

# OBAMA ALMOST MAKES THE RIGHT DECISION

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, NOV 26 2009

A recent report indicated that President Obama had finally made a security policy related decision—not on his Afghanistan strategy which is yet to be announced— but rather on whether or not his administration would seek to have the US sign the treaty banning the production and use of anti-personnel land mines, a treaty that 156 other nations have already signed. First word was that the administration would not favor signing the treaty. Signing would require approval of two thirds of the US Senate which is unlikely. More important, it is a bad treaty imposed primarily to hobble the US, and largely ineffective in achieving its nominal goal of eliminating land mines from warfare. But even this small bit of apparent Obama decisiveness found quick contradiction in a subsequent announcement that the administration's review of the treaty is continuing. No profile in political courage here as the treaty is much loved by the Left at home and abroad.

The treaty, which came into force in 1997, bans anti-personnel, victim activated mines including those that are timed, mines that deactivate after set durations such as eight hours or two days. Persistent landmines can kill or maim non-combatants long after the battle or even the conflict is over. The US had largely moved away from using persistent, buried anti-personnel mines toward scatterable (largely artillery delivered or air dropped) systems of timed, non-persistent mines. Perhaps comforted by the fact that its own forces were unlikely to be engaged in combat and thus in need the protection of land mines, the Canadian government, the prime mover behind the treaty, and other of America's "allies" sought to deny the US this technological advantage, making all anti-personnel, victim activated mines illegal, persistent or not. Because nearly every member of NATO signed the treaty, the US has had to abandon the use of its timed anti-personnel mines even though it is not a signator because the treaty makes it a violation for signators to join coalitions with anti-personnel mine users.

Mines are in fact militarily useful. They can be used to delay or channel attacking enemy forces, to protect the flanks of friendly forces, and to give soldiers in isolated posts a safe night's sleep. Of course, the US military has found work-arounds to the ban. The US now has weapons that provide systems of scatterable, networked mines with an observable, command detonation, perfectly legal under the treaty. A soldier observes a field of mines via computer link and can attack enemy forces as they move through it. The command link activates or terminates the field.

The treaty doesn't stop the US, but it also doesn't protect the innocents. China and Russia have not signed the treaty and still use buried, persistent mines. Arms dealers still offer long lasting, victim activated mines, and even if they did not, such mines are relatively easy to make as the spiraling use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) stands in testimony. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been invested in clearing mines from past conflicts, but thousands of innocents still fall victim to this cheap terrorist tool. Not all IEDs are technically mines, and some that are command detonated or anti-vehicle are legal under the treaty, but many groups throughout the world use pressure plates, trip wires and explosives to express their causes and kill or intimidate their opponents. Banned or not, it is still a big part of modern conflict.

Then why not sign the treaty? If it doesn't matter, why not make the symbolic political gesture? Because the treaty is the first step in a series in the activist's agenda to constrain American conventional military capabilities, it is unwise to provide such an endorsement. Already in preparation is a treaty banning cluster weapons which are used in area denial or artillery fire suppression missions, and which involve the delivery via air or artillery of hundreds of bomblets over a wide area intended to explode on contact or at set heights. Because a very small percentage of the bomblets

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are duds, work goes on to make them 100 percent reliable to avoid a residual, mine-like, persistent hazard on the battlefield.

Weapon bans are not a way to prevent wars. One sided bans, like the anti-personnel land mine ban, are political theater intended to handicap only American soldiers. Murder and crime are not stopped by gun possession restrictions, and neither will war be stopped by weapon bans. Oppose the war, not the weapons. I am against escalating in Afghanistan. Will the Obama administration be as well?

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## About the author:

**Harvey M. Sapolsky** is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.