

54. Nuclear Proliferation and the Terrorist Threat

Policymakers should

- avoid the assumption that deterrence is inapplicable in the post–Cold War era; the vast U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal still acts as a powerful deterrent against even the most aggressive nation-state actor launching an unprovoked attack against the American homeland;
- recognize that the prospect of stable, democratic countries acquiring nuclear weapons for deterrence and self-defense against regional threats is not necessarily destabilizing and may be preferable to having the United States shield those countries with a nuclear guarantee that puts the American homeland at risk;
- stop threatening preemptive war as a response to nuclear ambitions; such a doctrine actually creates a powerful incentive for adversaries to accelerate their acquisition of nuclear weapons as a deterrent to U.S. efforts to achieve regime change;
- make clear to regimes that acquire nuclear weapons that passing on weapons, material, or technology to terrorists is an intolerable act that will result in immediate U.S. military action against the regime; and
- stop trying to get new nuclear-weapons powers to divest themselves of their weapons and instead work with them to develop more secure command and control over their arsenals and to reject dangerous, destabilizing doctrines such as “launch on warning.”

Current thinking about nuclear weapons proliferation tends to be binary in nature. The traditional approach to arms control is to negotiate treaties

or agreements and create nonproliferation regimes (including intrusive and unfettered inspections) as a way to curb the spread of materials, technology, and weapons. People who are skeptical of arms control argue that the United States can dissuade countries from acquiring nuclear weapons by developing weapons—including precision low-yield nuclear weapons, or mininukes—that can hold high-value targets (including underground weapons of mass destruction, or WMD, facilities) at risk. Moreover, they argue that the United States must be willing to use military force, unilaterally if necessary, to prevent the acquisition of nuclear weapons if diplomacy fails.

The only way out of that dilemma is to rethink nonproliferation.

A Peculiar Loss of Faith in Deterrence

One increasingly prominent assumption in the foreign policy community is that the United States cannot rely on deterrence the way that it did throughout the Cold War era. That point became evident in the months leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The Bush administration clearly believed that Saddam Hussein was undeterrable. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice expressed that assumption when she rebuked those who asked for definitive evidence that Baghdad had chemical and biological weapons and was attempting to acquire nuclear weapons. Rice warned that we could not wait for a smoking gun in the form of a mushroom cloud.

But the question never should have been whether Iraq had WMD or not, which presumed that if it did it was an undeterrable threat. Rather, the fundamental question should have been: if Iraq has WMD, however undesirable that may be, is it a threat to the United States that cannot be deterred?

The answer is that there was no historical evidence of Iraq or any other rogue state using WMD against enemies capable of inflicting unacceptable retaliatory damage. True enough, Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons against helpless Kurdish villages and Iranian infantry in the 1980s. But during the Gulf War in 1991, when Hussein had vast stocks of chemical weapons, he was deterred from using them against the U.S.-led Coalition and Israel by credible threats of obliteration. More to the point, even if Saddam Hussein had managed to build a few atomic bombs, he would have been no more able to escape the reality of credible U.S. nuclear deterrence than were the Soviet Union and Communist China before him.

Most opponents of the administration seemed to share the Bush foreign policy team's lack of confidence in deterrence with regard to Iraq. The

traditional arms control and nonproliferation community could not disagree with the Bush administration's assertion that Iraq's possession of WMD was a threat that required a response because to disagree would have meant admitting that proliferation might be an acceptable outcome. Instead, they were left to disagree about the evidence that Iraq was in violation of UN Security Council resolutions and stress the need to obtain international consensus on the appropriate response.

The assumption that the United States can no longer rely on deterrence dominates Washington's overall strategic thinking. That is a startling departure from a core feature of U.S. security strategy since the end of World War II. U.S. officials have traditionally believed that the vast U.S. strategic arsenal would ultimately deter any would-be aggressor—even a nuclear-capable one.

The Bush administration's National Security Strategy, approved in September 2002, embraced the doctrine of preemptive military action to prevent so-called rogue states from acquiring weapons of mass destruction. The NSS stated that goal succinctly: "We must be prepared to stop rogue states and their terrorist clients *before* they are able to threaten or use weapons of mass destruction against the United States and our allies and friends." On another occasion, the administration emphasized that the United States would not "permit the world's most dangerous regimes" to pose a threat "with the world's most destructive weapons."

