Policy Analysis

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Executive Summary

One of the most important challenges facing U.S. leaders in the post-Cold War era is keeping the United States out of regional disputes in which one or more of the parties might be armed with nuclear weapons. Washington's obsession with preventing nuclear proliferation, combined with the doctrine of extended deterrence, instead puts the United States on the front lines of such conflicts. The most worrisome situations are those involving the two Koreas, Pakistan and India, and Ukraine and Russia.

Amid mounting evidence that North Korea may be pursuing a nuclear-weapons capability, the United States maintains a mutual defense treaty with South Korea and stations 36,000 troops on the peninsula. Washington's exposure in the simmering confrontation between Pakistan and India is less severe, but a 1959 military agreement contains an obligation to aid Pakistan in case of aggression. U.S. officials flirt with providing Kiev with security guarantees in the forlorn hope of inducing Ukrainian officials to relinquish the nuclear weapons stationed on their territory.

Washington's willingness to shield friendly nations from their regional adversaries does provide an incentive for its protectorates to forgo the development of independent nuclear arsenals. The threat of U.S. retaliation also might deter an aggressive nuclear power from attacking its neighbors. Such commitments, however, greatly increase the probability that the United States would be entangled in any conflict that did erupt. Instead of assuming grave risks when vital American security interests are not at stake, the United States should distance itself from regional disputes that could go nuclear.

Introduction

One of the most disturbing trends in the post-Cold War era is the mounting evidence of nuclear weapons proliferation. The most recent signs of trouble include the emergence of India and Pakistan as threshold aspirants to (if not full-fledged members of) the once-exclusive global nuclear club, North Korea's threat to withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) amid allegations from U.S. intelligence sources that Pyongyang is pursuing a clandestine weapons program, persistent reports of efforts by Iran and Libya to exploit the political chaos in the former Soviet Union to purchase small arsenals, and Ukraine's increasingly blatant foot-dragging about fulfilling its pledge to give up the nuclear warheads stationed on its territory. Such events more than offset the positive developments--the decisions by France and China to adhere to the provisions of the NPT, South Africa's announcement that it has given up an arsenal it had developed surreptitiously in the 1980s, and the bilateral accord between Brazil and Argentina to forgo nuclear ambitions--that U.S. leaders cite as evidence that the venerable nonproliferation system is working well.

From the standpoint of U.S. security policy, the three most worrisome cases of proliferation are those involving North Korea, India and Pakistan, and Ukraine. All three are taking place in regional situations that could easily explode into

armed conflict. Stalinist North Korea's hostility toward South Korea has already produced one major war, and the ironically named demilitarized zone (DMZ) between the rival states remains the most heavily armed area on the planet. Relations between India and Pakistan are only slightly less acrimonious. The two countries have fought three major wars since independence in 1947, and border skirmishes over the disputed province of Kashmir are commonplace. Ukraine jealously guards its newly won independence from Moscow and fears that Russia will someday attempt to reassert its imperial ambitions--a fear that indiscreet comments by some Russian officials have exacerbated. A simmering dispute involving the Crimea--inhabited predominantly by Russians but now Ukrainian territory--could someday trigger a major war.

The prospect that such virulent rivals are already armed or could soon be armed with nuclear weapons is alarming enough. Even worse is the degree to which the United States has chosen to risk becoming entangled in regional conflicts that might go nuclear. In the case of the two Koreas, the United States is deeply involved because of the 1954 Mutual Security Treaty with South Korea and the presence of more than 36,000 U.S. troops on the peninsula. Washington's exposure in the confrontation between India and Pakistan is less severe--primarily because there are no American forces stationed as a tripwire on the subcontinent--but a 1959 mutual defense agreement does obligate the United States to assist Pakistan if the latter is the victim of aggression. As yet Washington has no formal commitments that might involve it in a war between Russia and Ukraine, but U.S. officials have spoken of providing Kiev with unspecified security guarantees to entice Ukrainian officials to relinquish the nuclear weapons stationed on their territory.

Two factors have placed the United States on the front lines of potentially lethal regional conflicts. The first is the unwillingness of U.S. leaders to reassess alliance commitments inherited from the Cold War--commitments that may have made sense given the need to block the Soviet Union's expansionist ambitions but are highly dubious in the absence of the superpower rivalry. The second is Washington's obsession with preserving the NPT and the nonproliferation system it symbolizes.

To discourage the proliferation of nuclear weapons, U.S. policymakers are willing to continue the Cold War era bargain: if Washington's allies and clients renounce ambitions to acquire independent deterrents, the United States will extend to them the protection of the U.S. arsenal. What U.S. leaders apparently do not fully comprehend is that the nature of the risk has changed dramatically. Throughout the Cold War, the United States had to deter only one hostile nuclear-weapons state, the Soviet Union. (By the time China acquired a credible arsenal, the rapprochement between Beijing and Washington was already under way.) True, extended deterrence entailed some risk, but as time passed an implicit set of rules governed the superpower rivalry and it seemed less and less plausible that the Kremlin would take a reckless action that would lead to a nuclear conflagration.

The situation is markedly different in the post-Cold War setting. If proliferation trends continue, Washington will face the prospect of having to deter numerous nuclear weapons states from attacking or intimidating U.S. allies and clients. That would be a more difficult--and conceivably a more dangerous--mission than deterring the USSR was during the Cold War. Some of the new nuclear powers are likely to be governed by regimes that are considerably less predictable and "rational" than the Kremlin leadership proved to be. Such a regime might gamble that while Wash ington's willingness to court nuclear war to thwart Soviet global hegemony was credible, its willingness to do so merely to prevent a shift in the balance of power between regional rivals is not. Moreover, even a reasonably rational government might conclude that the stakes in stifling a hated adversary were important enough to justify incurring Washington's wrath. It would take only one deterrence failure to cause a catastrophe for the United States. The issue that U.S. policymakers must face--and have thus far refused to face--is whether assuming the risk of nuclear war is justifiable absent the security challenge posed by an adversarial superpower. Developments in Korea, South Asia, and Ukraine underscore the danger that the United States is courting.

