

33. Nuclear Proliferation

A change in Washington's nuclear-weapons policy is badly needed and requires a willingness to acknowledge that the number of nuclear-weapons powers is likely to grow in the coming decade. The relevant task now is not so much to prevent proliferation as to learn how to live with it.

Adjusting to proliferation will involve the following policy initiatives:

- **Ratify the START II treaty and negotiate a START III agreement with Russia that would reduce the nuclear arsenal of each country to 2,000 weapons. Because it is essential to maintain an adequate strategic deterrent, however, no deeper reductions should be considered in the foreseeable future.**
- **Increase funding for development of an anti-ballistic-missile (ABM) system.**
- **Refuse to agree to an indefinite extension of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). Any extension should not exceed five years.**
- **Continue the current moratorium on underground nuclear tests for another three years, but refuse to approve any treaty that includes a permanent prohibition of such tests.**
- **Notify U.S. allies and clients that the United States will no longer use its nuclear deterrent to shield them from attack and that they must make their own decisions about whether to build independent deterrents.**

Proliferation Trends

The recent crisis involving North Korea's nuclear program is indicative of a larger problem that has disturbing implications for the United States. The Korean crisis is merely the latest evidence that the global nonproliferation regime, symbolized by the NPT, is slowly but inexorably breaking down. The agreement negotiated by the Clinton administration with Pyongyang does not really resolve the Korean crisis. North Korea has obtained

valuable economic and political concessions from the United States and other nations in exchange for a paper promise to discontinue its nuclear program over the next decade. The agreement falls far short of preventing a regime as secretive and politically opaque as North Korea's from evading scrutiny by the International Atomic Energy Agency and continuing to pursue a clandestine nuclear-weapons program. Iraq was able to do so throughout the 1980s while complying with IAEA inspection requirements.

More important, North Korea appears to be only one of several states with nuclear ambitions. Israel, India, and Pakistan have already become undeclared members of the global nuclear club, and there are persistent reports of efforts by Iran and Libya to exploit the political chaos in the former Soviet Union to purchase small arsenals. (The interception by German authorities of several "samples" of plutonium that apparently originated in Russia underscores the latter danger.) In addition, numerous nations including South Korea, Japan, Sweden, Brazil, Argentina, Algeria, and Taiwan have the technology to produce nuclear weapons on relatively short notice. Those trends more than offset such anti-proliferation developments as the decision by Ukraine to sign the NPT and South Africa's announcement that it has given up an arsenal it had developed surreptitiously in the 1980s.

Proliferation trends are most pronounced in areas where bitter regional rivalries, ethnic or religious tensions, and border disputes rage. The prospect that virulent rivals are already armed or could soon be armed with nuclear weapons is alarming enough. Even worse from the standpoint of American interests is the existence of security commitments that could entangle the United States 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 Pakistan-India confrontation is less severe—primarily because there are no American forces stationed as a tripwire on the subcontinent—but a 1959 defense agreement does obligate the United States to assist Pakistan if it is the victim of aggression. The U.S. commitment to protect Saudi Arabia from Iran or other enemies may be informal, but as the Persian Gulf War confirmed, it is quite real.

Escalating Risks for the United States

Two factors have placed the United States on the front lines of potentially lethal regional conflicts. The first is the perpetuation of alliances and other

security commitments inherited from the Cold War—commitments that may have made sense given the need to thwart the Soviet Union's expansionist agenda 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 represents.

To discourage the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the United States has continued the Cold War era bargain: if Washington's allies and clients renounce ambitions to acquire independent deterrents, the United States will help protect their security, including in many cases extending to them the protection of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. But 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, even in the bipolar Cold War context 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 recklessly provoke a nuclear conflagration.

The situation is markedly different in the post-Cold War setting. If proliferation trends continue, Washington will face the prospect of deterring several nuclear-weapons states from attacking or intimidating U.S. allies and clients. That would be a more difficult—and dangerous—mission than deterring the USSR 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 Washington's willingness to risk nuclear war to block Soviet global domination was credible, its willingness to do so merely to prevent a shift in the balance of power between regional rivals is not. It would take only one deterrence failure to cause a catastrophe for the United States.

The Mounting Difficulty of Preventing Proliferation

American leaders hope, of course, to prevent new nuclear-weapons states from emerging in the first place. Although that may be a worthy objective, it is also an impractical one. Diplomatic or economic inducements are unlikely to dissuade regimes that have expansionist aims or fear for their own survival from acquiring independent deterrents. As the case of North Korea suggests, such a strategy will produce (at best) paper promises. Indeed, offering inducements for a nuclear aspirant to forgo

weapons development programs creates a perverse incentive. Other nations that are now merely contemplating such programs may conclude that “**playing the nuclear card**” is an extremely effective way to get Washington’s attention and extort concessions. (Ukraine’s campaign to get additional financial aid from the United States as a reward for signing the NPT was simply a more subtle version of the strategy pursued by North Korea.)

More **hard-line** policies, however, hold no better promise of halting proliferation trends. A **strategy of coercive nonproliferation**—relying on economic sanctions or preemptive military **strikes**—is not a viable option in most cases. Sanctions have not had an impressive record of persuading target regimes to alter their policies on important issues. Embargoes are especially likely to prove futile in compelling countries such as North Korea and Iran to abandon nuclear aspirations, since those countries are **already** largely isolated from the global economic system.

