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Nuclear war risk grows as states race to acquire bomb

By Peter Popham

29 April 2003

A conference on nuclear non-proliferation began in Geneva yesterday, in the shadow of North Korea's departure from the global treaty and with the bleakest prospects for progress in the pact's 33-year history.

John Wolf, US Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Non-proliferation told a news conference on the first day of the meeting that Iran has "an alarming, clandestine programme" to get hold of nuclear technology. "Iran is going down the same path of denial and deception that handicapped international inspections in North Korea and Iraq," he said.

But disarmament experts said that American lack of commitment to non-proliferation was as damaging as the behaviour of the proliferators.

Representatives of 187 countries are attending the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This is the second of three sessions that will be held before the Review Conference in 2005.

North Korea became the first state ever to defect from the process – Israel, India and Pakistan, all known nuclear states, have never been members – when it announced its departure in January. More defections are feared.

This was the Treaty that was supposed to lead to a non-nuclear world, but experts say the risks of proliferation are worse now than for 50 years. In the past two years the multilateral effort to contain and reduce the nuclear risk has unravelled. At the last NPT review conference in 2000 all member states signed a 13-point programme that included an undertaking by the five declared nuclear-weapon states to nuclear disarmament.

"That agreement is now gathering dust on some filing cabinet somewhere," said Dan Plesch, senior researcher at the Royal United Services Institute. "For the first time since the 1950s there isn't a global framework ... to get rid of nuclear weapons."

Pyongyang's off-the-record announcement last week that it already had the bomb was a further blow. "Everyone is at a loss as to how to move forward on North Korea," said Kathryn Crandall of the British American Security Information Council, a research organisation. It is expected that the meeting will try to agree on a statement – but given the low morale it is more likely to be an invitation to return to the fold than a blast of brimstone.

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At least as damaging as North Korea's departure have been successive moves by Washington to distance itself from nuclear disarmament.

In the run-up to the Iraq war, the US President, George Bush, signed National Security Presidential Directive 17, which said: "The United States will continue to make clear that it reserves the right to respond with overwhelming force – including potentially nuclear weapons – to the use of [weapons of mass destruction] against the United States ..."

This assertion, analysts say, undermined an important prop of the NPT process: the so-called "negative security assurances", initially made in 1978 and strengthened by the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 984 in 1995, not to use nuclear weapons against the non-nuclear weapon states.

The assurances were considered vital in discouraging states from developing their own nuclear weapons. Now people wonder if they are worth the paper it they are written on.

The popularising of the term Weapons of Mass Destruction has blurred the formerly stark distinction between nuclear and other weapons, and has paved the way for this change, claims Ms Crandall. She said: "Such terminology reduces the understanding of the unparalleled destructive capacity of nuclear weapons compared to the less destructive effects of chemical and biological weapons."

More and more states are likely to buy the argument that the only way to be secure in a unipolar world is to go down the nuclear road – "to pre-empt pre-emption", one analyst said. "People look at the different ways that the 'Axis of Evil' states – Iraq and North Korea – have been treated and they draw their own conclusions."

"What other countries are going to sit around after dinner saying, if Pakistan's got the bomb why haven't we?" said Mr Plesch. On the list of those likely to be holding such conversations, he said, are Egypt, Indonesia, Turkey and perhaps pre-eminently Japan, North Korea's uneasy neighbour.

No long-term ill consequences threaten those that go down such a route. After India, then Pakistan, tested nuclear weapons in 1998, sanctions were clamped and both countries widely condemned. But all that changed after 11 September 2001, when the US needed Pakistan's co-operation.

Last week, America's outgoing Ambassador to India, Robert Blackwill, spoke of India as "a rising great power of the 21st century" and of how the US and India "have made enormous strides" in the past two years towards "forging concentrated strategic collaboration". "Two years ago, there were economic sanctions ... against India related to its 1998 nuclear tests," Blackwill said. "Today, those sanctions are long gone." India congratulates itself that its stock in the world is higher now than before it got the bomb.

"It's a double hit," said Mr Plesch. "A failure to disarm the world at the end of the Cold War. And now proliferating countries and the United States all deciding that they are not interested in this or other treaties any more ... the whole future of the treaty is up for grabs."

ATOMIC NATIONS

ISRAEL

Believed to have between 100 and 200 nuclear warheads, but has never acknowledged them. Refuses to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and does not allow United Nations weapons inspectors into the country. Has around 90 Jericho 1 surface-to-surface medium-range (311 miles) missiles, and Jericho 2 long-range (1,000 miles) missiles, and 100 aircraft that could deliver nuclear devices.

IRAN

Development of nuclear power facilities at Busheher using Russian expertise has stoked US fears that Iran is developing nuclear weapons, despite an agreement

that spent fuel rods will be disposed of in Russia. Recent tests of a new generation of Shihab 3 medium-range rockets has added to US concerns, and a Shihab 4 rocket capable of reaching Western Europe is believed to be near to testing.

INDIA

In 1974, India exploded what the government described as a "peaceful nuclear device", and has expanded its capability ever since, bringing nuclear-capable Agni (Fire) II surface-to-surface long-range (1,242 miles) missiles into service last year. Also has short-range Agni I missiles, and 40 or more aircraft capable of delivering nuclear devices. Has not signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

PAKISTAN

When hundreds of thousands of Indian and Pakistani troops amassed on either side of the line of control in Kashmir last May, Pakistan test-fired Ghauri, Ghaznazi (Hatf 3) and the Abdali (Hatf 2) missiles to show it was ready and capable of using short and medium-range nuclear warheads. It also has 40 or so aircraft capable of delivering nuclear devices. Has not signed the non-proliferation treaty.

NORTH KOREA

Signed the non-proliferation treaty in 1985 and pulled out in January this year. This followed a US-led decision to halt oil shipments over Pyongyang's admission it was restarting its nuclear programme. Believed to have one or two nuclear weapons, and testing of the long-range Pekodosan 1 (formerly the Taepodong 1) missile continues. Has two or more aircraft capable of delivering nuclear weapons.

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