52. Adjusting to Nuclear Proliferation

Congress should

- allow new nuclear powers to acquire the technology to create safeguards against unauthorized launch of nuclear weapons;
- encourage the executive branch to help new nuclear powers develop effective security precautions to prevent the theft of nuclear weapons and materials;
- encourage the executive branch to enter into a dialogue with the political and military leaders of new nuclear powers to educate them about nuclear strategy and doctrine and to help them to design stabilizing deterrents rather than war-fighting doctrines;
- develop a far more selective nonproliferation policy focused on trying to prevent, or at least delay, the acquisition of nuclear weapons capabilities by threatening states; and
- refuse to approve the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

The test of nuclear weapons by Pakistan and India in 1998 has focused new attention on U.S. policy with respect to the spread of nuclear weapons. American policy strongly opposes nuclear proliferation and is wedded to the indefinite perpetuation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. Whether that policy can be sustained under the strategic conditions likely to prevail in the early 21st century, however, is problematic. In the case of nuclear weapons, whether ''more is better'' (as suggested by prominent international relations scholar Kenneth Waltz) is an open question. But that more nuclear weapons will be a fact of international life in coming years is certain. Congress must help the executive branch to adjust to that reality and develop appropriate policies.

The Strategy of Preponderance

U.S. policy with respect to nuclear proliferation is an integral component of America's grand strategy. That grand strategy aims to perpetuate the unchallenged global preeminence that the United States has enjoyed since the end of the Cold War. In fact, since the end of World War II the United States consistently has sought that status. The key elements of that strategy are (1) creation and maintenance of an American-led world order based on preeminent U.S. political, military, and economic power and on American values; (2) maximization of American control over the international system by preventing the emergence of rival great powers in Europe and East Asia; and (3) prevention, or containment, of the rise of regional powers (for example, Iraq, Iran, North Korea) that could threaten the interests of the United States or its allies.

The core assumption of current U.S. grand strategy is that, although the United States itself is highly secure from external threat, it has a compelling interest in maintaining stability in the international system. To preserve international stability, the United States seeks to prevent (1) the rise of new great powers and (2) the spillover of instability from strategically peripheral areas to regions of core strategic interest. The emergence of new great powers would have two deleterious effects on American security: (1) new great powers could become aspiring hegemons, and (2) the emergence of new great powers—especially Japan or Germany, or both, with ''renationalized'' security policies—would trigger destabilizing geopolitical snowball effects. Unless prevented by the United States, instability in the periphery could (1) ripple back into the core and undercut prosperity by disrupting the economic links that bind the United States to Europe and East Asia and (2) prompt American allies to act independently to maintain order in the peripheries (again raising the specter of renationalization). At first blush, the U.S. strategy of maintaining its preponderance seems logical. In fact, however, the strategy is certain to backfire geopolitically. Perversely, the strategy actually is likely to spur the emergence of new great powers (which by definition will have nuclear capabilities) and the acquisition of nuclear weapons (and other weapons of mass destruction, or WMD) by regional powers as an ''asymmetric'' strategic response to high-tech U.S. conventional war-fighting capabilities.

The Unipolar Illusion

The conviction that America can be a successful but benign dominant power is self-serving—and wrong. No state can afford to base its security

on trust in others' good intentions. Intentions are ephemeral; today's peaceful intentions may turn malevolent tomorrow. That is why states base their strategies on the estimates of others' capabilities; that is, their power (actual or latent).

And it is the imbalance of power in America's favor that other countries will seek to counter. China (a long-standing nuclear power) already is acquiring great power capabilities (enhancing both its nuclear and conventional military power) for the explicit purpose of offsetting America's dominance. By the same token, through a process of ''opaque'' proliferation, Japan, another emerging early-21st-century great power, has become a de facto nuclear weapons state, that is, ''a screwdriver's turn away'' from that status. And, as the public declarations of Indian policymakers and analysts make clear, New Delhi's recent nuclear tests were an assertion of India's great power ambitions, directed as much against the dominant U.S. global status as against the perceived military threat to India's security posed by Pakistan and China. Simply put, America's strategy of continued preponderance is doomed to fail. Rather than perpetuate the ''unipolar moment,'' U.S. preponderance will spur the emergence of new great powers. And, because nuclear weapons capabilities are the sine qua non of great power status, some spread of nuclear weapons in the early 21st century is inevitable.

Washington's aim of perpetuating its strategic preponderance also motivates regional states to acquire nuclear (and other WMD) capabilities. As currently defined, U.S. strategic interests, especially in the Persian Gulf and East Asia, clash with the security interests of states such as Iran, Iraq, and North Korea (all of which are seeking nuclear weapons capabilities). The Persian Gulf War demonstrated dramatically that, as a result of the revolution in military affairs, America's military forces enjoy an overwhelming advantage at the high-technology end of the conventional warfighting spectrum. Regional powers cannot compete with U.S. capabilities. The only way they can offset U.S. conventional military superiority, ensure their security (as they perceive it), and deter American military intervention is to acquire nuclear or other WMD capabilities, or both. Conversely, to facilitate American military intervention in the Persian Gulf region and East Asia, Washington's counterproliferation policy aims to prevent regional states from acquiring nuclear weapons. As long as the United States and various regional powers have competing political and strategic interests, regional states will have a strong incentive to acquire nuclear weapons. Inevitably, unless the United States can reach diplomatic accom-

modation with those states, or is willing to take preemptive military measures against them, some regional states will become nuclear powers.

