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U.S. Conduct Creates Perverse Incentives for Proliferation

By *Ted Galen Carpenter*

There are important reasons why most nations choose not to acquire a nuclear weapons capability. For one thing, it is very expensive. The opportunity cost is usually regarded as prohibitive. Occasionally, even a poor country such as North Korea will be willing to make a nuclear weapons program the highest priority, but most governments will not make the sacrifice. A decision to go nuclear also has important adverse diplomatic repercussions. Trying to build a nuclear arsenal is not the way to win friends in the international community. The majority of governments become extremely agitated when a country seeks to break out of the nonproliferation system and become a nuclear weapons state, and any would-be nuclear power has to take that hostility into consideration. Finally, by trying to acquire a nuclear arsenal, a country may trigger or exacerbate a regional arms race, and at the end of the process be no more secure than it was at the beginning. In fact, it might be even less secure.

Alternatively, there are important reasons why a country might decide to go nuclear. One reason is prestige. The global nuclear weapons club is a very exclusive association. All five permanent members of the UN Security Council are nuclear weapons states, and a sixth, India, is likely to become a permanent member of the Council in the next few years. Countries that have nuclear weapons are treated differently from non-nuclear powers. Before they became nuclear powers in 1998, India and Pakistan were treated with less than a great deal of respect by other international actors. India was considered a chronic Third World underachiever, and Pakistan was considered a problem state—if not a potential failed state. Consider how those countries are treated now, since they have joined the nuclear weapons club. It is markedly different.

Another motive to go nuclear is to deter or possibly intimidate a regional adversary. That appeared to be a consideration for both India and Pakistan. India had long sought to overawe its smaller neighbor, and possessing a nuclear arsenal eventu-

ally became part of that strategy. Pakistan, in turn, concluded that it had to neutralize India's growing conventional military advantage as well as its new nuclear capability. A nuclear deterrent was the most decisive and cost-effective way to achieve that goal. Beyond its regional rivalry with Pakistan, India was also concerned about China's rising military power. There was no question the perceived Chinese threat was a factor in India's decision to go nuclear, as then minister of defense George Fernandes emphasized.

In addition to the motive of deterrence within a region, there is a potential motive of broader deterrence—especially to deter the United States. With regard to that factor, we need to be realistic about the unintended consequences of some U.S. actions. The United States has taken major military action on ten occasions just since the end of the Cold War. That is an extraordinary record of belligerence, and although many Americans may think that those episodes were justified, other countries don't necessarily see it the same way. In particular, countries such as Iran and North Korea have seen how the United States has treated non-nuclear adversaries such as Serbia and Iraq, and that may have led to the conclusion that the only reliable deterrent to U.S. coercion is a nuclear arsenal.

U.S. leaders can weaken most of the proliferation incentives only on the margins. But it can take a crucial step to reduce one major incentive—its own behavior toward non-nuclear adversaries. Washington's tendency to use its incomparably capable conventional military forces for reasons other than its own national defense has created powerful pressures for countries to go nuclear. Especially after the Iraq episode, countries that are on bad terms with the United States fear that they might be the next candidates for regime change. Yet there is no way that they can match America's vast conventional military power. Both the technological gap and the financial burden would be prohibitive. The temptation, then, is to see nuclear weapons as the only feasible option.

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is dedicated to promoting peaceful resolutions to the nuclear crises in North Korea and Iran. It aims to provide policy makers with analysis on the latest developments in both nations and options for formulating coherent U.S. responses. In highlighting the importance of achieving diplomatic solutions, the goal is to avoid armed conflict and its attendant consequences.

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“There is a very serious risk that such [military] strikes, intended as surgical, could precipitate a spiral of escalation that results in full-blown war with Iran.”

—JUSTIN LOGAN,
“U.S. Policy toward Iran,”
Chapter 50 of the
Cato Handbook
for Policymakers,
7th edition.

It is a mistake to assume that countries fear only Washington’s huge nuclear weapons capability. Many of them also fear this country’s huge conventional military capability. It is imperative for the United States to offer reassurance on that front as well as the nuclear front. And that means changing U.S. behavior, especially by adopting a much higher threshold for launching conventional military interventions.

A more restrained U.S. military role would not by itself guarantee the absence of new proliferation crises in the future. But it is one crucial component of a strategy to reduce the prospects of greater proliferation. And a more conciliatory, less threatening policy by Washington is imperative to improve the negotiating environment if there is any hope of solving the current Iranian and North Korean proliferation problems through diplomacy. ■

Proliferation: The Real North Korean Nuclear Threat

By Doug Bandow

The so-called Democratic People’s Republic of Korea was near the top of the agenda in both Seoul and Beijing during President Barack Obama’s recent trip to East Asia. Administrations change and years pass, but the threat of a nuclear North Korea continues. No one, other than Kim Jong-il and a few devoted acolytes, wants the DPRK to develop nuclear weapons. However, not all nuclear threats are equal.

The creation of a North Korean nuclear capability would understandably generate unease throughout Northeast Asia. Nevertheless, simple possession of a small nuclear arsenal would not much change the regional balance of power. The North would face destruction if it attacked South Korea—the former would receive no support from China and would face massive retaliation from the United States. Pyongyang might feel more secure with nuclear weapons, and thus be more willing to engage in other provocative behavior. But nothing suggests that the regime is bent on suicide; by all accounts Kim prefers his virgins in this life rather than the next. Defense and deterrence likely remain important objectives of the DPRK’s nuclear program.

The prospect of further nuclear proliferation via North Korea is more worrisome. With ongoing nuclear production the regime might be tempted to take over the old Pakistani franchise of a “Nukes-R-Us” and sell both materials and expertise around the world. North

Korea has already been a ready supplier of missile technologies and conventional arms to Iran and other nations. Such sales have been an important source of hard currency for the cash-poor regime. There are charges (some unconfirmed) that the North has engaged in nuclear cooperation with Burma, Iran, and Syria. A greater fear is that Pyongyang might sell nuclear materials to terrorist groups.

The U.S. should first work with allied states to interdict any nuclear shipments, while informing the DPRK that proliferation to non-state actors would be a *casus belli*. Kim should be made to understand that there are far safer options for the North to make money. Second, Washington needs to cooperate with South Korea, Japan, and China to offer Pyongyang just such an option in return for verifiable denuclearization. Diplomacy may remain a long shot, but the U.S. should couple its stick with a (large) carrot.

The Obama administration should not let the perfect become the enemy of the good. In any negotiations, halting future North Korean nuclear development is a higher priority than eliminating the DPRK’s existing nuclear materials. The U.S. also needs to concentrate on enlisting Beijing’s assistance to support the diplomatic process. North Korea’s nuclear program remains a grave geopolitical challenge. But the greatest danger is Pyongyang’s potential sale of nuclear materials rather than the mere development of nuclear weapons. ■