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EDITORIAL

Fixing the Treaty

The world has a chance this month to send a powerful message about its determination to curb the spread of nuclear weapons. To do that, 189 nations, whose diplomats have gathered in New York, must strengthen the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

At a frightening time — when Iran and North Korea are defying the Security Council and pressing ahead with their nuclear programs, and terrorists are actively trying to buy or steal their own weapon — there has to be a law to make clear that proliferation will not be tolerated. The treaty is that law. But it is badly fraying.

Iran, which is a “non-weapons” state, managed for years to hide its nuclear activities. North Korea secretly diverted fuel and built weapons, then suddenly withdrew from the treaty and tested a weapon.

Ideally, the treaty would be strengthened with legally binding amendments. But that requires a consensus, and even then could take years of votes. A strong political document from the conference could make the world safer. That should include:

¶An insistence that all treaty members accept tougher nuclear monitoring, giving the International Atomic Energy Agency greatly expanded access to suspected nuclear sites and related data.

¶An agreement to penalize any state that violates its treaty commitments and then withdraws from the pact, as North Korea did.

¶A requirement that states that do not already make their own nuclear fuel stay out of the fuel business — it is too easy to divert to make a nuclear weapon. States with fuel programs must commit to guarantee supplies for peaceful energy programs.

¶A strong call for the United States and Russia to quickly begin negotiations on deeper weapons reductions, and a commitment to quickly draw other nuclear powers into arms reduction talks.

¶A firm agreement that there will be no more India-like exemptions from nuclear trade rules, and that any state that tests a weapon would be denied nuclear trade.

Four decades ago, a bargain was struck. Countries without nuclear weapons signed the treaty and forswore them in return for access to peaceful nuclear energy. The five weapons states — the United States, Britain, France, Russia, China — promised to eventually disarm and provide nuclear energy technology to non-weapons states.

The bargain was always tenuous, and countries that gave up nuclear arms have some right to feel aggrieved. For too long the United States and Russia did little to shrink their huge arsenals. China’s arsenal is still

expanding. Washington's agreement to sell nuclear energy technology to India (which like Pakistan boycotted the nonproliferation treaty so it could develop weapons) enshrined unequal treatment.

President Obama has shown that he is willing to lead by example. He has downgraded the importance of nuclear arms, pledged to build no new weapons, and signed a new arms reduction treaty with Moscow. All five weapons states issued a useful joint statement pledging not to test a weapon and promising to cooperate with countries seeking peaceful nuclear energy programs.

A successful conference — with robust commitments — would give real momentum as the Security Council tries to negotiate a fourth round of sanctions for Iran. That is why Iran is working so hard to dilute or block a strong consensus document.

Egypt, which leads the Nonaligned Movement, is also playing games by pressing for a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the Middle East that seeks to force Israel to give up its nuclear arsenal. That is not going to happen any time soon. All states need to ante up and reverse the treaty's slide. The world's security depends on it.

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