



# briefing

[#06/7]

## How the West undermines nuclear non-proliferation

*Ernie Regehr  
December 2006*

While the United Nations Security Council struggles to achieve the verifiable disavowal of nuclear weapons by Iran and North Korea, Europe and North America are busy championing nuclear weapons as indispensable to their security and as the preeminent symbol of prestige and strategic gravitas in the international community. The result is a political climate that is increasingly hostile to non-proliferation.

Three recent Western initiatives in as many weeks tell the story.

At the end of November in Riga, NATO leaders may have quarreled over Afghanistan but they were of a single mind in reaffirming the political and security advantages of nuclear weapons (NATO 2006). The leaders declared the continuing relevance of, and their full satisfaction with, the alliance's 1999 strategic doctrine (NATO 1999), which declares that "the Alliance's conventional forces alone cannot ensure credible deterrence. Nuclear weapons make a unique contribution in rendering the risks of aggression against the Alliance incalculable and unacceptable. Thus, they remain essential to preserve peace."

The Riga declaration gives the nuclear commitment a 2006 update with the statement that "there will continue to be a requirement for a mix of conventional and nuclear forces." It is an assertion that begs a question almost too obvious to repeat: If

NATO, with its collective command of almost two-thirds of global conventional military capacity,<sup>1</sup> feels unacceptably vulnerable without a nuclear backup, what are countries like India, Iran, North Korea, and Pakistan likely to conclude?

North Korea and Iran knew the rules when they joined the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as non-nuclear weapon states and solemnly pledged to permanently disavow nuclear weapons, and so they do not now have any legitimate case for renegeing on that commitment, NATO's recommitment to nuclear weapons notwithstanding. However, Canada and all other NATO states – except the United States, the United Kingdom, and France – also joined the NPT as non-nuclear weapon states, but in 2006 they are still proclaiming their enduring commitment to nuclear weapons. Five non-nuclear weapon states (Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, and Turkey) (Norris & Kristensen 2006, 57-58) even host nuclear weapons on their territories.

Only days after NATO's paean to nuclear weapons, the United Kingdom followed up with its own unilateral version of nuclear addiction. In its just released Defence White Paper, the Blair Government promises a new generation of submarine-based nuclear weapons, albeit reduced by 20 percent from its current arsenal of about 200 warheads (Norris & Kristensen 2005, 77-79). As the lead editorial in *The Guardian* (2006) put it, "the

words ‘nuclear deterrent’ occur more than any other in the defence white paper published [December 4], but at no point is the document clear about who or what a new generation of British nuclear weapons is intended to deter.”

The Weapons of Mass Destruction (Blix) Commission (2006, 94), challenges both the UK and France “to decide whether it will be meaningful to retain costly nuclear arsenals that were developed for an enemy that no longer exists, in order to meet hypothetical threats against which such weapons are of questionable value.”

Whitehall has just concluded that it is meaningful, denying of course that its nuclear modernization program is in violation of Article VI of the NPT or a betrayal of its pledge, made at the 2000 NPT Review Conference along with other nuclear weapon states, of “an unequivocal undertaking...to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals leading to nuclear disarmament to which all States parties are committed under Article VI.”<sup>2</sup>

Others are not so charitable toward the nuclear weapon states and their failure to meet their obligations. Article VI of the Treaty commits all nuclear weapon states to eliminating their nuclear arsenals, and the 1996 World Court opinion<sup>3</sup> said that not only are such states to negotiate in good faith, they are to “bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control.” It is difficult to deny that the disrespect of nuclear weapon states for the letter and spirit of their disarmament obligations inexorably yields a political climate of disrespect and distrust in which non-proliferation will not flourish.

The British Pugwash Group (2006) had earlier written to *The Times*, “If the UK decides to retain nuclear arms, it will be a signal to every country that may soon acquire nuclear weapons that we consider them worth the political and economic cost. It will be a step towards a world ruled forever by mutual threat and fear. If the UK were to forgo nuclear weapons, it would indicate that one of the original nuclear states had decided that they were no longer

necessary for its security; a step towards a world ruled by law and mutual understanding.”

