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# White House Is Being Pressed to Reverse Course and Join Land Mine Ban

By **MARK LANDLER**

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration, under intense political pressure from Capitol Hill and elsewhere, is engaged in a vigorous debate over whether to reverse course and join an international treaty banning land mines, administration officials said this week.

In re-examining the issue, the administration is stepping back into the glare of a perennial cause that has captured the attention of world leaders, royalty and celebrities. It is also inviting another internal debate that pits the Pentagon against other parts of the administration.

The policy review, which officials expect to be completed this summer, could result in the United States pledging to abide by the treaty's provisions even if it does not join it. That would be a striking disavowal of its announcement last fall that it would stick to the Bush administration's refusal to join the agreement, known as the [Ottawa Treaty](#).

It would also mollify critics, chiefly Senator [Patrick J. Leahy](#), Democrat of Vermont, who called the earlier decision a "default of U.S. leadership and a detour from the clear path of history." Mr. Leahy, who expressed his dismay to [President Obama](#), said on Friday that he was glad the issue was getting "the kind of attention it should have been getting then."

The military has long opposed signing the land mine treaty, arguing that it would put the lives of American soldiers at risk by depriving them of a deterrent weapon. There are still nearly a million mines in the demilitarized zone on the Korean Peninsula, shielding American troops from a marauding North Korean army.

But some of the administration's leading liberal insiders, like [Harold H. Koh](#), the State Department's legal adviser, are pushing for the United States to join the ban. And even some Pentagon officials are said to favor a change.

In a sign of the effort's urgency, the White House is holding regular meetings with officials from the Pentagon and State Department. The administration has summoned outside experts, like [Karl F. Inderfurth](#), a former senior diplomat who led the delegation to Ottawa in 1997, where the United States watched as 120 other countries signed the pact.

"I'm guardedly optimistic," said a senior administration official who favors the treaty and who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly. "Why stick with the status quo when we would get so much credit for even a modest move?"

A Pentagon spokesman said it would be "premature" to comment before the review was completed. It is not clear where the defense secretary, [Robert M. Gates](#), stands.

The White House said that the United States is already helping deal with the fallout from mines. "The U.S. record on humanitarian mine action shows that we share the concern of parties to the Ottawa Convention," said Michael Hammer, a spokesman for the [National Security Council](#).

Some analysts say the rationale for land mines is even weaker now than it was in 1997. Technological advances have enabled the Pentagon to create explosives that function like mines but are detonated remotely, making them permissible under the treaty. The United States has not used land mines since 1991, despite fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan — two countries that have ratified the treaty.

"The situation has changed significantly in recent years," said Mr. Inderfurth, who is now a professor of international affairs at [George Washington University](#). "There is every reason to believe we could join this treaty."

Next week, Senator Leahy plans to send a letter to Mr. Obama, urging him to join the ban. The letter notes that 158 countries have signed the treaty, including Britain and other [NATO](#) allies. It is signed by 68 senators, including 10 Republicans.

In the 13 years since [Diana, Princess of Wales](#), walked near a minefield in Angola to dramatize

the dangers, land mines have receded as a political cause. They were not an issue in the presidential campaign or in the early days of the administration.

By all accounts, the initial land mine review was “cursory and half-hearted,” in Mr. Leahy’s words. Last November, on the eve of a meeting on the treaty in Colombia, a State Department spokesman declared, “We would not be able to meet our national defense needs nor our security commitments to our friends and allies if we signed this.”

A day later, after a storm of protest from Mr. Leahy and human rights groups, the administration insisted that the review was still under way, and that the spokesman’s comments were premature. But one senior official said the “negative blowback” forced a more serious examination. The current review is being coordinated by two senior officials at the National Security Council, [Samantha Power](#) and Barry Pavel.

Another key player is Andrew J. Shapiro, the State Department’s top liaison to the Pentagon who served as an adviser to Mrs. Clinton on defense policy when she was in the Senate. Officials said Mr. Koh, a former dean of Yale Law School, was drafting legal arguments on issues like the status of land mines in South Korea, where American troops are deployed.

In the past, the Pentagon has sought a “Korean exception” that would allow it to keep a stockpile of mines in the demilitarized zone. But while those mines are there to protect American soldiers, control over them has been transferred to South Korea, which is not a party to the treaty.

The goal of those who favor the treaty is to get back to the policy of the Clinton administration, which declined to sign the treaty in 1997 but said it wanted the United States to be compliant by 2006. In 2004, the Bush administration issued a new policy that emphasized the development of safer and more sophisticated mines, but pointedly refused to go along with a ban.

Since the treaty has been in force for more than a decade, the United States would no longer sign it, but accede to its terms, a decision that would still require ratification by the Senate. The most likely outcome, several officials said, is for the administration to bring the United States closer to full compliance, while setting a goal, as Mr. Clinton did, to join it eventually.

Such a move might not satisfy the advocates, said Heather Hurlburt, the executive director of

the [National Security Network](#), a foreign policy group. “But you definitely have people within the administration working to bring the United States closer to the spirit of the treaty,” she said.