The Korean Time Bomb

Most proponents of the U.S. alliance with South Korea now grudgingly acknowledge that Seoul could build the conventional forces needed to defend itself from North Korean aggression. That is undoubtedly true. South Korea has twice the population of the North and, according to most estimates, now has an economy 11 to 12 times the size of North Korea's. By increasing its military spending modestly from the current 5 percent of GNP to 8 percent, Seoul

would soon close the remaining gap in military capabilities and then rapidly outpace its communist adversary.

Defenders of the mutual security treaty and the U.S. troop presence on the Korean Peninsula, however, fall back on two arguments to justify the status quo. The first is that the U.S. military presence is an essential part of Washington's general policy of promoting stability in East Asia. That assumption plays well with South Korean leaders, who fear Japan and China at least as much as they do North Korea and who have stated that they would want U.S. troops to remain even if the Pyongyang regime collapsed and political reunification of the peninsula took place.[1]

North Korea's Apparent Nuclear Ambitions

The other justification, related to the first, emphasizes the possibility that North Korea may become a nuclear power. According to that argument, if the United States withdrew its forces and terminated the security treaty, South Korea would be in a highly vulnerable position if the North continued to pursue its nuclear-weapons program. Seoul would then face a terrible choice: either risk intimi dation or subjugation by Pyongyang or acquire an independent nuclear deterrent. The latter option would intensify pressure on Japan--which is already nervous about North Korea's nuclear ambitions--to abandon its nonnuclear status. That action, in turn, could lead to a conventional and nuclear arms race throughout East Asia, with dangerously destabilizing consequences. In the case of Korea, Washington's insistence on maintaining Cold War era alliances and its commitment to nonproliferation dovetail perfectly. The question is, however, whether either policy is sustainable or is in the best interests of the American people.

There is little doubt that North Korea has actively pursued a nuclear-weapons program despite having signed the NPT in 1985. Indeed, there was a flurry of concern in Washington and Seoul at the beginning of the 1990s that Pyongyang might be on the brink of becoming a nuclear power. Some U.S. intelligence officials speculated in early 1992 that North Korea might be only months away from building its first atomic bomb and that the installations at Yongbyon (not to mention any underground facilities that might exist) could be capable of producing enough fissionable material for as many as seven or eight Hiroshima-sized bombs.[2] Pyongyang's decision to sign a bilateral accord with Seoul making the peninsula a nuclear-free zone and its conclusion of an inspection agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) temporarily eased such fears. When the IAEA demanded to inspect two suspected clandestine sites in early 1993, however, North Korea's cooperative policy abruptly ceased. Pyongyang immediately abrogated the inspection agreement and announced its intention to withdraw from the NPT.

Although bilateral talks between U.S. and North Korean officials have thus far induced Pyongyang to postpone withdrawal from the NPT, the IAEA has encountered continuing obstruction of its efforts to conduct inspections. Experts remain uncertain about North Korea's motives. Some contend that the North is merely "playing the nuclear card" as part of a political strategy to wring concessions from the United States and Japan. According to that view, Pyongyang wants the United States to cancel the annual "Team Spirit" military exercises with South Korea. The communist leadership also seeks full diplomatic recognition, trade, and (from Japan, at least) economic aid.

That interpretation may be correct, but given the opaque nature of North Korea's political system, it is impossible to be certain. Indeed, a growing number of Western officials and policy experts fear that Pyongyang may instead be unalterably committed to acquiring a nuclear-weapons capability. The entire inspections episode has created concern that North Korea is merely stalling for time until it can complete its weapons-development program and present the world with a fait accompli. That possibility has not only produced demands for international economic sanctions against Pyongyang, it has led to calls for U.S. or South Korean preemptive air strikes to take out the nuclear facilities.[3] Proponents of the U.S.-South Korean alliance have also seized on the incident to suggest increasing rather than reducing the number of U.S. troops stationed in Korea.[4]

A Dangerous Tripwire

Both suggestions are ill-advised. Aside from the problem that there is no guarantee that the nuclear installations identified by the IAEA and U.S. intelligence agencies are the only ones, a military attack on the Yongbyon complex could well trigger a general war on the Korean Peninsula. A preemptive assault would constitute an international humiliation that the paranoid and unpredictable regime of Kim Il-Sung could not easily ignore. If Pyongyang did respond by launching an attack across the DMZ, the 36,000 U.S. troops--most of them directly astride the invasion

routes--would be immediately involved.[5]

The vulnerability of those forces means that suggestions to maintain, much less increase, the U.S. troop presence are dangerously misguided. Contrary to the belief of those who argue that the possibility of a nuclear-armed North Korea reinforces the need for Washington's security commitment to South Korea, it should increase the incentives for U.S. disengagement. The only thing worse than risking a conventional war to protect a small client state such as South Korea would be to risk a nuclear conflict. That level of risk should never be accepted except to defend America's most vital security interests. And in the post-Cold War era, South Korea constitutes a peripheral, not a vital, interest. South Korea's strategic value has declined markedly with the end of the Sino-American and Soviet-American rivalries, and its economic value as a U.S. trading partner, while significant and growing, is hardly irreplaceable.

Overstating South Korea's Importance

During the Cold War it was plausible to argue that a North Korean attack on South Korea would have been merely one element of a general offensive by the Soviet Union or China--a bid for hegemony in East Asia, a region of considerable economic and strategic importance to the United States. U.S. policymakers viewed Pyongyang as nothing more than a surrogate of the two communist giants. Whatever the accuracy of that view in the Cold War setting, it has no applicability today. Both Moscow and Beijing have been rapidly distancing themselves politically and militarily from North Korea while working diligently to establish close economic ties to the South. Neither regime has the slightest interest in fomenting a new round of fighting on the Korean Peninsula.

Given those radically changed circumstances, a war between North and South Korea would be merely a parochial conflict involving those two states. To be sure, it would constitute a tragedy for the populations of both countries, but it need not have wider geostrategic significance, much less threaten vital U.S. security interests. Only if U.S. policymakers foolishly put America's prestige (and American lives) on the line would such a conflict become important to the United States.