In a third proliferation-friendly initiative of recent weeks, the US Administration and Congress rewarded India for its violation of non-proliferation norms in conducting nuclear warhead tests and building a nuclear arsenal. The US-India nuclear cooperation agreement accepts India as a *de facto* nuclear weapons state and accepts with full equanimity India’s continuing violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1172. This 1998 Resolution, which followed Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests that year, calls on India and Pakistan “immediately to stop their nuclear weapon development programs, to refrain from weaponization or from the deployment of nuclear weapons, to cease development of ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons and any further production of fissile material for nuclear weapons” (operative para 7).

Implementation of full civilian nuclear cooperation with India will arguably put the United States in violation of Article I of the NPT, which prohibits nuclear weapon states from assisting, encouraging, or inducing other states to acquire nuclear weapons. Providing India with civilian nuclear fuel assists its nuclear weapons development by freeing up limited domestic supplies for the production of fissile material for its expanding arsenal. And there is little doubt that India takes encouragement from its newfound favour in Washington and the equanimity with which its violations of the Security Council are met.

For North Korea and Iran the lessons are unmistakable. Western non-proliferation policy is not about eliminating nuclear arsenals or even stopping their spread. Instead, it is practiced as a crude art of selection: states within, or being wooed into, a US-defined orbit of friendliness are permitted to violate global non-proliferation norms, while states outside this axis of strategic convenience are to be punished to the full for their, in the case of Iran, much lesser violations.

Hans Blix and his Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission (2006, 60) warned against this kind of selective non-proliferation. Proliferation will not be successfully curbed if the international community's strategy is based on "the suggestion that nuclear weapons in the hands of some pose no threat, while in the hands of others they place the world in mortal jeopardy."

If it is the intention of European and North American governments to foster a political climate that is hostile to non-proliferation, then they will be well pleased with their work of the last few weeks.

### Notes

1. *The Military Balance 2006* sets global military spending in 2004 at US\$1,119.3 billion, of which \$707.5 is by NATO.
2. 2000 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Final Document: Volume I, Part I: Review of the operation of the Treaty, taking into account the decisions and the resolution adopted by the 1995 Review and Extension Conference Improving the effectiveness of the strengthened review process for the Treaty (Article VI and eighth to twelfth preambular paragraphs), para 15(6).
3. The International Court of Justice (ICJ), the judicial branch of the United Nations, issued its advisory opinion, *Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons* July 8, 1996.

### References

- British Pugwash Group. 2006. Trident: revise it or reject it? Letter to *The Times*, November 25.
- The Guardian*. 2006. Why? And why now? December 5.
- International Institute for Strategic Studies. 2006. *The Military Balance 2006*. London: Routledge.
- NATO. 1999. *The Alliance's Strategic Concept Approved by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington, D.C. on 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> April 1999*. <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/1999/p99-065e.htm>.
- . 2006. *Comprehensive Political Guidance Endorsed by NATO Heads of State and Government on 29 November 2006*. Riga, Latvia. <http://www.nato.int/docu/basicxt/b061129e.htm>.
- Norris, Robert S. and Hans M. Kristensen. 2005. British nuclear forces, 2005. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. 61:6.
- . 2006. Where the bombs are, 2006. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. 62:6.
- Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission. 2006. *Weapons of Terror: Freeing the World of Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Weapons*. Stockholm.
- Ernie Regehr, O.C., is Senior Policy Advisor with Project Ploughshares.*

Project Ploughshares is an ecumenical agency of the Canadian Council of Churches that works with churches and related organizations, as well as governments and non-governmental organizations, in Canada and abroad, to identify, develop, and advance approaches that build peace and prevent war, and promote the peaceful resolution of political conflict. "and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:4)