That loss of faith in deterrence is puzzling. Shadowy nonstate actors—especially Al Qaeda and its allies—probably are not deterrable, since they can shift locations easily and, therefore, there is no obvious target for retaliation. But nation-states have a return address, and their leaders know that any attack on the United States would be met with an obliterating retaliatory attack by the massive U.S. nuclear arsenal. Also, while individual fanatics may sometimes be willing to commit suicide for a cause, prominent political leaders rarely display that characteristic.

Moreover, over the years, the United States deterred the likes of Joseph Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev, and Mao Zedong. None of those leaders seriously contemplated attacking the United States. And the reason for their restraint was quite simple: they knew that such an attack would mean their own annihilation. Why, then, do U.S. officials apparently assume that leaders of radical nation-states are undeterrable? It cannot be that those leaders are more brutal than America's previous adversaries. Khrushchev and Brezhnev were thuggish, and Mao and Stalin were genocidal monsters. A credible case cannot be made that the current crop of

tyrants is more erratic and unpredictable than the tyrants the United States deterred in the past. Stalin epitomized paranoia, and Mao was the architect of China's utterly bizarre Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s—at the very time that China was acquiring a nuclear-weapons capability.

U.S. policymakers should regain their faith in deterrence and again make that doctrine the cornerstone of America's security policy. Preemptive action may sometimes be necessary to meet a threat, but only when that threat is clear and imminent. What the Bush administration described as preemptive action was more properly termed “preventive war”—a willingness to strike first to forestall a vague, largely theoretical security threat. That doctrine not only risks making the United States an aggressor in certain situations; it also has some highly undesirable side effects.

Preemptive War and Perverse Incentives

Washington's goal of nuclear nonproliferation has suffered two serious setbacks in recent years. Both North Korea and Iran appear to be pursuing ambitious nuclear-weapons programs. What U.S. officials do not recognize is that such actions are a logical, perhaps even inevitable, response to the foreign policy the United States has pursued since the end of the Cold War. Consider the extent of U.S. military action since the opening of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Washington has engaged in nine major military operations during that period. Moreover, in his 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush explicitly linked both North Korea and Iran to Iraq (a country with which the United States was clearly headed to war) in an “axis of evil.” It is hardly surprising that Pyongyang and Tehran concluded that they were next on Washington's hit list unless they could effectively deter an attack. Yet neither country could hope to match the conventional military capabilities of a superpower. The most reliable deterrent—maybe the only reliable deterrent—is to have nuclear weapons. In other words, U.S. behavior may have inadvertently created a powerful incentive for the proliferation of nuclear weapons—the last thing Washington wanted.

North Korean and Iranian leaders likely noticed that the United States treats nations that possess nuclear weapons quite differently than it treats those that do not possess them. That is not a new phenomenon. Just six years after China began to develop nuclear arms, the United States sought to normalize relations—reversing a policy of isolation that had lasted more than two decades. U.S. leaders show a nuclear-armed Russia a fair

amount of respect even though that country has become a second-rate conventional military power and a third-rate economic power. And Washington has treated Pakistan and India with far greater respect since those countries barged into the global nuclear-weapons club in 1998.

Contrast those actions with Washington's conduct toward nonnuclear powers such as Iraq and Yugoslavia. The lesson that North Korea and Iran learned (and other countries may be learning as well) is that possessing a nuclear arsenal is the way to compel the United States to exhibit caution and respect. That is especially true if the country has an adversarial relationship with the United States.

U.S. leaders need to face the reality that America's foreign policy may cause unintended (and sometimes unpleasant) consequences on the nuclear-proliferation front. The people who cheered Washington's military interventions need to ask themselves whether increasing the incentives for nuclear proliferation was a price worth paying—because greater proliferation is the price we are now paying.