Washington's insistence on preserving the mutual security treaty and keeping U.S. troops in South Korea is a classic case of policy inertia. President Clinton's speech to the South Korean National Assembly in July 1993 was a virtual daisy chain of Cold War era clichÃ‡s. Not only did he stress the need to maintain the "forward presence" of U.S. armed forces in East Asia--a doctrine that is increasingly irrelevant given the existence of ICBMs, long-range bombers, and rapidly deployable air and naval units--but his other statements also epitomized status quo thinking. "Our commitment to Korea's security remains undiminished," Clinton affirmed. "The Korean Peninsula remains a vital American interest. Our troops will stay here as long as the Korean people want and need us here."[6]

U.S. leaders still see the two Korean states as essential pieces in a global geopolitical chess match. But that chess match, known as the Cold War, has already been decided. It is reasonable for American policymakers to hope that South Korea can remain independent--indeed, that it might one day absorb a defunct North Korea as West Germany absorbed East Germany. It is not reasonable, however, to risk entangling the United States in a war on the peninsula by launching air strikes to prevent North Korea from acquiring atomic weapons. Nor is it prudent to place American troops at risk in a future conflict if North Korea does become a nuclear-weapons state.

The United States should, of course, pursue vigorous diplomatic initiatives to dissuade Pyongyang from triggering a regional nuclear arms race. Such efforts should be coordinated with Japan, Russia, China, and other countries that have every reason to want to see North Korea remain non-nuclear. At the same time, the United States must begin to develop policies to deal with the disagreeable possibility that North Korea's actions are something more than a ploy to garner political and economic concessions.

Those who contend that tolerating a North Korean nuclear capability and withdrawing the U.S. defense shield from South Korea would lead to nuclear proliferation in East Asia are probably correct. Seoul would almost assuredly revive the nuclear-weapons development program that it reportedly abandoned in the late 1970s under intense pressure from the United States. Tokyo might well reconsider its nonnuclear status; indeed, there are already signs that the Japanese political leadership has begun to hedge its bets.[7] The prospect of such proliferation is extremely unpleasant for all concerned. Nevertheless, it is preferable to the alternatives: a strategy of coercive nonproliferation that might trigger

the very war that U.S. leaders have sought to prevent for four decades, or shielding a nonnuclear South Korea from an utterly unpredictable adversary armed with nuclear weapons.

Deadly Rivalry: Pakistan and India

The Indian subcontinent will be only a slightly less dangerous place than the Korean Peninsula in the post-Cold War period. There have been numerous conflicts, both major and minor, between India and Pakistan during the four and a half decades since the two countries achieved independence, and the bloody dispute over the province of Kashmir remains as intractable as ever. The rise of religious fundamentalist influences in recent years, particularly the growth of Hindu fundamentalism in India symbolized by the popularity of the militant Bharatiya Janata party, have greatly exacerbated tensions.[8]

Both nations may already have operational nuclear arsenals. Certainly they have the capability to produce such arsenals on short notice. New Delhi exploded what it described as a "peaceful" nuclear device in 1974, and many experts believe that India is a full-fledged (albeit undeclared) nuclear-weapons state.[9] The evidence concerning Pakistan is less definitive, but there is little doubt that Islamabad has been pursuing a nuclear-weapons program for more than a decade. Pakistan's foreign secretary, Shahryar Khan, conceded publicly in early 1992 that his country had all the components necessary to build a nuclear explosive "device."[10]

Saber Rattling on the Subcontinent

The long-standing animosity between the two countries combined with their growing nuclear-weapons potential creates an especially dangerous situation. Several senior Indian military leaders have explicitly cited the "Pakistani threat" as a major reason India needs a nuclear deterrent. Similarly, Pakistan's ambassador to the United States, Abida Hussain, defended her country's nuclear program as designed to "deter nuclear blackmail by India."[11] There has been explicit nuclear saber rattling on occasion in both capitals. One Indian official, Maj. Gen. Satinder Singh, even published an article in the Indian Defense Journal providing a detailed scenario for winning a nuclear war against Pakistan.[12] There have been reports, albeit minimized by some U.S. officials, that the two countries approached the nuclear brink in 1990 over Kashmir.[13] In any case, relations between India and Pakistan remain extremely tense with the ever-present possibility of another major war. CIA director R. James Woolsey, testifying before a congressional committee on July 28, 1993, warned that the continuing tension between Pakistan and India "poses perhaps the most probable prospects for future use of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons."[14]

Foolish U.S. Obligations

The United States runs a significant risk of being caught up in such a conflict. A bilateral agreement on military cooperation between the United States and Pakistan, signed in 1959, remains in effect. Article 1 of that accord provides that "in case of aggression against Pakistan," the United States will take appropriate action, "including the use of armed forces, as may be mutually agreed upon," to "assist the government of Pakistan at its request."[15]

There is little doubt that the motive for concluding the agreement was to solidify a military relationship with a client state on the Soviet Union's southern flank. The acquisition of such regional allies was consistent with Washington's overall containment strategy. Nevertheless, the military agreement contains no language limiting the U.S. obligation to cases of Soviet aggression. During the years following the signing of the agreement, a series of U.S. presidents gave Pakistan written and verbal assurances that assistance would be forthcoming in the event of war, even if the conflict involved Indian rather than Soviet aggression.[16] The Nixon administration's decision to send weapons to Pakistan and to support Islamabad diplomatically during the 1971 war with India lends additional support to the argument that the agreement obligates the United States to help defend its ally against aggression from any source.