Preemptive military strikes would theoretically be more effective, but that approach also has serious drawbacks. Not only might it prove difficult to identify clandestine weapons development sites, but attacks on operating reactors run the risk of spreading radioactive **fallout**, which would endanger civilians not only in the target country but in neighboring nations as well. Moreover, the country that had been assaulted would have every incentive to seek revenge against the United States. At the very least, a preemptive strike would increase the prospect of terrorist incidents. It could also provoke attacks on U.S. military forces and regional clients. Bombing North Korea’s nuclear facilities, for example, could easily trigger a general war on the Korean peninsula, immediately engulfing the American troops stationed there.

The **impracticality** of stemming the spread of nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War world means that Washington must reconsider the wisdom of maintaining security commitments to regional allies and clients. Greater proliferation especially **calls into question** the benefits to the United States of preserving the doctrine of extended deterrence.

The Perils 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 and therefore contributes to overall international stability. 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.

Nevertheless, the problems associated with the policy now outweigh such benefits. 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 entangled in any conflict that did erupt. During the Cold War a case could be made that the United States had no choice but to accept that risk to prevent Soviet global domination. 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. 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 often the very ones that are most likely to use them for aggressive purposes. They are also 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 **nonnuclear**—and entirely dependent on U.S. protection—while unstable or aggressive states are armed to the teeth. America's nonproliferation policy threatens to produce the same perverse results as domestic gun control laws.

A Policy of Adjustment

A policy of adjusting to the looming prospect of nuclear proliferation would require a number of important actions in addition to eliminating extended deterrence and refraining from intervening in parochial regional disputes.

First, nuclear proliferation underscores the need to maintain a credible strategic nuclear deterrent despite the demise of the Soviet Union, although there is room for some downsizing of the arsenal. The START n treaty, which would reduce the U.S. strategic arsenal to 3,500 bombs and warheads, provides an ample cushion of safety and the Senate should ratify the agreement. Indeed, the United States ought to go further and accept the proposal advanced by Russian president Boris Yeltsin in 1992 for a ceiling of 2,000 weapons.

Nevertheless, the United States must keep an arsenal large enough to deter an attack on American territory by all except the most irrational regimes. Beyond a certain point, fewer is not necessarily better when it comes to nuclear weapons. An excessively small strategic arsenal might tempt an aggressive state to believe that it could "take out" that arsenal

with a well-coordinated attack or at least engage in nuclear **brinksmanship** to intimidate the United States.

Second, the United States should proceed cautiously on the issue of **nuclear-weapons** testing. Although the current moratorium on underground tests can be continued for at least two to three years without any adverse impact on national security, Congress should refuse to approve any agreement that bans such tests indefinitely. Changes in technology can affect nuclear weaponry as they can other components of the military. A total ban on nuclear testing could, in time, render the U.S. arsenal obsolete. Instead of approving a comprehensive underground test ban, Congress should advise the president to negotiate a new international agreement that places strict limits on such tests.

Third, it is essential for the United States to augment its strategic deterrent with robust air and missile defenses. An ABM system would not require fully implementing Ronald Reagan's ambitious Strategic Defense Initiative, since repelling an onslaught by a massive missile fleet, such as that possessed by the Soviet Union, is now an extremely improbable mission. The more **likely** danger is an accidental launch of a few dozen missiles or a deliberate attack by a new nuclear power with a limited arsenal. Even a "thin layer" ABM system could offer crucial protection from such threats. As a collateral benefit, it would reduce the likelihood of nuclear blackmail. Congress should restore the funds for ABM defense that were cut from the defense budget at the urging of the Clinton administration. The long-range goal should be the deployment of a **comprehensive** ABM system within eight years. Congress should insist on modifications to the ABM treaty that would permit such a deployment. If Russia refuses to agree to such revisions, the United States should give the required notice and renounce the treaty.

Fourth, Congress should urge the executive branch to alter its negotiating position with respect to the extension of the NPT in 1995. Although it would probably be excessively destabilizing to abruptly abandon the current nonproliferation system, the United States should refuse to approve an indefinite extension of the treaty. The value of the NPT is already open to serious question, and the problems with the treaty are likely to grow worse with the passage of time. The United States should therefore agree to an extension of no more than five years, with the expectation that the NPT will probably not have significant utility after that point. U.S. officials should use the intervening period to conduct a

thorough reassessment and revamping of America's **nonproliferation** and extended deterrence policies.

One important step would be to inform **Washington's** allies and clients that the United States intends to rescind the doctrine of extended deterrence in the near future and they must, therefore, make their own decisions about whether to develop independent deterrents. U.S. leaders should no longer discourage stable democratic nations from acquiring nuclear weapons—especially when the quid pro quo for their restraint is that the United States will use its own deterrent to shield them.

To the extent that Washington continues a nonproliferation strategy, it should concentrate on making it difficult for aggressive or unstable regimes to acquire the technology and fissile material needed to manufacture nuclear weapons. U.S. policymakers must adopt a realistic attitude toward the limitations of even that more tightly focused nonproliferation policy. At best, U.S. actions will delay, not prevent, such states from joining the nuclear-weapons club.

But delay can provide some important benefits. It may give the United States time to develop adequate strategic defenses and other democratic nations time to build their own deterrents or strategic defense systems, or both. 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 monopoly and be tempted to blackmail nonnuclear neighbors. In some cases, the knowledge that regional nuclear hegemony is unattainable may even discourage a would-be aggressor from making the effort.

A policy of adjustment is not a panacea. It is, however, superior to the existing policy of accepting the risks inherent in extended deterrence and hoping that the fraying nonproliferation system will somehow hold together indefinitely. It is also superior to the dangerous and provocative alternative of coercive nonproliferation. Because the United States cannot prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, it must focus on minimizing its negative consequences for the American people. The 104th Congress can make important contributions to that change of policy.

Suggested Readings

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