Not All Forms of Proliferation Are Equal

The conventional wisdom is that nonproliferation per se creates greater security. Indeed, that was the underlying logic of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) adopted by the bulk of the international community in the late 1960s. The NPT is the centerpiece of the existing nonproliferation system. Members of the arms control community have over the decades spent at least as much time and energy agonizing over the possibility that stable, democratic, status quo powers such as Germany, Japan, Sweden, and South Korea might decide to abandon the NPT and develop nuclear deterrents as they have spent over the prospect that unstable or aggressive states might do so.

That unfortunate attitude is evident across the political spectrum. As the North Korean nuclear crisis evolved, some of the most hawkish members of the U.S. foreign policy community became terrified at the prospect that America's democratic allies in East Asia might build their own nuclear deterrents to offset Pyongyang's moves. Neoconservative luminaries Robert Kagan and William Kristol regard such proliferation with horror: "The possibility that Japan, and perhaps even Taiwan, might respond to North Korea's actions by producing their own nuclear weapons, thus spurring an East Asian nuclear arms race . . . is something that should send chills up the spine of any sensible American strategist."

That attitude misconstrues the problem. A threat to the peace may exist if an aggressive and erratic regime gets nukes and then is able to intimidate or blackmail its nonnuclear neighbors. Nuclear arsenals in the hands of stable, democratic, status quo powers do not threaten the peace. Kagan and Kristol—and other Americans who share their hostility toward such countries having nuclear weapons—embrace a moral equivalence between a potential aggressor and its potential victims.

America's current nonproliferation policy is the international equivalent of domestic gun control laws—and exhibits the same faulty logic. Gun control laws have had done little to prevent criminal elements from acquiring weapons. Instead, they disarm honest citizens and make them more vulnerable to armed predators. The nonproliferation system is having a similar perverse effect. Such unsavory states as Iran and North Korea are well along the path to becoming nuclear-weapons powers while their more peaceful neighbors are hamstrung by the NPT from countering those moves.

The focus of Washington's nonproliferation policy should be on substituting discrimination and selectivity for uniformity of treatment. U.S. policymakers must rid themselves of the notion that all forms of proliferation are equally bad. The United States should concentrate on making it difficult for aggressive or unstable regimes to acquire the technology and fissile material needed to develop nuclear weapons. Policymakers must adopt a realistic attitude toward the limitations of even that more tightly focused nonproliferation policy. At best, U.S. actions will only delay, not prevent, such states from joining the nuclear-weapons club.

But delay can provide important benefits. A delay of only a few years may significantly reduce the likelihood that an aggressive power with a new nuclear-weapons capability will have a regional nuclear monopoly and be able to blackmail nonnuclear neighbors. In some cases, the knowledge that the achievement of a regional nuclear monopoly is impossible may discourage a would-be expansionist power from even making the effort. At the very least, it could cause such a power to configure its new arsenal purely for deterrence rather than design it for aggressive purposes.

Although in the general sense it might be true that fewer nuclear weapons in the world (and fewer countries with nuclear weapons) would be a good thing, such logic is not necessarily absolute. Instead of assuming that all proliferation of nuclear weapons is an inherent danger that must be prevented, policymakers should analyze proliferation and assess its consequences on a case-by-case basis rather than use a one-size-fits-all approach.

What If Nonproliferation Efforts Fail?

There are steps that the United States can take to limit some of the harmful effects of proliferation. One worrisome prospect is that new nuclear states may lack the financial resources or the technical expertise to establish reliable command-and-control systems, or to guard their arsenals from theft or accidental or unauthorized launch. (Although the latter two dangers are an acute concern with new nuclear-weapons powers, they are also a problem with Russia's nuclear arsenal.) An equally serious danger is that some of those nuclear powers may fail to develop coherent strategic doctrines that communicate to adversaries the circumstances under which the aggrieved party might use nuclear weapons.