Whether the United States would actually aid Pakistan in a conflict with India now that the danger of Soviet expansionism is no longer relevant is unknown. Relations between Washington and Islamabad have cooled noticeably in recent years--both because of the latter's nuclear-weapons program and because of reports of Pakistani support for Islamic political groups with terrorist tendencies. Nevertheless, U.S. officials have taken no steps to terminate the 1959

military agreement. Indeed, some proponents of continuing ties insist that Pakistan still plays an important role as a pro-Western bastion in an extremely unstable region. They also seem wary about India's increasing political assertiveness in South Asia, which they regard as a threat to important U.S. interests--especially the security of the Persian Gulf oil routes. The Department of Defense, for example, has stated explicitly that it needs forces to deal with an India that might someday seek to exert hegemony over the Indian Ocean region.[17]

There are other signs that some U.S. officials would be willing to involve the United States in an Indo-Pakistani conflict. A secret intelligence memo from the Pentagon-based National Intelligence Office for Warning, leaked to the press in May 1992, provided a glimpse of such thinking. The memo reportedly stressed that U.S. leaders needed to define a strategy for American armed forces in the event of hostilities in South Asia. Although the ostensible goal of Washington's policy was to prevent the escalation of an Indo-Pakistani war to a nuclear exchange, the memo clearly envisioned an active U.S. military role. A high-level source familiar with the document contended that inaction "would irrevocably damage [the U.S.] position as leader of the free world."[18]

Maintaining the security tie with Islamabad and developing scenarios for political (and possibly military) involvement in a South Asian war create the potential for a clash with India. For example, if the United States sent an aircraft carrier battle group to the Bay of Bengal in the midst of a crisis, as the Nixon administration did during the 1971 war, New Delhi would have reason to be jittery. U.S. policymakers might view such a redeployment as merely a gesture of support for Pakistan (Kissinger notes that in the 1971 crisis, "Nixon had no intention of becoming militarily involved, but he was determined that something be done.")[19] There is no guarantee, however, that Indian political--much less military--leaders would necessarily view matters in the same way. The memory of Washington's intervention against Iraq, which began as a "defensive" build-up ostensibly to protect Saudi Arabia, could contribute to a hair-trigger response.

Perpetuating the alliance also makes the United States vulnerable to potential blackmail by its client. It is instructive that during the 1990 crisis over Kashmir, Pakistan reportedly sought to trade a pledge to refrain from using nuclear weapons for a U.S. commitment to undertake a massive airlift of conventional weapons to Pakistan in the event of war with India.[20] A similar offer of conditional restraint by Islamabad could be made during a future crisis, and it would place the United States in a serious bind. If Washington declined to make a commitment to render conventional military assistance, Pakistan might plunge the region into nuclear war. Yet if U.S. leaders succumbed to such blackmail, New Delhi would clearly regard the United States as an active patron of its mortal enemy, with all the potential for a U.S.-Indian military collision that perception would entail.

High Risks for Meager Stakes

Flirting with a nuclear entanglement in South Asia is even less justified than incurring that risk in Korea. South Korea is at least a midsized trading partner of the United States, and Washington does have significant economic and strategic interests in East Asia and the western Pacific. Those interests do not warrant risking getting caught in a nuclear crossfire between North and South Korea, but neither can they be disregarded. Washington has no similar stakes on the Indian subcontinent.

Preserving the Cold War era military alliance with Pakistan is not merely a case of policy inertia, it is gratuitous meddling in a region of marginal importance to the United States. It should not be an objective of U.S. policy to prevent India from becoming the preeminent power in South Asia; such preeminence, if it occurs, can be accepted with equanimity.

Moreover, Washington cannot even use the goal of nuclear nonproliferation as a justification for its South Asian entanglement. In contrast to the situation in Korea, that battle is already lost. Like it or not, Pakistan and India are de facto members of the global nuclear-weapons club. Washington can only encourage both countries to configure their arsenals for deterrence rather than war-fighting purposes and hope that the balance of terror that prevented the United States and the Soviet Union from going to war will also work on the regional level in South Asia. There is no certainty that Islamabad and New Delhi will exhibit such restraint. If they do not, the last thing Washington should want is to risk having the United States become caught in the resulting conflagration.

The Ukrainian-Russian Imbroglio

The initial expectation of U.S. officials that Russia would be the sole inheritor of the Soviet Union's vast tactical and strategic nuclear arsenal has been dashed. Although Ukrainian president Leonid Kravchuk continues to insist that his government will ratify the START I agreement and the NPT, domestic opinion appears to be turning against that policy.[21] A rebellious parliament has repeatedly delayed taking tangible steps that would make Ukraine a non-nuclear power, and in June 1993 then-prime minister Leonid Kuchma openly stated that Kiev should retain the 176 missiles with more than 1,600 warheads stationed on Ukrainian soil.[22] In early July the parliament voted 226 to 15 to claim ownership of those missiles.[23] Defense Minister Gen. Konstantin Morozov subsequently indicated that instead of joining the NPT as a nonnuclear state, Ukraine would seek special status in a new category, that of a "transition country" with nuclear weapons.[24] There have also been reliable reports that a concerted effort is under way to break the launch codes that have kept operational control of the missiles in the hands of the government in Moscow.[25] Such actions are hardly consistent with an intent to foreswear nuclear ambitions. Anne Applebaum, foreign editor of the Spectator in London and a long-time observer of Ukrainian affairs, concludes, "Nowadays, it is no longer possible to find a Ukrainian politician of any significance who hopes to see the missiles on Ukrainian soil dismantled quickly."[26]

Kiev Is Stalling for Time

There is little prospect of rapid nuclear disarmament in any case. Even if Kravchuk manages to engineer parlia mentary ratification of START and the NPT, it may be little more than a paper victory for Western proponents of nonproliferation. The START accord would require Kiev only to remove and dismantle its nuclear weapons within seven years, which leaves a very long time for a policy reversal. As Vyacheslav Pikhovshek, director of the Ukrainian Center for Independent Political Research, put it, ratification will probably take place because Kravchuk will insist on it, "but the issue is whether it will be implemented." And even Kravchuk's sincerity may be open to question. "Kravchuk will keep telling the West that he will probably give up the weapons tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow," Pikhovshek predicted.[27] The reality is that Ukraine will be a de facto nuclear-weapons power for nearly the next decade--and perhaps beyond.

