues are presented in the order in which Rice discussed them.

Secretary Rice: “…we did take down the A. Q. Khan network.”
ACA Response: True, but some question whether the administration waited too long to act and uncertainty remains whether the entire network has been shut down. Part of that uncertainty stems from the administration’s decision not to press the Pakistani government to permit U.S. interrogations of Khan and apparent U.S. interference in the investigations of other governments to protect U.S. sources and intelligence. That meddling may have prevented key individuals involved in
the network from receiving appropriate penalties for trafficking nuclear secrets around the globe.

For more information on the Khan network, visit ACA’s resource page on nuclear black markets: http://www.armscontrol.org/subject/58/date.

**Secretary Rice:** “…the president’s administration has established the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI).”

**ACA Response:** Yes, in May 2003, the Bush administration established the PSI, an initiative to intercept shipments of unconventional weapons in transit at sea, on land, and in the air. The administration claims that some 90 countries are now participating in the voluntary effort. However, assessing the practical value and achievements of the PSI is difficult because countries, including the United States, were already conducting interdictions to impede proliferation before the PSI’s establishment and the initiative is based on pre-existing international and national legal authorities. The most frequently touted success of the PSI by Bush administration officials is the October 2003 interdiction of a ship carrying centrifuge components to Libya, but that operation has been attributed by other U.S. and foreign government officials to activities that predated the PSI. It also remains unclear whether other successes reported by PSI participants would have occurred without the PSI because they also relied on capabilities and practices that preceded the initiative’s start. Still, the initiative does appear to have raised awareness and cooperation amongst a broader group of states on the need to prevent illicit transfers of unconventional weapons and materials from reaching their destination.

For more information on the PSI, visit ACA’s resource page on the PSI: http://www.armscontrol.org/subject/21/date.

**Secretary Rice:** “…it is a major breakthrough that Libya made the strategic choice to give up its weapons of mass destruction.”

**ACA Response:** Absolutely. Libya’s December 2003 renunciation of nuclear weapons and other unconventional arms programs stands as a notable nonproliferation achievement. Bush administration officials attribute Libya’s decision to a variety of factors, including the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the October 2003 interdiction of a shipment of centrifuge components. Libya’s decision, however, also was influenced by years of multilateral diplomacy and crippling economic sanctions that began before the Bush administration entered into office. While making progress on their disarmament commitments, Libyan officials have expressed frustration at times with the United States for not following through on its promises to reward Libya for its action. Still, Rice last week became the highest-ranking U.S. official to visit Libya in decades.

For more information on Libya and its disarmament, visit ACA’s resource page on Libya: http://www.armscontrol.org/country/8/date.

**Secretary Rice:** “…North Korea. Yes, this process has had its ups and downs. But we do have a way forward...”

**ACA Response:** “Ups and downs” is an understatement. When the Bush administration entered office, North Korea’s operation of its plutonium-based nuclear weapons program at Yongbyon had been frozen as a result of the 1994 Agreed Framework. At that time, Pyongyang was suspected of having squirreled away enough material for one or two nuclear weapons. The situation deteriorated in late 2002 when the Bush administration accused North Korea of cheating on its commitments and then cut off fuel supplies to North Korea, which the United States had committed to provide under the 1994 agreement. Pyongyang then kicked out international inspectors and restarted its weapons operations at Yongbyon, eventually producing enough material for up to an estimated 12 nuclear weapons. North Korea’s resumption of the Yongbyon-based weapons effort culminated in that state’s first nuclear test explosion in October 2006. Just a few months earlier in July, North Korea had conducted an unsuccessful flight test of a longer-range ballistic missile, reversing a flight test moratorium it had adhered to since 1999.

Working with China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea, the Bush administration in its second term did obtain a commitment from North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons programs, and following a reinvigorated diplomatic campaign, negotiated an agreement for North Korea to take specific steps toward that goal in early 2007. This process has gained mixed results, but has succeeded again in
shutting the Yongbyon facilities.