In some cases, Washington can help minimize such problems by disseminating command-and-control technology and assisting in the creation of crisis management hotlines and other confidence-building measures among emerging nuclear-weapons states. That would reduce the danger that a country might adopt a "launch on warning" strategy—launching its weapons on the basis of an indication that the other side has launched an attack without waiting for confirmation that an attack is actually under way. The United States can also encourage potential adversaries to engage in strategic dialogues to delineate the kinds of provocations that might cause them to contemplate using nuclear weapons and outline the doctrines that would govern their use. At the very least, such a dialogue would reduce the chances of a nuclear conflict erupting because of miscalculation or misunderstanding. Finally, Washington can strongly encourage new nuclear powers to configure their arsenals solely for defensive, second-strike roles rather than provocative, first-strike capabilities.

Such measures are not a panacea, but they do limit some of the worst potential effects of nuclear proliferation. There is one other area in which the United States must have a proactive policy—making it clear to new nuclear powers that transferring nuclear technology or weapons to nonstate actors is utterly unacceptable.

Proliferation and Terrorism

The imperatives of the post-9/11 threat environment dictate that the most important U.S. security concern related to nuclear weapons is the potential for transfer of such weapons (or materials and technology) to terrorist groups who are, by definition, undeterrable. Therefore, the single

most important criterion to use in assessing the potential dangers of proliferation must be the possibility of nuclear terrorism.

The conventional wisdom is that preventing proliferation of nuclear weapons to countries de facto prevents the transfer of weapons to terrorists. That was the rationale used by the Bush administration to disarm Iraq—including using military force unilaterally. The president argued that Hussein could give his WMD to terrorists who would then attack the United States—the smoking gun in the form of a mushroom cloud. Therefore, the only way to prevent the possibility of WMD terrorism was to rid Iraq of its WMD or its ruler, who was seeking to acquire WMD, including nuclear weapons.

Such an argument was certainly plausible, but the question was whether it was likely. The Bush administration was never able to make a convincing case. The 9/11 Commission has issued a report concluding that there was no evidence of a collaborative relationship between Baghdad and Al Qaeda. Moreover, Saddam Hussein was known to support anti-Israeli Palestinian terrorist groups, including Hamas, for years, but he never gave chemical or biological weapons to those groups to use against Israel, a country he hated as much as he hated the United States.

Regardless of the Bush administration's weak case that Iraq would transfer WMD to terrorists, the logic of its argument creates a conundrum for those who believe that preventing proliferation of nuclear weapons to countries also prevents the transfer of such weapons (or materials or technology) to terrorists. The only way out of the conundrum is a willingness to explore failed nonproliferation efforts as an acceptable (but undesirable) outcome while still developing successful ways to prevent nuclear weapons from falling into the hands of terrorists. There are three specific, worrisome cases.

North Korea

The United States and the major nations of East Asia are engaged in a concerted diplomatic effort to get the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) to dismantle its nuclear-weapons program. However, it may not be possible to put that genie back into the bottle. If that proves to be the case, the United States can probably live with a nuclear-armed North Korea, but the danger of proliferation activities by Pyongyang must be addressed.

The United States cannot tolerate North Korea's becoming the global supermarket of nuclear technology. An especially acute danger is that

Pyongyang *may* provide either a nuclear weapon or fissile material to Al Qaeda or other anti-American terrorist organizations. The DPRK's record on missile proliferation does not offer much encouragement that it will be restrained when it comes to commerce in nuclear materials. Perhaps most troubling of all, Pyongyang has shown a willingness to sell anything that will raise revenue for the financially hard-pressed regime. In the spring of 2003, for example, evidence emerged of extensive North Korean involvement in the heroin trade. It is hardly unwarranted speculation that the DPRK might be a willing seller of nuclear weapons or materials to terrorist groups flush with cash.

Washington should communicate to the DPRK that selling nuclear material—much less an assembled nuclear weapon—to terrorist organizations or hostile governments will be regarded as a threat to America's vital security interests. Indeed, U.S. leaders should treat such a transaction as the equivalent of a threatened attack on America by North Korea. Such a threat would warrant military action to remove the North Korean regime. Pyongyang must be told in no uncertain terms that trafficking in nuclear materials is a bright red line that it dare not cross if the regime wishes to survive.