Washington Contemplates Offering Security Guarantees

Either as a stalling tactic or as a bona fide quest for a quid pro quo, Ukrainian leaders have demanded Western (especially U.S.) security commitments as the price of their nation's willingness to become a nonnuclear state. During a visit to the United States in early January 1993, Deputy Foreign Minister Boris Tarusiuk stated bluntly that his government was seeking explicit security guarantees from the United States "in the form of declarations at the highest political level."[28] While U.S. officials have sought to finesse the issue, they are so anxious to get Kiev to adhere to the NPT that they have sought to create a system of "security assurances" as an inducement. The Bush administration reportedly provided draft U.S. security guarantees to Ukraine shortly before leaving office. According to Ukrainian foreign minister Anatoli Zlenko, however, the document's terms were "insufficient."[29]

The Clinton administration has adopted a similar approach, albeit one that seems to emphasize carrots more than sticks, to persuade Kiev to give up its nuclear weapons. In June 1993 Ambassador-at-Large Strobe Talbott informed a Senate Foreign Relations Committee subcommittee: "We are seeking to design confidence-building mechanisms. Already, Ukraine has received draft texts of security assurances from all five [permanent] members of the UN Security Council."[30] The following month Secretary of Defense Les Aspin met with Morozov and signed a military cooperation agreement providing for an expansion of contacts between military leaders of the two countries.[31] There is some evidence that the agreement may in fact go further than the announced provisions. A few weeks before the conclusion of the agreement, a senior Defense Department official described an impending visit by Aspin to Kiev as an effort to advance a "defense partnership" and "a major step forward in . . . building a security relationship" with Ukraine.[32] That statement implied some- thing more than occasional junkets by high-ranking officers. Following Aspin's June visit, Defense Department officials indicated that the United States had proposed providing advice to Ukraine on military logistics, training, and personnel, although they stressed that Aspin had not gone so far as to [33]

suggest sales of weapons.

The nature of the proposed security assurances mentioned by Talbott is veiled in secrecy, but it is apparent that the Clinton administration has thus far pursued a multilateral approach in an effort to reassure Ukraine sufficiently to get it to join the NPT as a nonnuclear state. The corollary of that effort has been to convince the Ukrainian leaders that a decision to retain nuclear weapons would make their country an international pariah--diplomatically isolated and financially bankrupt.

Why Kiev Is Likely to Retain Its Nuclear Weapons

U.S. leaders face difficult, perhaps insurmountable, obstacles to their strategy of enticing Kiev to give up the missiles. Paper promises from the permanent members of the UN Security Council are unlikely to convince nervous Ukrainians that their freedom and independence are secure. (Actions such as the Russian parliament's declaration that the Sevastopol naval base on the Crimea is Russian property will only enhance Ukrainian apprehension.)[34] John J. Mearsheimer notes that defeat at the hands of the Russians "would mean loss of sovereignty, and history makes clear that states will pay very high costs to maintain it." He concludes that "Ukraine is likely to keep its nuclear weapons, regardless of what other states say and do."[35] Western security commitments would have to possess high credibility indeed before Kiev would sacrifice an existing weapon system that guarantees its independence and sovereignty. As Financial Times foreign correspondent Edward Mortimer observes: "Ukrainians will not be impressed by fine words from western powers which have failed to come to the aid of Bosnia. Probably little short of full NATO membership would sway Ukraine."[36]

Although Mortimer concedes that such a step would be destabilizing and provocative, pundits and foreign policy experts in the United States and Western Europe have advocated formal NATO membership for Ukraine or at least informal NATO protection. Even more alarming, the Clinton admin istration is considering schemes to expand NATO's membership or security jurisdiction eastward.[37] Since the crucial foundation of NATO's military power is the U.S. nuclear arsenal, the operational reality of such schemes is to use the doctrine of extended deterrence to protect Ukraine from Russian expansionism. Some analysts have tried to finesse the obvious problem--that any NATO-U.S. military commitment to Kiev would be viewed as extremely provocative in Moscow--by suggesting that both Russia and Ukraine be brought into the NATO fold.[38] That ploy, however, would not overcome an equally serious problem--that such an extension of security obligations could entangle the United States in an array of potentially explosive Russian-Ukrainian disputes.

Growing Ukrainian-Russian Tensions

The most obvious source of friction between the two countries is the status of the Crimea. Russians of all political persuasions seem to harbor expansionist designs when it comes to Ukrainian territory. Even such an ardent, pro-Western Russian democrat as St. Petersburg mayor Anatoli Sobchak speaks of the Crimea as Russian soil and believes that Russia should claim the borders it had in 1922, when it joined the Soviet Union.[39] That step would place a very large chunk of Ukrainian territory in Moscow's domain.

Russian territorial claims are merely a symptom of a more serious problem--an unwillingness to accept the legitimacy of Ukraine's independence. Again, that attitude is not confined to rabid nationalist or die-hard Bolshevik circles. Particularly disturbing were reports from East European capitals in March 1993 that officials of Boris Yeltsin's government had told those countries "not to bother building large embassies in Kiev because within 18 months they will be downgraded to consular sections."[40]

Such attitudes have deep historical roots. What is now Ukraine was the heartland of Rus, the original medieval Russian state. After centuries of Mongol and, later, Polish domination, Ukraine again came under Russian control during the time of Peter the Great. Given that history, it is not too surprising that Russians across the political spectrum have difficulty accepting the legitimacy of an independent Ukraine. At the same time, Ukrainian nationalists are determined to maintain their country's newly acquired sovereignty. Those sharply conflicting agendas, combined with the simmering territorial disputes, create considerable potential for armed conflict. It is an arena in which Washington's

flirtation with security assurances or other forms of geopolitical meddling is especially unwise.

