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U.S. Policy Recommendation: Ottawa Convention on Anti-Personnel Landmines

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The military purpose of anti-personnel landmines (APLs) is to prevent or complicate access to specific areas by killing or incapacitating enemy ground troops. Unfortunately, the vast majority of landmines used in the last several decades have been left in place following the end of conflict, posing a grave threat to local populations. Today, more than eighty million landmines remain active in over seventy countries. Since the end of the Cold War, the international community and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have recognized the humanitarian crisis posed by landmines. The scale of the landmine crisis is alarming and has both direct and secondary impacts on affected communities. Since 1975, it is estimated that over one million people have been killed or maimed by APLs, including hundreds of thousands of children. Landmine victims become a burden on their families because many can no longer work, and most require substantial medical care. In addition to the physical threat these weapons pose, their presence can have strong psychological effects and can hinder development and economic opportunities. More so than the mine itself, the threat of its presence is the underlying cause of the humanitarian crisis. Mines Advisory Group founder Rae McGrath states, “Any area suspected of being mined is a minefield until proven safe.” The possibility of landmines can prevent civilians from using farmland or traveling to another village, reducing productivity and preventing trade. Moreover, mine clearance is dangerous and costly, deterring investment from mine-affected communities and preventing development. These factors keep communities trapped in poverty and insecurity, and prevent a return to normalcy for decades after a conflict ends.

In response to the alarming data regarding landmine casualties in the early 1990s, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) declared an epidemic and began an advocacy campaign to limit the suffering caused by these remnants of war. Growing outrage, combined with media attention, led to an unprecedented coalition of NGOs, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), governments, and civilians calling for a global ban on anti-personnel landmines. In 1997, 124 states signed the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production, and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction, otherwise known as the Ottawa Convention. The treaty combined provisions for arms control with requirements for human protection under international humanitarian law (IHL). The Ottawa Convention is aimed at eliminating the use of landmines in order to protect civilians in accordance with human rights law and IHL. Additionally, the Convention contains requirements for mine clearance and victim assistance. The goal of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) — a global coalition of NGOs that assisted the passage of the Ottawa Convention — and the Convention itself has been to eliminate the humanitarian landmine crisis, both through international cooperation in the humanitarian mine action effort and through the stigmatization of military landmine use.

As the concern over the landmine epidemic gained momentum in the early 1990s, the United States was at the forefront of the initial call for the ban. President Bill Clinton actively participated in the Ottawa Process leading up to the Convention, but ultimately refused to sign due to pressure from the Pentagon. Instead, President Clinton committed to developing alternative weapons, then banning landmine use, and signing the Ottawa Convention by 2006. However, following the administration change in 2000 and the start of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, U.S. policy regarding landmines shifted as the international military focus turned to terrorism. In 2004, President George W. Bush announced that the United States would not sign the Ottawa Convention and would continue to produce and stockpile landmines. This stance has left the United States behind most other states, which have continued to move toward a global ban on landmines.

This article examines the consequences of the U.S. refusal to sign the Ottawa Convention and examines the implications of its continued refusal for the Ottawa Convention and customary international law. The United States has historically been a

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To put an end to the suffering and casualties caused by anti-personnel mines, that kill or maim hundreds of people every week, mostly innocent and defenseless civilians and especially children, obstruct economic development and reconstruction, inhibit the repatriation of refugees and internally displaced persons, and have other severe consequences for years after emplacement, believing it necessary to do their utmost to contribute in an efficient and coordinated manner to face the challenge of removing anti-personnel mines. ... 14

While the Convention establishes specific timetables and guidelines for disarmament, the most important provisions are those that require states to clear all mines from their territories and ensure an ongoing commitment to assist victims and threatened populations.15 Furthermore, reservations 16 are not permitted under any circumstances, preventing states from maintaining any existing minefields or stockpiles.