Iran

Clearly, Iran's nuclear-weapons program is a concern because of that country's ties to terrorist groups. According to the State Department, "Iran remained the most active state sponsor of terrorism in 2003." It's no secret that Iran provides funding, safe haven, training, and weapons to anti-Israeli groups, such as Hezbollah and Hamas. But, like Iraq, Iran has not supplied terrorist groups with chemical or biological weapons to use against Israel. So it's not clear what incentive Iran would have to give nuclear weapons to terrorists. Indeed, Israel's nuclear arsenal (believed to be as many as 200 warheads) serves as a powerful deterrent against Iran taking such action.

Iran's terrorist ties were also cited by the 9/11 Commission, which implicated Iran in the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing and cited "strong evidence" that Iran facilitated the transit of several Al Qaeda members before 9/11 (including perhaps eight or more of the hijackers). The commission did not claim, however, that Iran was involved with the attacks. The potential Iran-Al Qaeda connection is a serious one that deserves further investigation. But without clear evidence that the regime in Tehran was involved in 9/11 or is otherwise supporting or harboring Al Qaeda, the

United States cannot afford to wage another unnecessary war as it is doing against Iraq.

Just as the United States may have to learn to live with a nuclear-armed North Korea, U.S. policy may have to adjust to Iran's nuclear ambitions. If Iran does eventually acquire nuclear weapons, one thing should be made clear to Tehran: transfer of such weapons, material, or technology to terrorist groups will be justification for regime change. That is a bright line that must be drawn and strictly (and swiftly) enforced, not just with Iran but with any other country that aspires to nuclear status.

Pakistan

Pakistan also demonstrates the limitations of current nonproliferation thinking. Although the Musharraf regime is considered an ally in the war on terrorism and has helped capture some important Al Qaeda operatives, the prospect of that country's nuclear weapons falling into the hands of radical Islamists must be planned for. Pakistan is also a concern because so many nuclear efforts in other countries (e.g., North Korea, Iran, and Libya) were tied to a nuclear bazaar created by Pakistani scientist A. Q. Khan, who has been hailed as a national hero by Musharraf. Unfortunately, neither the traditional nonproliferation approach nor preemptive war is a real solution to this problem. Preemptive regime change is not a viable option, and it is unrealistic to expect that Pakistan will give up its nuclear weapons. Instead, U.S. efforts should focus on creating better security and command and control over Pakistan's nuclear weapons to prevent them from being used by terrorists. Continuous U.S. pressure must also be exerted on Musharraf's government to make sure that such leakage does not occur.

Conclusion

U.S. policymakers must think beyond traditional nonproliferation policy. That policy may have served us reasonably well in the past, but a rapidly changing global security environment is rendering it obsolete and potentially counterproductive. We can no longer cling to the NPT and all it symbolizes as the answer to all the varied problems of nuclear proliferation. Instead, we need a large policy toolbox with a variety of tools. We can continue to rely on the ability of America's vast nuclear arsenal to deter attacks on the American homeland by nuclear-weapons powers. At the same time, we must recognize the likelihood that the number of nuclear powers in the international system will increase in the next decade and

that many of those new members of the global nuclear club will be unsavory regimes. In some cases, we may have to accept that stable, democratic countries may acquire their own deterrents—or even encourage them to do so—to prevent aggressive states from achieving a regional nuclear monopoly.

Washington's own nonproliferation efforts should focus on delaying rogue states in their quest for nuclear weapons, not beating up on peaceful states that want to become nuclear powers. The other key objective of a new U.S. proliferation policy should be to prevent unfriendly nuclear states from transferring their weapons or nuclear know-how to terrorist adversaries of the United States. Those objectives are daunting enough without continuing the vain effort to prevent all forms of proliferation.

Suggested Readings

- Atal, Subodh. "Extremist, Nuclear Pakistan: An Emerging Threat?" Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 472, March 5, 2003.
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- Carpenter, Ted Galen. "Living with the Unthinkable." *National Interest*, no. 74 (Winter 2003–04): 92–98.
- Peña, Charles V. "Mini-Nukes and Preemptive Policy: A Dangerous Combination." Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 499, November 19, 2003.
- Record, Jeffrey. "Nuclear Deterrence, Preventive War, and Counterproliferation." Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 519, July 8, 2004.
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