Although Rice is correct that a “way forward” exists, the reality is that North Korea advanced its nuclear weapons efforts, including acquiring enough material for up to six times as many bombs as it previously had and conducted its first nuclear test, all under the Bush administration’s watch. Moreover, while some evidence indicates that North Korea had procured technologies in violation of the Agreed Framework to pursue an alternative method for producing bomb material, the Bush administration has been unable to substantiate that the North Korean violations were so serious that it justified torpedoing the Agreed Framework.

For more information on North Korea and the status of its nuclear weapons programs, visit ACA’s resource page on North Korea:

http://www.armscontrol.org/country/9/date.

Secretary Rice: “…with Iran, we have put together an international coalition of states that...have made clear to the Iranians that they have to abandon their ambitions for technologies that can lead to nuclear weapons...”

ACA’s Response: Despite Bush administration efforts to isolate Iran with Security Council resolutions and economic sanctions, Iran has steadily made progress in increasing its nuclear capabilities. It has expanded its operational centrifuges, which can be used to produce low-enriched uranium for nuclear reactor fuel or highly enriched uranium for nuclear weapons, from over a hundred in 2003 to about 4,000 today.

To be sure, Iran appears staunchly committed to advancing its nuclear programs, which it maintains are for energy purposes, and it is unclear what measures at this time could persuade Iran to curtail or abandon its efforts. However, the Bush administration eschewed early diplomatic efforts to potentially halt or curtail Iran’s capabilities soon after the Iranian activities came to light in 2002. The administration, for instance, opted not to join key European countries in offering incentives to Iran in exchange for it showing restraint over two years. Indeed, until this year, the Bush administration refused to participate in negotiations with Iran, squandering the possibility of diplomatic solutions to constrain Iran’s nuclear programs. The international coalition that Rice mentioned has adopted three rounds of international sanctions, but those have not led Iran to alter its course.

For more information on Iran and the status of its nuclear programs, visit ACA’s resource page on Iran:

http://www.armscontrol.org/country/10/date.

Secretary Rice: “…what we now have is a way for India to pursue civil nuclear technology...[that way] expands the reach of the [International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)]...begins to expand the reach of the nonproliferation regime, and that does so without violating important principles that are there in the [nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT)].”

ACA’s Response: Most definitely not. The Bush administration’s July 2005 deal with India fails to bring that country into the “nonproliferation mainstream” as administration officials so frequently assert. India remains one of three countries (the other two are Israel and Pakistan) to have never signed the NPT, meaning it has no legal commitment to pursue nuclear disarmament. In addition, India refuses to halt fissile material production for building additional weapons, although that has been a step taken by France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and reportedly China. India also continues to decline to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) outlawing nuclear explosions, which has been signed by 179 countries, including the United States.

Rice has touted India’s pledge to safeguard an additional eight Indian thermal nuclear power reactors as significant in expanding the IAEA’s reach, but this step hardly brings India “into the nonproliferation system” because India will continue to operate an unchecked nuclear weapons enterprise in parallel to the safeguarded civilian reactors. Safeguards are measures to ensure that technologies, materials, and facilities designated for civilian nuclear purposes are not used to produce nuclear weapons. India will keep at least eight other thermal power reactors and two breeder reactors, which are ideal for producing plutonium that can be used to make nuclear bombs, outside of safeguards and available to contribute to India’s nuclear weapons endeavors.

Indeed, India’s nuclear weapons sector will benefit from foreign nuclear supplies flowing into the country for nuclear power production because that will enable India to devote more of its scarce
domestic uranium resources to making bombs. In such an event, nuclear suppliers would be violating the letter if not the spirit of Article I of the NPT, which obligates them “not in any way to assist, encourage, or induce” any non-nuclear-weapon state to acquire nuclear weapons. Despite possessing nuclear arms, India is a non-nuclear-weapon state under the NPT because India did not conduct a nuclear test before Jan. 1, 1967.

