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## **Nuclear pact's parties must unite on terror**

**URANIUM LIMITS SHOULD BE COMMON GROUND AT CONTENTIOUS CONFERENCE**

**By William Potter**

This week, representatives from most of the 187 member states of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons convened at the United Nations in New York for a monthlong review of the implementation of the treaty.

Much has changed in the five years since the last treaty review conference. Unfortunately, most of the changes have been negative, including the withdrawal of North Korea from the treaty, the illicit trafficking in nuclear technology by the A.Q. Khan network, the concealment by Iran of nuclear research activities that are ambiguous but could be linked to a weapons program, and the deep skepticism on the part of most non-nuclear states about the United States' commitment to its nuclear disarmament obligations. Perhaps most disturbing is the emergence of nuclear terrorism as a credible, near-term threat.

How the parties to the treaty respond to these challenges at the review conference will largely determine the future viability of the treaty and the extent to which it remains an important tool for restraining the further spread of nuclear weapons. It is far from clear, however, that policy-makers in Washington or most other capitals are prepared to show the flexibility necessary to forge a policy consensus on the highly divisive issues of nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation and the peaceful use of nuclear energy. Indeed, members have yet to agree on the conference agenda although the meeting already has begun.

Notwithstanding serious disagreements over procedural and substantive matters, it may be possible to find common ground at the conference on one topic of great importance. That issue is preventing non-state actors from gaining access to nuclear weapons.

When the treaty was concluded in 1968, the drafters did not contemplate the danger of nuclear terrorism, and the treaty provides no guidance on this subject. Last spring, however, the United Nations Security Council adopted an important resolution (SCR 1540) requiring all U.N. member states to establish effective domestic controls to prevent non-state actors from acquiring nuclear, chemical or biological weapons, their means of delivery, and related materials. This rare display of unanimity by the Security Council suggests that it may be possible to make progress at the treaty conference if states expand their focus beyond the traditional issues to devise practical steps for preventing nuclear terrorism.

Although two types of fissile materials -- highly enriched uranium and plutonium -- can be used to build nuclear weapons, for technical reasons it would be far easier for a terrorist to use

the uranium to fabricate a crude but still devastating nuclear device. Highest priority, therefore, should go to impeding access by non-state actors to the hundreds of tons of highly enriched uranium stored in dozens of countries.

Fortunately, highly enriched uranium is not required for civilian nuclear power and has few peaceful uses. The uranium's current civilian uses include fuel for high-powered research reactors and for nuclear-propelled icebreakers, and as the source of certain short-lived medical isotopes, which are produced by bombarding uranium targets. In most, if not all, of these cases, low-enriched uranium can be substituted.

It should therefore be possible politically to gain support from treaty members to halt international commerce in highly enriched uranium. A more ambitious but also feasible goal is the elimination of its use in the civilian nuclear sector. In pursuit of these objectives, the review conference should endorse a four-step strategy:

- Improve the physical security of highly enriched uranium.
- Consolidate global stocks of highly enriched uranium.
- Reduce the size of the global stockpile by down-blending highly enriched uranium to low-enriched.
- Phase out the use of highly enriched uranium in the nuclear industry.

Given the divergent views of key member states on the traditional issues of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, it is unrealistic to expect that the conference will bring agreement on many pressing nuclear challenges. Nevertheless, members have an unusual opportunity to find common ground in combating nuclear terrorism -- the paramount nuclear danger facing the world today. If members can agree on practical steps to reduce this threat, they will have achieved a major success.

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