



NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

Nuclear Proliferation

By Christopher Miller

Introduction

Take a look around: North Korea, Israel and Palestine, Iran, India and Pakistan—each of the world’s major hotspots share a single unifying characteristic. It isn’t terrorism; it is possession of nuclear weapons. The threat of the latter is potentially much more dire than that of the former. A terrorist attack employing **conventional** high-explosives can kill at most only a few thousand; horrifying, to be sure, but manageable. In contrast, a nuclear explosion in a major metropolitan area would kill millions. All the more dangerous is the threat of terrorists acquiring nuclear capacity.

Conventional (explosives)—
explosives that are non-nuclear

Untenable—*impossible to protect against*

The History of Nuclear Weapons

The danger of putting nuclear technology in human hands was recognized before the first atomic bomb was used on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. Since then, humanity has struggled to deal with the horror we have unleashed upon ourselves. Many find the existence of nuclear weapons to be an anathema to continued human survival. Various arguments are posited for their elimination: that nuclear arms are immoral and/or strategically impractical, or that the risk of an accident, though slim, is simply **untenable**. While admitting that the use of nuclear weapons would be devastating, the widely accepted response argues that the best way to ensure non-use of nuclear weapons is through deterrence: the principal that no state will use nuclear weapons if it knows that nuclear weapons will be used upon it in response.

During the Cold War, the logic of nuclear weapons was much discussed, often to ends that probably had little bearing on reality. The title of one influential work, *On Thermonuclear War*, seemed to treat the subject as though it were commonplace, a trifle to be pondered on summer afternoons rather than a potential world-ending cataclysm. Early in the Cold War, the threat of nuclear holocaust was always present.

The end of the Cold War has changed the way we understand nuclear weapons. No serious observer expects nuclear warfare between any of the great powers. The imprint of the 1950s and 60s—the image of schoolchildren hiding under their desks during bomb drills—no longer shapes the modern perspective of nuclear weapons. Instead, discussion is motivated by the awful attacks of September 11, 2001. How much worse would they have been if nuclear materials were involved?

By and large, Americans supported the 2003 Iraq war due to concerns over the Iraqi nuclear program, and statesmen from both political parties in the US list the North Korean nuclear program as a first-tier security threat. As long as nuclear weapons remain a major issue in international affairs, questions about who possesses them, who does not, and who decides those distinctions will be of **paramount** importance.

paramount—*of the utmost importance*

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

The Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT), signed in 1968, has been the cornerstone of the international anti-**proliferation** agenda. Few security treaties have such wide membership, and yet few have such notable—and controversial—non-members. The treaty allows states that possessed nuclear weapons in 1968 (Russia, China, US, UK, and France) to maintain those weapons; it bars any other state from seeking nuclear weapons. However the treaty encourages non-nuclear weapons states to obtain nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. The NPT established the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to verify, through inspections, that member states abide by their treaty responsibilities.

proliferation—*term describing an increasing number of nuclear weapons*

The Bomb—*a nuclear bomb capable of massive destruction*

After nearly 40 years, the NPT's record is mixed. Since 1968, five other states (India, Pakistan, Israel, North Korea, and South Africa, the latter having dismantled its program) have acquired nuclear weapons; proliferation has clearly taken place. Nevertheless, IAEA inspections have at times proved to be a useful tool for verifying states' intent with regard to their nuclear programs and discouraging some states, notably Iraq, from pursuing nuclear arms.

Responses to Proliferation

The failures of the NPT have been twofold: first, the current inspection provisions are not robust enough to ensure that states do not develop extensive nuclear programs; second, the treaty does little to address non-state actors like terrorist groups. Three case studies follow:

The 2003 Iraq War

The case of Saddam Hussein, who was once the poster-boy for proliferation initiatives gone wrong, in the end proved to be an ironic example of the NPT's success. American forces in Iraq quickly realized that the IAEA inspections regime imposed after the 1991 Gulf War was, in fact, effective in stopping Saddam from getting **The Bomb**. However, this apparent success masks a larger failure—the IAEA inspections were not definitive enough to convince the US, Britain, and many of Iraq's neighbors that Saddam did not have nuclear weapons. Rightly or wrongly, the Bush Administration felt threatened by the mere *possibility*

that Iraq would develop nuclear weapons, and the IAEA inspections, though countering Washington's evidence, were hardly conclusive. In the eyes of two of the five nuclear weapons states, the strictures of the NPT could not guarantee that Iraq was not building nuclear weapons, and therefore could not guarantee their security. An international agreement can hardly be considered successful if it leaves two nuclear-weapons states (not to mention many neighboring Arab states and Israel) fearing for their security.