US Landmine Policy and Its Implications

The U.S. government has defended its decision not to sign the Ottawa Convention based on a number of factors. First, the United States is, by a considerable margin, the world’s largest financial donor to humanitarian mine action, contributing over $1.2 billion to activities in fifty countries since 1993. This funding supports mine clearance training and work, local mine risk education, victim assistance, mine-affected area surveys, and destruction of stockpiles. In many ways, these U.S. efforts surpass the requirements of the Ottawa Convention. Second, the United States has committed to using only detectable, non-persistent landmines that will self-detonate or lose power after a short period of time.17 Although landmines have not been used in any U.S. conflict since the 1991 Gulf War, the U.S. government still views landmines as an indispensable military tool.18

Third, the U.S. government argues that the Ottawa Convention focuses too specifically on anti-personnel landmines while ignoring other unexploded ordnance (UXO).19 The United States maintains that the most effective method of controlling the UXO threat to civilians is the creation and implementation of responsible guidelines for their production, use, and subsequent deployment.20
routes, the method which it argues allows for the most cost-
the threat of landmines in populated areas and transportation
States supports a “mine-impact free” goal which will eliminate
ensuring that areas and villages are not overlooked. The United
is to increase the international focus on mine clearance, while
the humanitarian benefits of a total ban on anti-personnel land-
determined that the military necessity of landmines outweighs
more lives would be at risk. As a result, the United States has
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that landmine presence can have on post-conflict recovery and
development.

Finally, the U.S. government has refused to sign the Ottawa
Convention because it does not allow for reservations. According
to the United States, the unique situation in the demilitarized
zone (DMZ) of the Korean peninsula requires the use of anti-
personnel landmines in order to deter North Korean forces from
entering South Korea. Without landmines, a substantially higher
number of troops and weaponry would be required in Korea and
more lives would be at risk. As a result, the United States has
determined that the military necessity of landmines outweighs
the humanitarian benefits of a total ban on anti-personnel land-

Because the United States has been a strong advocate for
universal human rights in the past and initiated the call for a
landmine ban, it has been widely criticized for its refusal to
accede to the Ottawa Convention. The government clearly needs
to balance its competing expectations and requirements, but the
landmine issue has become politically volatile. The ICRC argues
that landmines are not an indispensable military weapon and
that their value is dramatically outweighed by their post-conflict
effects. The stigmatization of mine use has made their political
costs prohibitive. As international law moves into the arena of
human security, the United States cannot afford to sacrifice its
position in international affairs and international law to defend a
marginally useful military tool.

In order to examine the reasons behind U.S. landmine policy,
it is important to contrast the prominent military and humanitar-
ian viewpoints on the issue. The military viewpoint stresses the
value of anti-personnel landmines in conflict situations. They
are considered “force multipliers” because they allow for the
protection of larger areas with fewer troops. During military
operations, active battlefields are viewed in terms of tactics
and strategic objectives. Traditionally, marginal efforts aim to
minimize “collateral damage” to civilians during wartime, while
most concentrate on the main strategic objectives. The United
States maintains that the responsible use of landmines in conflict
situations is proportionately acceptable, in terms of military
value, weighed against the potential danger to civilians.

The humanitarian viewpoint, on the other hand, focuses on
the short- and long-term effects that landmines and other UXOs
have on civilian populations. The ICRC conducted a study of
the military effectiveness of landmine use and found that the
weapons were generally used in violation of international law
and that their use had minimal effects on the outcome of the
conflicts. Because the responsible use of landmines requires
substantial effort and organization, the ICRC concluded that
armed forces are generally unable to follow IHL when marking
and mapping landmines. Furthermore, because military opera-
tions focus on battlefield tactics, they often neglect to consider
the post-conflict consequences when planting mines. In other
words, battlefields often return to their use as crop fields, soc-
cer fields, or playgrounds when conflicts end. The humanitarian
viewpoint acknowledges the numerous and considerable effects
that landmine presence can have on post-conflict recovery and
development.