Drifting into Peril

The danger is not so much that Washington will propose formal NATO membership or even an alliance security shield for Ukraine. Such explicit guarantees are unlikely because of West European reluctance and the prospect of domestic opposition from both Congress and the public. But dangerous entanglements can result from less dramatic steps. The Clinton administration's draft presidential Decision Directive 13, leaked to the press in August 1993, expressed Washington's desire to mediate disputes among the republics of the former Soviet Union and to help dampen conflicts on the perimeter of the old USSR. Concern about the fighting raging in the Caucasus region was probably at least as important a motive for that proposal as was interest in protecting Ukraine's security. Whatever the underlying rationale, however, the Yeltsin government understandably regarded the administration's initiative as unwelcome interference in Russia's sphere of influence.[41] More anti-American nationalist groups in Russia were even less charitable, viewing the policy as an effort to ring their country with U.S. clients. The timing of Decision Directive 13, reports of which surfaced immediately after the military cooperation agreement between Washington and Kiev, has made the U.S.-Ukrainian relationship a focal point of Russian suspicions and hostility.

Even vague security assurances from the United States are too high a price to pay to persuade Kiev to relinquish its nuclear arsenal. Such a policy is morally and intellectually bankrupt under virtually any scenario. If Washington is not serious about protecting a nonnuclear Ukraine from Russian coercion, security assurances would be a cynical deception that might lure Ukrainian leaders into making a concession that could cost their country its independence. Conversely, if Washington is serious, the policy entails the risk of entangling the United States in a Russian-Ukrainian war--something that is clearly not in the best interests of the American people.

The worst outcome would be the failure of U.S. security assurances to induce Kiev to actually give up its nuclear weapons. Although American assurances might lead to Ukraine's formal ratification of START and the NPT, implementation of those agreements would remain problematic. U.S. policymakers could find themselves in the unpleasant position of having already made security commitments to a state that, while promising repeatedly to eliminate its arsenal, continued to stall for years.

There is nothing at stake in the region that warrants assuming risks appropriate only for the defense of a vital American interest. The preservation of Ukraine's independence certainly does not reach the level of a vital interest. The United States was able to tolerate Russian control of Ukraine during both the czarist and communist eras without any discernible adverse impact on American security. Although it would be sad to see Ukraine reabsorbed into a "greater Russia," American security would not be seriously affected. Likewise, nuclear nonproliferation might be a worthy goal in the abstract, but it is not a vital interest--nor is it terribly realistic--in this case. Getting Kiev to relinquish its deterrent is certainly not worth offering security assurances that risk a military collision with Moscow.

The Dilemmas of Extended Deterrence

Washington's willingness to protect other nations with its nuclear umbrella does provide an incentive for those countries to forgo the development of independent arsenals. The threat of U.S. retaliation also might deter an aggressive nuclear power from intimidating or attacking its neighbors, thereby making the outbreak of a conflict less likely. Those are not trivial benefits, and they must be taken seriously. That is why advocates of the commitment to both extended deterrence and nuclear nonproliferation cling to a policy of extensive U.S. engagement. Washington Post columnist Stephen S. Rosenfeld epitomizes that attitude when he proposes "drawing would-be nuclear countries into a network of smothering security and other ties that at once provide those countries with political and military reassurances and restrict their nuclear options."[42]

There are several significant problems with Rosenfeld's approach. Although extended deterrence might make attacks on U.S. protectorates less likely even in a multipolar nuclear system, it also guarantees that the United States would be disastrously entangled in any conflict that did erupt. During the Cold War a persuasive case could be made that the United States had no choice but to accept that risk to prevent Soviet global hegemony. The argument that America must continue accepting similar risks merely to discourage regional conflicts is considerably less compelling.

Moreover, Washington's ability to dissuade nations from acquiring nuclear weapons is extremely uneven. A network of smothering ties may work with some Cold War era allies--although even in those cases there is likely to be a growing credibility problem. But how much effect will it have on a North Korea, an Iran, or a Libya--or even on a nation such as Pakistan that sees a regional adversary threatening its very survival? That problem underscores a crucial point: the nonproliferation system is not merely breaking down, it is breaking down asymmetrically. The regimes that seem most determined to develop their own arsenals are in many cases precisely the ones that are most likely to contemplate using them for aggressive purposes. They are also frequently regimes over which the United States has little or no influence. Washington may inadvertently create a situation in which the more peaceably inclined nations remain non-nuclear--and entirely dependent on U.S. protection--while the planetary bullies are armed to the teeth.

Credibility Problems

The assumption that if extended deterrence contributed to stability during the Cold War, it will produce the same result in the post-Cold War world is fallacious for another reason. As Harvard University scholar Steven E. Miller points out, nuclear deterrence threats are not equally effective in all circumstances. In particular, "deterrence will not work well when dealing with ambiguous borders or disputed territories. . . ."[43] That was never a relevant factor in the U.S.-Soviet Cold War competition, but the rivalries between India and Pakistan and between Russia and Ukraine involve precisely those problems. The confrontation between North and South Korea is even more serious, since neither regime accepts the legitimacy of the other. Although Miller's observation was intended to support the proposition that an independent Ukrainian arsenal might not effectively deter an attack by Russia, his point is even more applicable to a distant power's guarantees of extended deterrence. Their ability to prevent conflicts in cases of virulent feuds between regional enemies is problematic at best.

A related question is how credible U.S. extended deterrence commitments will be, to both clients and their adversaries, in a post-Cold War environment. The benefits to the United States of deterring an attack on a client would appear to be far less than they were during the intense U.S.-Soviet rivalry. That perception might well cause an expansionist state to conclude that Washington was bluffing and that moving against a U.S. protectorate was worth the gamble. Conversely, America's global dependents would have to ask themselves whether U.S. leaders would actually accept the consequences of a nuclear war if the commitment were challenged. For them, it is not an academic matter; their survival as independent nations could hinge on the answer. "Probably" may not be good enough for nervous clients, and "possibly" will clearly not be sufficient. A similar gnawing uncertainty about the reliability of Washington's nuclear shield was one factor that impelled Gaullist France to adopt a hedging strategy by developing a small independent arsenal in the early 1960s.[44] In the post-Cold War era, it is even more probable that the doctrine of extended deterrence will ultimately face a crisis of credibility.

