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At nuclear conference, U.S. expects little, gains little

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It didn't end in failure.

That was perhaps the best the U.S. government could boast about a month-long conference on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which ended Friday in New York.

President Obama has made a priority of strengthening the treaty, which is in danger of unraveling after decades of curtailing the spread of nuclear weapons. Much of his ambitious nuclear agenda has been undertaken with an eye toward demonstrating U.S. compliance with the pact.

The United States got few of the specific goals it sought at the conference, such as penalties for nations that secretly develop nuclear weapons, then quit the pact (think North Korea). Language calling on countries to allow tougher nuclear inspections was greatly watered down.

And the conference's final document singled out Israel's suspected nuclear program - but not Iran's secret facilities, which many think are part of an effort to build an atomic bomb. Gen. James Jones, the U.S. national security adviser, blasted that absence as "deplorable."

U.S. officials said the conference's final "action plan" at least represented a commitment by 189 nations to stand by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The last review conference, in 2005, collapsed in failure, with many countries blaming the Bush administration.

"We've got the NPT back on track. There was so much criticism about 2005 . . . and a lot of doom and gloom about the treaty failing," said one U.S. official, who was not authorized to speak on the record. "We have to hold this treaty together."

The 40-year-old pact is built on a grand bargain: The original five nuclear powers promised to disarm gradually and all others foreswore the bomb. All treaty members were guaranteed access to nuclear energy, subject to the oversight of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

But the conference revealed the strains in the treaty. Non-nuclear countries complained bitterly that nuclear powers are not upholding their end of the bargain.

It was clear from the start that getting agreement would be difficult. The conference's final documents are reached by consensus, meaning that Iran, a treaty member, could block any initiatives. That explains why it wasn't named.

Israel, on the other hand, has not signed the treaty and did not attend the meetings.

"We did the most we could, considering the rules of the road," said Ellen O. Tauscher, the U.S. undersecretary for arms control.

Still, U.S. officials appeared frustrated that the Obama administration did not get more credit for its record. It has signed a new arms-reduction treaty with Russia, hosted a

47-nation summit on nuclear security and lessened the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. defense policy.

"The disarmament stuff Obama did, they just pocketed," said David Albright, president of the Institute for Science and International Security. Non-nuclear countries, he said, "didn't give anything back."

Egypt's U.N. ambassador, Maged Abdel Aziz, who led the powerful 118-member non-aligned group, disagreed. He said non-nuclear countries ultimately dropped their demands for faster disarmament.

"We like Obama's ideas. We will make the first concessions," he said in an interview. "But we will see what is going to come."

His comments reflected skepticism among countries about how much Obama will achieve. The new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with Russia has not been ratified, and Obama faces an uphill battle in winning Senate approval of a separate pact banning nuclear tests worldwide.

Aziz said non-nuclear countries are still smarting over the George W. Bush administration's decision to sell civilian nuclear technology to India, which hasn't signed the nonproliferation treaty. Obama voted for that deal as a senator.

"If you say countries outside the treaty are going to get . . . even more benefits than countries inside the treaty, than what is the benefit for me to bind myself with more [nonproliferation] restrictions?" Aziz asked. U.S. officials said they would continue to pursue tougher nuclear controls in more favorable venues, such as the U.N. Security Council and the IAEA.

Even before the conference started, the Obama administration "trimmed their sails on what they expected to get out of it. The main thing at this point was not to undercut their agenda going forward," said Miles Pomper, a nuclear policy expert at the Monterey Institute of International Studies.

Not that the conference lacked for drama. Many diplomats expected the U.S. delegation would kill the final document because of the mention of Israel.

When the United States accepted it, the Iranian delegation was so surprised that it asked for a four-hour postponement of the final session so that members could call their government, diplomats said.

The Iranians finally agreed to the text, recommitting themselves -- at least verbally -- to the treaty's rules.

The adoption of a document "provides less excuse for people who would like this [treaty] to go off the tracks," the U.S. official said.