The Future of Extended Deterrence

The perceived threat that American dominance poses to some potential great, and regional, powers explains why those states have powerful incentives to ''go nuclear.'' However, there are friendly states, both potential great powers and regional powers, that also have strong national security incentives—resulting from intense rivalries with neighboring countries—to think about acquiring nuclear weapons. Examples are Japan, Germany, Ukraine, Taiwan, and Pakistan. Yet U.S. policy seeks to dissuade friendly, as well as potentially hostile, states from acquiring those weapons.

Views about American grand strategy, and proliferation policy, are linked inextricably to attitudes toward nuclear proliferation and deterrence. The argument between ''deterrence optimists'' and ''proliferation pessimists'' has been catalyzed by the debate between international relations scholars Scott Sagan and Kenneth Waltz about the consequences of nuclear proliferation. America's current global strategy reflects ''proliferation pessimism,'' the belief that the spread of nuclear weapons will automatically have bad consequences: increased nationalism of such countries as Japan and Germany, arms races and security competitions, and an increased risk of nuclear conflict. U.S. strategy rests on the assumption that by bringing potential proliferators within the shelter of its security umbrella, the United States can prevent such unpleasant consequences. Thus America's present strategy is based not only on proliferation pessimism but on extended deterrence optimism—that is, a belief (or faith) in the continuing robustness of the American strategic umbrella.

Extended deterrence optimism is quite problematic, however. As political scientist Bradley A. Thayer points out, states that acquire nuclear weapons are driven to do so by security imperatives. Proliferation is primarily a demand-side problem: ''If states feel that nuclear weapons are not needed for their security, then they will not seek to acquire them.'' The United States attempts to lessen the demand-side cause of proliferation by assuaging the security fears of the protected states. Whether U.S. strategy can work is a function of two interrelated factors. First, is it credible? That is, will extended deterrence actually dissuade an adversary from attacking the recipients of U.S. guarantees? Second, will U.S. guarantees reassure the countries Washington seeks to protect?

Extended deterrence is a difficult strategy to implement successfully. As political scientist Patrick Morgan points out, ''One of the perpetual problems of deterrence on behalf of third parties is that the costs a state is willing to bear are usually much less than if its own territory is at stake, and it is very difficult to pretend otherwise.'' During the Cold War, extending deterrence to Western Europe was thought to be especially difficult after the Soviet Union attained strategic nuclear parity with the United States because, in the course of defending Europe, the United States would have exposed itself to Soviet nuclear retaliation. On both sides of the Atlantic there was concern that the American threat to use nuclear weapons to deter a Soviet conventional attack on Western Europe was both irrational and incredible (in both senses of the latter term). Indeed, extended deterrence was a contentious issue that repeatedly corroded NATO's strategic unity almost to the breaking point. And doubt about the efficacy of U.S. security guarantees was the impetus for France's acquisition of an independent nuclear force.

Notwithstanding its perceived difficulties and complexities, it appears that extended deterrence ''worked'' in Europe during the Cold War. One should not conclude, however, that extended deterrence will work equally well in the early 21st century. If extended deterrence indeed worked during the Cold War, it was because of a unique convergence of factors that are unlikely to be replicated in the future: (1) a bipolar international system, (2) a clearly defined geopolitical status quo recognized by both the potential challenger and the defender, (3) the intrinsic value of the protected region to the defender, and (4) the permanent forward deployment by the defender of sizeable military forces in the protected region.

During the Cold War the bipolar nature of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry in Europe stabilized the superpower relationship by dividing the Continent into U.S. and Soviet spheres of influence that reflected the vital interests of both superpowers. Each knew it courted disaster if it challenged the other's sphere. Also, during the Cold War the superpowers were able to exercise control over their major allies to minimize the risk of unwillingly being dragged into a conflict by them. In the early 21st century, however, the international system will be multipolar. Spheres of influence will not be delineated clearly. In addition, because other countries will have more latitude to pursue their own foreign and security policy agendas than they did during the Cold War, there will be a greater risk that the United States could be dragged into a conflict because of a protected country's irresponsible behavior.

Moreover, a crucial factor in weighing the credibility of a defender's commitment is the degree of its interest in the protected area. Had the Soviets seriously contemplated an attack on Western Europe, they almost certainly would have drawn back from the brink. In a bipolar setting, Western Europe's security was a matter of considerable importance to the United States for both strategic and credibility reasons. In the early 21st century, however, the intrinsic value of many of the regions to which the United States may wish to extend deterrence will be doubtful. Indeed, as political scientist Robert Jervis observes, in the post–Cold War world, ''few imaginable disputes will engage vital U.S. interests.'' It thus will be difficult to convince a potential attacker that U.S. deterrence commitments are credible.