The presence of both viewpoints is evident in the complex
and contradictory arguments found in U.S. landmine policy. The
United States claims that, by remaining outside of the restric-
tions and requirements of the Ottawa Convention, it has more
freedom to dedicate efforts toward the greatest humanitarian
threats from all types of UXOs. However, this rationaliza-
tion fails to recognize the value of international solidarity and
collective commitment. The primary purpose of the Ottawa
Convention is to highlight the importance of human security
under IHL by banning the use of anti-personnel landmines.
The United States acknowledges the existence of humanitarian
threats from UXOs, but has failed to recognize the importance
of the Ottawa Convention in the legal process toward eliminating
those threats. As illustrated by the recent Convention on Cluster
Munitions, the international community intends to eliminate
the humanitarian threat of persistent and indiscriminate weapons
through the introduction of human security into international
law. While both the United States and the international com-
unity claim to be concerned with reaching the same goal, the U.S.
has chosen to take a slow, incremental approach in opposition to
the international majority.

As a result of 12 years of competing priorities and lack of
determination, the United States is preventing the full eradica-
tion of the humanitarian landmine threat. Though it seems that
the trend toward human security in international law will con-
tinue to move forward without the support of the United States,
the refusal of such a dominant world power stands in the way of
the Ottawa Convention becoming customary international law
and significantly hampers the international protection of all vic-
tims from the threat of indiscriminate remnants of war.

U.S. Policy Options

The policy that the United States chooses to follow regard-
ing the Ottawa Convention has important implications, both for
human security and post-conflict development in future conflict
areas and for the framework of international law. Over the last
15 years, U.S. landmine policy has reverted from a progressive
to an increasingly ostracized stance. From its current position,
the United States could follow one of three possible courses of action regarding landmine policy: (1) continued adherence to the current policy; (2) movement toward the standards set out on the Ottawa Convention with an exception for the Korean peninsula; or (3) accession to the Ottawa Convention.

If it adheres to the current policy, the United States will continue to support humanitarian mine action on its own terms by identifying high-risk areas and considering the costs and benefits of removing landmines in remote areas. Continued support for mine clearance training, mine risk education, and victim assistance will continue to exceed the guidelines set out by the Ottawa Convention. The military will produce and stockpile non-persistent, detectable landmines and retain the right to deploy them in conflict. While it is highly unlikely that the United States would use landmines in future conflict due to the political consequences, the option will remain.

Following this policy will keep the United States at odds with the global humanitarian movement and the international community, and will prevent greater acceptance of human security and protection into international law. The Ottawa Convention will remain partially effective and, although landmines will become increasingly stigmatized, their use by rogue states and non-state actors will continue to inflict suffering and obstruct development.\(^{28}\) As the human security concept moves toward the elimination of additional indiscriminate weapons and tactics to prevent the suffering of innocent civilians, the United States will be seen as supporting inhumane warfare as the government continues to focus strictly on national security.

The second option would move U.S. policy in the direction of the Ottawa Convention mine ban, while maintaining an exception for the situation in the Korean DMZ. The goals of the Ottawa Convention would be strengthened to a small degree, as U.S. disapproval of landmine use will further stigmatize the weapon. Aside from Korea, it is unlikely that the United States would use landmines in future conflicts due to the growing stigmatization. Therefore, producing and stockpiling these weapons serves only to comfort military officials. However, it is unlikely that additional countries would accede to the Convention, preferring instead to declare their own exceptions for continued use. Such a trend of exceptions would mean that the landmine ban would not be considered customary international law.

The third and most favorable option is a U.S. commitment to accede to the Ottawa Convention before the end of the current presidential term in 2012. The military would be allowed the next three years to develop alternative technology, while maintaining access to current stockpiles in the meantime. The Convention requires States Parties to remove all landmines in the territories they control within ten years, allowing the United States until 2022 to replace landmines in the Korean DMZ with alternative weapons. By rejoining the rest of the progressive international community, the United States could renew its commitment to human rights and IHL and cooperate in constructing future treaties focused on human security. With the United States as a State Party to the Ottawa Convention, the ban on landmine use would approach customary international law. With the full commitment of donor countries, the humanitarian threat of landmines would be significantly mitigated. Countries remaining outside of the Convention would come under increased pressure to accede, reducing the threat of landmine use to mostly non-state actors. Because of the grave humanitarian threat posed by landmine use and UXOs, the United States must acknowledge that the civilian costs far outweigh their military value, and that international solidarity is the best path to their eradication.