In short, the U.S.-Indian nuclear deal does not strengthen the nonproliferation regime, but severely undermines it by giving India the same nuclear trading privileges as NPT members who have forsworn nuclear weapons and provide the IAEA access to their full nuclear complexes. India is not undertaking any binding or new steps to limit its nuclear weapons program in exchange for expanded nuclear trade, but instead is seeking to establish supply arrangements that would enable it to conduct a nuclear test without having trade cut off.

For more information on India and the U.S.-Indian nuclear deal, see ACA’s resource page on India: http://armscontrol.org/country/13/date.

Secretary Rice: “We have also, of course, continued our work...on securing nuclear materials...[and] continuing the work of the Nunn-Lugar program.”

ACA’s Response: True, but not enthusiastically. The Nunn-Lugar program was established by legislation in 1992 and funds important efforts to secure and dispose of excess or outlawed biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons and materials, as well as delivery vehicles, in Russia, other states of the former Soviet Union, and some additional countries. Although the specific Nunn-Lugar program is run by the Pentagon, other U.S. agencies, particularly the Department of Energy, administer programs with similar purposes, and all are commonly referred to as Nunn-Lugar.

In its first budget, the Bush administration sought to cut funding for these so-called threat reduction programs and has maintained similar funding levels or sought additional cuts ever since. Congress has repeatedly increased spending above the administration’s initial budget requests. The Bush administration’s efforts to ratchet back threat reduction spending followed on the heels of a January 2001 independent bi-partisan report that called then-current funding “inadequate” and urged dramatically increasing the funding to address what the panel said was “the most urgent unmet national security threat.” The Bush administration also slowed for years implementation of some threat reduction programs by haggling with Russia over small legal details, losing sight of the bigger security threats the programs intended to mitigate.

One positive move by the Bush administration was its 2002 initiative to seek increased threat reduction funding from other states. Commonly referred to as the Global Partnership, the program calls on other states to provide $10 billion in threat reduction funding over 10 years to match U.S. spending. Although foreign countries have yet to reach the $10 billion pledged mark, they have committed billions to the project and progress is being made in several areas, such as helping Russia destroy its chemical weapons stockpile.

While important and good work has occurred on the ground to secure excess nuclear materials and weapons, the pace of action to secure the most vulnerable stockpiles that remain must be accelerated in order to reduce the risk of catastrophic nuclear terrorism.

For more information on the Nunn-Lugar program and similar threat reductions efforts, see ACA’s resource page on threat reduction: http://armscontrol.org/subject/28/date.

Key Nuclear Control Issues that Rice Did Not Mention:

The 2003 Iraq Invasion: After accusing Iraq of illicitly pursuing unconventional weapons, including nuclear weapons, and ignoring the findings of international inspectors that no evidence existed to support such allegations, the Bush administration led an invasion of that country. In February 2003, just weeks before the U.S.-led invasion, the heads of the UN and IAEA inspection teams reported to the UN Security Council that their inspectors, after returning to Iraq in late 2002, had found no evidence of ongoing chemical, nuclear, or biological weapons programs and were in the process of destroying a number of prohibited missiles in Iraq’s possession. Tragically, the Bush administration ignored these findings and failed to instruct the U.S. intelligence community to review the flawed
October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq’s suspected weapons programs.

No unconventional arms, except some obsolete chemical weapon shells, or programs were ever discovered and the invasion cast doubt around the world about U.S. intelligence and credibility. For more information on Iraq, see ACA’s resource page on Iraq: http://armscontrol.org/country/14/date.

**The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT):** Since taking office, the Bush administration has publicly opposed the treaty and in 2002 the Department of Defense explored the possibility of removing the U.S. signature from the accord. The administration also has failed to fully pay assessed U.S. dues as a signatory to the pact to establish the treaty’s monitoring and inspection network, which is critical to U.S. test monitoring capabilities in key regions. The United States is one of several states that must still ratify the treaty to enable it to enter into force.