It is doubtful, for example, that the United States could deter a Russian invasion of the Baltic republics or Ukraine or, several decades hence, a Chinese assault on Taiwan. To engage in such actions, Moscow or Beijing would have to be highly motivated; conversely, the objects of possible attack are unimportant strategically to the United States, which would cause the challenger to discount U.S. credibility. The spring 1996 crisis between China and Taiwan suggests the difficulties U.S. extended deterrence strategy will face in coming decades. During the crisis, a Chinese official said that China could use force against Taiwan without fear of U.S. intervention because American decisionmakers ''care more about Los Angeles than they do about Taiwan.'' Although empty today, as China becomes more powerful militarily and economically in coming decades, threats of this nature from Beijing will be more potent.

Extended deterrence is strengthened when the guarantor deploys its own military forces on the protected state's territory. Thus, during the Cold War the presence of large numbers of U.S. combat forces and tactical nuclear weapons in Europe underscored its importance to the United States and bolstered the credibility of extended deterrence. But it is unlikely that the United States would ever bolster the credibility of explicit or implicit security guarantees to nations like Ukraine, the Baltic republics, or even Taiwan—each of which is threatened potentially by a nuclear rival—by deploying ground forces as tokens of its resolve. Indeed, even as NATO has expanded, Washington has taken an ambivalent stance with respect to whether the United States will ever deploy troops or tactical nuclear weapons in Poland (which, because of its proximity to Russia, is the expanded NATO's most vulnerable member state).

The bottom line is inescapable: in the early 21st century, U.S. extended deterrence guarantees will become increasingly tenuous. As that happens,

countries currently under the protection of the U.S. nuclear umbrella will realize that they no longer can count on the United States to protect them from other nuclear states that could menace their security. Considerations of national interest and security inevitably will impel many of the states now protected by America's extended deterrence strategy to acquire their own independent nuclear capabilities.

Conclusion

In coming years, some degree of nuclear weapons proliferation is inevitable. In some instances, proliferation may actually increase U.S. security because it is a lesser strategic evil than relying on a faltering extended deterrence strategy. Rather than discourage proliferation, U.S. reliance on extended deterrence will pose an increasing risk that the United States could be drawn into conflicts that it otherwise could avoid.

The issue of U.S. proliferation policy in the early 21st century is too important to be determined by knee-jerk reactions. Nuclear weapons are not inherently ''bad.'' In itself, the spread of nuclear weapons is not harmful to international stability. Indeed, under certain conditions, because of their fearsome deterrent effect, nuclear weapons can have a positive, stabilizing effect on international politics. Thus, the United States must adopt a nuanced, complex, and discriminating policy with respect to nuclear proliferation. It is not proliferation per se with which the United States must be concerned. The important questions are which states become nuclear powers, what kinds of nuclear arsenals they deploy, and what kinds of safeguards they develop to protect the security of their nuclear arsenals. Guideposts for U.S. proliferation policy in the early 21st century should include the following:

- Nuclear weapons contribute to strategic stability between rival states when both possess invulnerable, second-strike retaliatory deterrent forces. The United States can take a relaxed attitude toward the development of forces of this type by new nuclear powers. However, not all countries have the economic resources, technological capability, or geographic position to build invulnerable, second-strike retaliatory deterrent forces. The United States should follow a more active policy with respect to rivalries between new nuclear states when one or both of them deploy vulnerable, first-strike nuclear forces. Nuclear arsenals of this type vitiate the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons and are destabilizing because they create incentives for preemptive use.

- The United States should allow new nuclear powers to purchase the technology to create Permissive Action Links and other safeguards against unauthorized launch of nuclear weapons.
- The United States should actively help new nuclear powers develop effective security precautions to prevent the theft of nuclear weapons and materials.
- The United States should enter into a dialogue with the political and military leaders of new nuclear powers to educate them about nuclear strategy and doctrine. The leaders of new nuclear powers need to understand that nuclear weapons have utility only as a deterrent; they are not useful as instruments of a war-fighting strategy.
- In some instances, U.S. interests, or doubts about the stability of the state in question, may cause the United States to conclude prudently that potential proliferators must not be allowed to realize their nuclear ambitions. In such instances, Washington should seek first to use diplomacy and economic incentives to dissuade such regimes from acquiring nuclear capabilities. A policy of accommodation can succeed, however, only when backed by adequate provisions to ensure compliance and verification.
- As a last resort, when accommodation fails, the United States must have preemptive military options available. The United States should also seek to develop more subtle preemptive options, options that would interdict, at an early stage, a potential proliferator's access to the technological expertise and hardware needed to build and deploy nuclear forces.

Recommended Readings

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