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Obama's Nuke Double Standards

By Nat Parry

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President Obama warns that “all options are on the table” regarding a possible attack against Iran, though there’s no credible evidence that it’s building a nuclear bomb. By contrast, Israel maintains an undeclared nuclear arsenal and the U.S. has thousands of nukes with no specific plans to get rid of them, Nat Parry notes.

The United States continues to demonstrate double, triple and quadruple standards in its policies toward nuclear proliferation and disarmament.

On the one hand, it flouts its own obligations to disarm as spelled out in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. It tolerates its ally Israel defying this treaty by maintaining an undeclared nuclear arsenal. It even adopts a policy of containment toward rogue state North Korea, which is openly threatening war against U.S. ally South Korea and has recently threatened to use nukes against the U.S. mainland.



The mushroom cloud of the atomic bombing over Nagasaki, Japan, on Aug. 9, 1945.

However, when it comes to Iran, which insists its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes and is continuing to engage in diplomatic negotiations — recently concluding what a Western official described as “useful” talks in the Kazakh city of Almaty — the United States imposes sanctions, makes threats of force and even engages in cyber-attacks that could be considered acts of war.

Speaking in Jerusalem last week, President Obama reiterated that U.S. policy is to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, what Obama called “the world’s worst weapons,” at virtually any cost.

Israel and the United States, he said, “agree that a nuclear-armed Iran would be a threat to the region, a threat to the world, and potentially an existential threat to Israel. And we agree on our goal. We do not have a policy of containment when it comes to a nuclear Iran. Our policy is to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

“We prefer to resolve this diplomatically, and there’s still time to do so. Iran’s leaders must understand, however, that they have to meet their international obligations. And, meanwhile, the international community will continue to increase the pressure on the Iranian government. The United States will continue to consult closely with Israel on next steps. And I will repeat: All options are on the table. We will do what is necessary to prevent Iran from getting the world’s worst weapons.”

On one hand it could be considered reassuring that the President is stating that the U.S. “prefers to resolve this diplomatically,” rather than militarily, but the flip side of that, of course, is the stated insistence that “all options are on the table,” including the military option.

Also implied is that the U.S. — as the inventor, leading stockpiler and only country to ever use nuclear weapons — could actually launch a nuclear assault in order to prevent Iran from obtaining

these weapons. After all, if no option is off the table, supposedly that means that the nuclear option is on the table.

While that might be considered too extreme even for the anything-goes standards of the United States, the implicit threat is indeed clear: if Iran continues to defy the will of the U.S. government, the U.S. retains the right to wipe that country off the map.

What is perhaps more interesting about Obama's statement however is his explicit reference to nukes being "the world's worst weapons." The unstated implication is that these weapons are in a wholly different league than any other weapon on earth. While nuclear weapons may be considered too dangerous to be used, Obama hinted, nearly any other weapon ever devised is considered fair game.

Depleted Uranium

It is noteworthy that as Obama was singling out nuclear weapons as uniquely horrific, new information was coming to light about the U.S.'s use of depleted uranium in its war against Iraq last decade. Significantly, in Fallujah – which was targeted mercilessly by U.S. forces in 2004 – the use of depleted uranium has led to birth defects in infants 14 times higher than in the Japanese cities targeted by U.S. atomic bombs at the close of World War II, Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

As the Huffington Post reported last week, "ten years after the start of the U.S. invasion in Iraq, doctors in some of the Middle Eastern nation's cities are witnessing an abnormally high number of cases of cancer and birth defects." Scientists blame the use of depleted uranium and white phosphorus in the U.S. military assaults.

The babies and small children suffering horribly from the U.S. military's reckless use of chemical weapons might consider depleted uranium and white phosphorus pretty horrible. But Obama is of course correct that nuclear weapons are indeed horrific and their effects too ghastly to truly comprehend. His implication though that they are nevertheless safe in certain hands, namely the world's already existing nuclear powers such as the U.S. and Israel, is dubious.

Although Iran has not invaded another country in hundreds of years, the U.S. has launched dozens of covert actions and wars of aggression since rising to superpower status following World War II. Likewise, Israel has frequently attacked its neighbors, including Lebanon, Iraq and Syria, not to mention the regular assaults it commits against Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

If there are countries that truly can't be trusted with the world's worst weapons, some might say that it is the countries that actually launch aggressive wars on a regular basis. Further, while nukes certainly have a unique capability of delivering devastation unlike any other weapon in the world, they have also long been considered a stabilizing force by nuclear security strategists.