Some Low-Risk, Constructive Steps

The recognition that Washington's hoary policies of nuclear nonproliferation and extended deterrence will not suffice in a post-Cold War world does not mean that the United States can do nothing to reduce the danger of regional nuclear wars. U.S. leaders can pursue a number of worthwhile, low-risk initiatives. Further reductions in America's own oversized arsenal would help create a less threatening global environment and weaken the argument that other states need nuclear weapons to prevent intimidation by the United States. Extending the moratorium on U.S. nuclear tests would also foster a less confrontational atmosphere. Washington should encourage the establishment of nuclear-free zones in such regions as South America and Sub-Saharan Africa where no nation currently possesses such weapons or seems on the brink of doing so. In cases in which two or more regional rivals already have arsenals, the United States can help those nations develop reliable command-and-control systems to prevent accidental launches or the theft of weapons by terrorist organizations. An active U.S. diplomacy can also assist such adversaries to articulate defensive nuclear doctrines to minimize the chances of miscalculation.[45]

Realism Needed in a Multipolar Nuclear World

Such an approach would require a willingness to acknowledge that the number of nuclear-weapons powers is certain to grow regardless of America's wishes. C. Raja Mohan, a senior research associate with India's Institute for Defence

Studies and Analyses, noted that the issue of nonproliferation was a moot point with respect to his re gion. "The question is how to make a nuclearized South Asia stable and free of war," he observed.[46] Mohan's policy focus is more realistic and constructive than is continuing to cite the virtues of nonproliferation in places where proliferation is already a reality. The relevant task now is not so much to prevent proliferation as to learn how to live with it.

The United States can take some steps to help make a multipolar nuclear world marginally safer. Under no circumstances, however, should Washington place this country at risk in purely regional disputes that have nuclear implications. One can readily sympathize with Mohan and others who seek stability for their regions, but the reality is that conflicts between long-standing rivals are an ever-present danger. Rear Adm. Edward Scheafer, Jr., the head of U.S. naval intelligence, warned in a recent interview that "somewhere, some time in this decade, someone is going to set off a nuclear weapon in deadly earnest."[47] Scheafer may well be proven correct, if not in this decade then in the next. The first task of a prudent U.S. security strategy must be to keep America out of potential nuclear crossfires.

Notes

[1] For examples of such comments, see Ted Galen Carpenter, A Search for Enemies: America's Alliances after the Cold War (Washington: Cato Institute, 1992), p. 89. Even the recent ly retired "radical" opposition leader Kim Dae Jung favors keeping U.S. troops indefinitely to prevent "dangerous adventurism among regional powers." Specifically, Kim stresses that the troop presence would "provide a check against China or an expansionist Japan." Kim Dae Jung, "The Once and Future Korea," Foreign Policy 86 (Spring 1992): 53.

[2] Don Oberdorfer, "N. Korea Seen Closer to A-Bomb," Wash ington Post, February 23, 1992, p. A1; and Elaine Sciolino, "CIA Chief Says North Koreans Plan to Make Secret Atom Arms," New York Times, February 26, 1992, p. A1.

[3] See, for example, Center for Security Policy, "What to Do about North Korea's Nuclear Threat: Execute the 'Osirik' Remedy," Decision Brief no. 93-D20, March 19, 1993.

[4] David Kay, "Don't Wait for a Change of Heart in North Korea," Wall Street Journal, March 18, 1993, p. A12; and Frank Gaffney, Jr., "Delusions over North Korea," Washington Times, June 16, 1993, p. G3.

[5] For a discussion of such problems, see Doug Bandow, "North Korea and the Risks of Coercive Nonproliferation," Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing no. 24, May 4, 1993.

[6] Bill Clinton, "Fundamentals of Security for a New Pacif ic Community," Address before the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea, Seoul, South Korea, July 10, 1993, U.S. Department of State Dispatch, July 19, 1993, pp. 509-10.

[7] At the G-7 summit in Tokyo in July 1993, Japanese offi cials opposed language in the communiqu that endorsed an indefinite extension of the NPT. A foreign ministry offi cial explained that "it would be a risk to acknowledge an indefinite extension while North Korea is developing nuclear weapons. We must be cautious." Daniel Williams, "Japan Hedges on Nuclear Arms Treaty," Washington Post, July 9, 1993, p. A17. Foreign Minister Kabun Muto subsequently stated that Japan must have the will and the right to build its own nuclear weapons if necessary to deter a North Korean nuclear attack. Sam Jameson, "Foreign Minister Says Japan Will Need Nuclear Arms If N. Korea Threatens," Los Angeles Times (Washington edition), July 29, 1993, p. 3.

[8] Sumit Ganguly, "Ethno-Religious Conflict in South Asia," Survival 35 (Summer 1993): 88-109.

[9] Bill Gertz, "Israel, Pakistan, India Have Nuclear Bombs, Experts Say," Washington Times, June 20, 1991, p. A6.

[10] R. Jeffrey Smith, "Pakistan Can Build One Nuclear De vice, Foreign Official Says," Washington Post, February 7, 1992, p. A18. For detailed assessments of the Indian and Pakistani nuclear-weapons programs, see Leonard S. Spector with Jacqueline R. Smith, Nuclear Ambitions (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1990), pp. 63-117; Warren H. Donnelly and Zachary S. Davis, "India and Nuclear Weapons," Congressional Re search Service Issue Brief, January 8, 1992; and

Warren H. Donnelly and Zachary S. Davis, "Pakistan's Nuclear Status," Congressional Research Service Issue Brief, January 22, 1992.

[11] Gus Constantine, "Pakistani Envoy Defends Nuclear Effort as Peaceful," Washington Times, March 24, 1993, p. A7.

[12] Steve Coll, "South Asia Retains Its Nuclear Option," Washington Post, September 30, 1991, p. A1.

[13] Seymour M. Hersh, "On the Nuclear Edge," New Yorker, March 29, 1993, pp. 56-73; and Douglas Jehl, "Assertion India and Pakistan Faced Nuclear War Doubted," New York Times, March 23, 1993, p. A3.

[14] Quoted in Cord Meyer, "Perilous Collision Course," Washington Times, August 20, 1993, p. F3.

[15] U.S. Department of State, United States Treaties and Other International Agreements (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1960), vol 10, part 1, 1959, p. 318.