Bush’s CTBT policy is self-defeating and counterproductive. Given the 1996 U.S. signature of the CTBT and its test moratorium policy, the United States bears most CTBT-related responsibilities. Yet, Washington’s failure to ratify the treaty has diminished its ability to prod other states to join the accord and refrain from testing. At the same time, there is no need—nor is there any political support—for renewed U.S. testing for new nuclear warheads or any other reason. For more information on the CTBT, see ACA’s resource page on the CTBT: http://armscontrol.org/subject/45/date.

**The Proposed Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT):** The Bush administration in 2004 dropped long-standing U.S. advocacy for negotiating an “effectively verifiable” global FMCT, contending that such a treaty was unachievable. Instead, the administration called for negotiating an FMCT, which would end the production of highly enriched uranium and plutonium for making nuclear bombs, without the goal of making it verifiable. This shift directly contravened the positions of many U.S. allies and has helped perpetuate the negotiating deadlock within the 65-member Conference on Disarmament, where the agreement is supposed to be negotiated. No official talks have been started on the proposed accord. For more information on efforts to negotiate an FMCT, see ACA’s resource page on the Conference on Disarmament: http://armscontrol.org/subject/30/date.

**The U.S.-Russian Strategic Reduction Process:** Despite Russian interest in negotiating lower limits on nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles, the Bush administration has resisted. It remains content with the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) force limit of 1,700-2,200 warheads which will take effect, but also expire, on Dec. 31, 2012. Moreover, the administration has failed to reach a solution with Russia on what to do about the scheduled Dec. 5, 2009 expiration of the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, which currently provides the verification measures that allow the United States and Russia to keep tabs on each other’s nuclear forces. SORT contains no verification measures. Reaching agreement with Russia on nuclear limits has been complicated by the Bush administration’s 2002 withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which had banned U.S. and Russian nationwide anti-missile systems. After abrogating that treaty, the administration has further upset Russia by seeking to deploy long-range missile interceptors in Poland. Despite U.S. claims that the system is to defend against growing Iranian missile capabilities, Russia charges the proposed interceptors are aimed at undermining its nuclear deterrent. For more information on U.S.-Russian strategic relations, see ACA’s resource pages on strategic arms agreements, http://armscontrol.org/subject/61/date, and missile defenses, http://armscontrol.org/subject/18/date.

**The 2005 NPT Review Conference:** The members of the NPT meet every five years to review the treaty’s implementation and discuss ways to make greater progress toward the treaty’s goals. The Bush administration soured the atmosphere for the 2005 meeting by refuting a series of disarmament commitments, known as the 13 Steps, agreed to by all NPT states-parties at the previous conference in 2000. The administration then insisted that the 2005 conference focus on dealing with the noncompliance of certain states, such as Iran, and refused to talk about nuclear disarmament or other matters that many states wanted to raise with the United States. The obstinate Bush administration approach to the conference helped prevent it from reaching any conclusions, potentially missing an opportunity to strengthen the beleaguered accord. Most commentators described the 2005 conference as an unmitigated disaster, an assessment the Bush administration denies. The fact remains that under the Bush administration’s watch, no new
measures to strengthen the NPT were adopted at the 2005 Review Conference. For more information on the NPT and other nonproliferation developments, see ACA’s resource page on the NPT: http://armscontrol.org/subject/60/date.

**U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policies and Programs:** Although the Bush administration claims to have reduced the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. security policy, the 2001 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review called for augmenting U.S. nuclear weapons capabilities for additional purposes, such as destroying targets buried deep underground or chemical and biological weapon depots. For that purpose, one initiative that the administration promoted was development of the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator. The administration further succeeded in rolling back a 1993 prohibition against researching weapons with yields lower than five kilotons and it supported development of a new generation of nuclear warheads under the Reliable Replacement Warhead program. Congress, however, wisely denied funding for all of the administration’s new and modified warhead proposals. Nonetheless, the administration’s pursuit of modified and new types of nuclear warheads undercut U.S. credibility among other states in arguing for them to restrain their nuclear weapons programs or development of certain nuclear technologies. For more information on U.S. nuclear weapons policies and programs, see the ACA’s resource page on U.S. nuclear weapons: http://www.armscontrol.org/subject/65/date.

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