**Conclusion**

While the purpose of the Ottawa Convention is clearly in line with the U.S. mission to support human rights and humanitarian action around the world, perhaps the most important reason for accession to the Convention are the treaty’s implications for the future of international law. While the United States has supported the elimination of civilian landmine threats over the last twenty years, it has also continued to insist on the tactical military importance of indiscriminate anti-personnel landmines and has developed its policy based heavily on the military viewpoint. This insistence flies in the face of the international community’s acknowledgement of the disproportionate humanitarian effect of such weapons and the successful introduction of the human security concept into international law. Accession to the Convention is in the best long-term interest of the United States, allowing it to stay near the forefront of international law. Possessing the technology and capability to develop new weaponry, the United States must find an alternative to landmine use in Korea. The cost of ignoring the international consensus in order to maintain a fifty-year-old war zone is short-sighted and in opposition to U.S. goals to spread freedom and improve international security.

By Henrik Hansson.

Three Republic of Korea soldiers patrolling the border at Panmunjeom in the DMZ between North and South Korea.

1 John Troxell, *Landmines: Why the Korea Exception Should be the Rule*, 30(1) PARAMETERS: US ARMY WAR COLLEGE QUARTERLY 82 (2009) (stating that the military purpose of landmines is “to channel enemy forces into a specific area, or to defend flanks, restricted terrain, or border zones,” and therefore landmines increase the defensive capabilities and cause significant casualties for the attacking force).


8 According to ICBL, Humanitarian Mine Action is a comprehensive response to the problem of landmines and other UXO. It focuses on marking minefields, total mine clearance, mine risk education, victim assistance, and advocacy. It is carried out by a wide array of NGOs, IGOs, and states. ICBL, supra note 2.

9 The Ottawa Process was spearheaded by the Canadian government with the involvement of a large coalition of Action NGOs under the leadership of the ICBL. Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy was instrumental in pushing the process forward despite its unconventional methods. Canadian Red Cross, *Canada’s Role in the Ottawa Process*, available at http://www.redcross.ca/article.asp?id=24621&tid=001 (last visited Nov. 11, 2009).


11 ICBL, supra note 2.


14 Anti-Personnel Landmines Convention, supra note 5.

15 Id.

16 Under international law, a reservation is a statement by a state made when ratifying or acceding to a treaty in which the state indicates an exclusion or modification of certain provisions with regard to that state.


18 Carr, supra note 10.

19 Unexploded Ordnance includes any type of explosive weapon that did not explode upon deployment, including landmines, bombs, shells, grenades, etc.

20 Carr, supra note 10.

21 Anti-Personnel Landmines Convention, supra note 6.

22 The ICRC study examines the military and civilian effects of landmine use in conflict from WWII through the 1990s. The study determined that landmine deployment methods generally do not comply with international law, that their objectives are rarely met, and that they routinely cause substantial human and social threats during and after the conflict. The report was conducted by the ICRC along with numerous weapons and military experts. International Committee of the Red Cross, *Anti-Personnel Landmines: Friend or Foe? A Study of the Military Use and Effectiveness of Anti-Personnel Mines*, available at http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/p0654 (last visited Oct. 23, 2009).

23 Id.


28 Daniel Smith’s concept of “The Landmine Web,” whereby states depend on or wary of several world powers, namely the United States, are reluctant to sign the Ottawa Convention before their powerful neighbors, adversaries, or partners, provides an interesting consideration of the ‘domino effect’ should the United States agree to sign the treaty. Id.