[16] Henry Kissinger, White House Years (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), pp. 895, 1488 n.7.

[17] Thomas P. Thornton, "The United States and South Asia," Survival 35 (Summer 1993): 125.

[18] Jim Rogers, "Memo Asks Services to Draft Response to Possible India-Pakistan War," Inside the Air Force, May 8, 1992, p. 1.

[19] Kissinger, pp. 895-96.

[20] Hersh, p. 67.

[21] A public opinion survey taken in August 1993 indicated that a majority of Ukrainians favored keeping the missiles. Andrew Borowiec, "Wary Ukraine Retains Grip on Nuclear Arsenal," Washington Times, August 18, 1993, p. A9.

[22] Chrystia Freeland and R. Jeffrey Smith, "Kiev Premier Urges Keeping Nuclear Arms," Washington Post, June 4, 1993, p. A1.

[23] Michael Dobbs, "Ukraine Claims All Nuclear Weapons on Its Territory," Washington Post, July 3, 1993, p. A24; and "Ukraine's Lawmakers Claim Nuclear Arsenal," Baltimore Sun, July 3, 1993, p. 4.

[24] Jane Perlez, "Ukraine May Ask Special Status in Atom Pact," New York Times, July 26, 1993, p. A8.

[25] Classified U.S. intelligence assessments, leaked to the press in May 1993, concluded not only that Ukraine is moving toward acquiring "positive operational control" of the 176 missiles, but that it was likely to achieve that objective within 18 months. Jim Hoagland, "Race between Nightmares East of the Urals," Washington Post, May 30, 1993, p. C7. Earlier, more preliminary assessments by the U.S. intelli gence community had concluded that Kiev was increasingly likely to retain its nuclear capabilities. R. Jeffrey Smith, "Officials See Shift in Ukraine's Nuclear Position," Washington Post, December 19, 1992, p. A10.

[26] Anne Applebaum, "How We Bombed on Nukes in Ukraine," Wall Street Journal, June 30, 1993, p. A14.

[27] Edith M. Lederer and Sergei Shagorodsky, "Nukes Still Hot Issue in Ukraine," Washington Times, June 14, 1992, p. A1. During a visit to Kiev in October 1993, Secretary of State Christopher received yet another set of vague promises from Kravchuk. Barry Schweid, "Ukraine Stalls U.S. on Atomic Disarming," Washington Times, October 26, 1993, p. A10.

[28] Serge Schmemann, "Ukraine Finds Nuclear Arms Bring a Measure of Respect," New York Times, January 7, 1993, p. A1.

[29] Don Oberdorfer, "Ukraine Is Loath to Yield Nuclear Arms," Washington Post, March 25, 1993, p. A29.

[30] Strobe Talbott, "The United States and the Ukraine: Broadening the Relationship," Statement before the Subcom mittee on European Affairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, June 24, 1993, U.S. Department of State Dispatch, July 5, 1993, p. 481.

[31] Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. Says Ukraine Has Begun Disman tling Nuclear Missiles," New York Times, July 28, 1993, p. A8.

[32] Freeland and Smith, p. A7.

[33] R. Jeffrey Smith, "Ukrainians Endorse Arms Plan," Wash ington Post, June 8, 1993, p. A16.

[34] James Rupert, "Russian Deputies Claim Ukraine's Naval Base," Washington Post, July 10, 1993, p. A13.

[35] John J. Mearsheimer, "The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent," Foreign Affairs 72 (Summer 1993): 57-58.

[36] Edward Mortimer, "A Close Nuclear Family," Financial Times, July 28, 1993, p. 14.

[37] Steve Vogel, "U.S. Proposes NATO 'Partnerships' for Former Warsaw Pact Nations," Washington Post, October 21, 1993, p. A22; and Thomas M. Lippman, "Christopher Talks of 'Partnership' in East," Washington Post, October 22, 1993, p. A28.

[38] Ira Louis Straus, "Bring Russia and Ukraine into NATO Together," letter to the editor, New York Times, June 28, 1993, p. A16. Straus is U.S. coordinator of the Committee on Eastern Europe and Russia in NATO. The editors of the Washington Post offer the slightly more vague proposal that both Russia and Ukraine "be tightly bound into Western security and political structures." Substantively, it would amount to the same thing. "Security for Ukraine," editori al, Washington Post, June 12, 1993, p. A20. Advocates of extending NATO's jurisdiction to cover the nations of Cen tral and Eastern Europe are typically evasive about the issue of bringing states of the former Soviet Union into the system. See Jeffrey Simon, "Does Eastern Europe Belong in NATO?" Orbis 37 (Winter 1993): 21-35; Ronald D. Asmus, Richard L. Kugler, and F. Stephen Larrabee, "Building a New NATO," Foreign Affairs 72 (September-October 1993): 28-40; and Charles L. Glaser, "Why NATO Is Still Best," Interna tional Security 18 (Summer 1993): 13-14.

[39] Mark Frankland, "Nuclear Neighbors Keep the Fences Up," Washington Times, June 11, 1993, p. A8.

[40] Quoted in Cord Meyer, "Ukraine Roots," Washington Times, March 26, 1993, p. F1.

[41] Margaret Shapiro, "Russia Sees Itself as Region's Media tor," Washington Post, August 14, 1993, p. A17.

[42] Stephen S. Rosenfeld, "Bombs for Everyone," Washington Post, June 25, 1993, p. A25.

[43] Steven E. Miller, "The Case against a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent," Foreign Affairs 72 (Summer 1993): 71.

[44] Jean Lacouture, De Gaulle: The Ruler, 1945-1970, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), pp. 368-69.

[45] For a more extensive discussion of these and other constructive steps, see Ted Galen Carpenter, "A New Prolif eration Policy," National Interest 28 (Summer 1992): 71-72.

[46] Quoted in Peter Grier, "Asian Nations Pose Greatest Nuclear Risk," Christian Science Monitor, August 3, 1993, p. 1.

[47] Quoted in "Nuclear Survival Task Falls to U.S.," Atlanta Constitution, August 5, 1993, p. 18.