In short, because they are so uniquely destructive, they can provide a powerful deterrent to would-be aggressors. This, of course, is the primary reason why countries may seek to obtain

nuclear weapons — and the main reason why only full disarmament can ever truly eliminate the threat of proliferation.

North Korea has made this perfectly clear in its ongoing bluster issued against the United States. Earlier this month, North Korea's foreign ministry said the country will exercise its right to "pre-emptive nuclear strikes on the headquarters of the aggressors" because Washington is pushing to start a nuclear war against it.

While this threat was roundly – and rightly – condemned by the international community, in substance it is not drastically different than official U.S. policy, which indicates that the United States retains the right to a first nuclear strike. The Obama administration's own defense strategy published last year clearly states that the U.S. will maintain its nuclear arsenal as long as these weapons exist, and if necessary, will use them.

"As long as nuclear weapons remain in existence," it says, "we will field nuclear forces that can under any circumstances confront an adversary with the prospect of unacceptable damage, both to deter potential adversaries and to assure U.S. allies and other security partners that they can count on America's security commitments."

Although North Korea boasts of nuclear bombs and pre-emptive strikes, it is not thought to have mastered the ability to produce a warhead small enough to put on a missile capable of reaching the United States. It is nevertheless striking how different the U.S. treats this semi-nuclear power in comparison to countries that don't have the ability to inflict damage against the United States, such as Iran.

The Iran Anomaly

When it comes to Iran, Obama insists that "they have to meet their international obligations," and if they don't, the U.S. just might launch a military assault. Left unsaid, of course, is that the U.S., as a nuclear power, also has international obligations, namely to move towards complete nuclear disarmament.

As the most recent Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference reminded states parties to the treaty in 2010:

"The Conference recalls that the overwhelming majority of States entered into legally binding commitments not to receive, manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices in the context, inter alia, of the corresponding legally binding commitments by the nuclear-weapon States to nuclear disarmament in accordance with the Treaty."

The Conference further regretted that nuclear-armed countries such as the United States have failed to live up to their end of the NPT bargain:

"The Conference, while welcoming achievements in bilateral and unilateral reductions by some nuclear-weapon States, notes with concern that the total estimated number of nuclear weapons deployed and stockpiled still amounts to several thousands. The Conference expresses its deep

concern at the continued risk for humanity represented by the possibility that these weapons could be used and the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that would result from the use of nuclear weapons.”

When it comes to disputes over compliance with the treaty, however, for example Western suspicions that Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons or Iranian complaints that the U.S. is failing to disarm, the Review Conference reiterated the obligation that only diplomatic means should be pursued, and that “attacks or threats of attacks” must be avoided:

“The Conference emphasizes that responses to concerns over compliance with any obligation under the Treaty by any State party should be pursued by diplomatic means, in accordance with the provisions of the Treaty and the Charter of the United Nations. ...

“The Conference considers that attacks or threats of attack on nuclear facilities devoted to peaceful purposes jeopardize nuclear safety, have dangerous political, economic and environmental implications and raise serious concerns regarding the application of international law on the use of force in such cases, which could warrant appropriate action in accordance with the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations. The Conference notes that a majority of States parties have suggested a legally binding instrument be considered in this regard.”

While the United States continues to flout its NPT obligations to disarm, other nations of the world continue to press for the nuclear powers to live up to their promises. As the Inter Press Service reported on March 7,

“For the first time, ‘humanitarian diplomacy’ is being deployed to drive home the need for banning nukes – though under the self-imposed exclusion of the P5, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, who own a crushing majority of the 19,000 nuclear weapons capable of destroying the world many times over.

”A first step toward humanitarian diplomacy was taken in Oslo at a Mar. 4-5 conference convened by the government of Norway. Mexico will host a follow-up meeting ‘in due course’ and ‘after necessary preparations,’ Juan José Gómez Camacho, the country’s ambassador to the UN announced.

“Participants in the conference included representatives of 127 states, the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement and civil society, with the International Campaign for Abolition of Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) in the forefront.”

While this is indeed a hopeful step, it’s difficult to say how successful it can be without the United States and the other nuclear powers. The P5, not Iran, should be the primary targets of nuclear non-proliferation efforts, as there are no other countries on earth that have flouted the NPT as routinely since the treaty was signed.

Pressure needs to be brought to bear particularly on the United States, as the inventor of nuclear weapons, the country with the least scruples about using military force (including the use of

horrific weapons such as depleted uranium, white phosphorus and cluster bombs), and the world's leading exporter of conventional weapons.