The Bush Administration's argument in favor of **pre-emptive war** (most scholars would term the Iraq War and the so-called 'Bush Doctrine' one of *prevention* rather than *pre-emption*) highlighted that, given the increasing ease of obtaining nuclear technology, a strategy based on stopping states from developing such technology is becoming increasingly difficult. The Bush Doctrine sought to realign America's policy toward treating dangerous regimes, rather than proliferation *per se*, as the security threat. Notably, former President Bush adopted a different tack in dealing with Iran and North Korea.

Some opponents of the Iraq War argued that, even if Iraq were to get The Bomb, Saddam could be deterred; some envisioned a miniaturization of the Cold War. But the logic of deterrence only functions if both parties are rational. Throughout the Cold War, each of the great powers acted in a rational fashion and war was avoided.

But was Saddam rational? After Hussein's regime fell, the US military interviewed Iraqi leaders, civilians, and military personnel in an attempt to determine how Iraq planned for war. The central determination: Saddam believed that "his 'superior' forces would put up "a heroic resistance and . . . inflict such enormous losses on the Americans that they would stop their advance." He was laughably wrong. Was he even rational? And if not, could deterrence have worked? It is a question that is hopelessly **hypothetical** and yet of central importance. If deterrence cannot work with irrational leaders, must they be removed before they obtain nuclear weapons?

Nunn-Lugar

The fall of the Soviet Union left a once-great nuclear power in a state of military disrepair. Lacking funds, Russia's nuclear program has decayed significantly. Once a security threat because the US feared they might attack, the Russian nuclear arsenal is dangerous today because it is so poorly secured from theft. Fearing that rogue groups could seize nuclear materials or misuse the Russian nuclear program in other ways, Washington initiated the Nunn-Lugar program to help fund efforts to secure **WMD** sites across the former USSR and to begin destruction of undeployed WMD.

It is exceedingly difficult to measure the success of a program like Nunn-Lugar; only a nuclear catastrophe could demonstrate its fail-

pre-emptive war—*a military move made in order to gain a strategic advantage before an enemy strikes first. This is often done to prevent or deter an enemy attack from taking place*

hypothetical—*uncertain; existing only as an idea or thought*

WMD—*weapons of mass destruction*

ure. Proponents cite impressive statistics on the number of nuclear components or deployment systems that have been dismantled, which certainly reduces the threat posed by the Soviet arsenal. Still, the post-Soviet territories are less than stable, and many elements from within would love the bargaining power associated with the theft of nuclear materials—and more frighteningly, many groups from without would love the damage associated with the use of those weapons.

AQ Khan

The father of Pakistan's nuclear weapon, Dr. A.Q Khan, is also the world's most dangerous agent of nuclear proliferation. Details of his web of nuclear sales are murky, but it is certain that A.Q Khan participated in, and perhaps developed, a weapons trade network that included North Korea, Pakistan, Iran, and Libya: a who's who of **rogue states**. This network operated for at least a decade (probably more) before being broken up in 2004. The specific details are not nearly as important as the implications: that these states, which have few naturally overlapping interests, cooperated on the most sensitive military matter is a shocking revelation indeed.

If it were ever in doubt, AQ Khan's network highlights the continued importance of nuclear weapons in international relations, for each state undertook enormous risk in dealing with others to develop their nuclear program, a risk that was only worthwhile because they perceived an enormous benefit. Little, it seems, will stop a state from seeking to acquire nuclear weapons if it perceives that going nuclear will enhance its security.

The ease with which the AQ Khan network operated highlights the difficulty of counter-proliferation. In the absence of UN sanctions, sovereign states can generally act as they wish, making it exceedingly difficult to monitor a country's nuclear program, and even more difficult to act if a state begins developing nuclear weapons; in the absence of a **'smoking gun'**, the application of military force is usually not an option, making diplomatic and law-enforcement techniques the only available policies. In the end, these responses succeed in putting a halt to AQ Khan's nuclear network, but only after decades of damage had been done.

President Obama

President Barack Obama has come out strongly against nuclear proliferation. In a landmark speech in the Czech Republic on April 5, 2009, the US president announced his goal of seeing a "world without nuclear weapons." Though the feasibility of this goal is a target of much debate, the action presents a bold new development in non-proliferation. It remains to be seen what realistic steps Obama will take towards achieving this vision, but with a Nobel Peace Prize under his

rogue states—states or countries considered particularly threatening to international peace; these include states ruled by an authoritarian regime, violate human rights, or that sponsor terrorism.

'smoking gun'—an obvious indicator

belt, he certainly has the international political capital necessary for making a strong effort for non-proliferation.

Regional Snapshots

India-Pakistan

India is the world's original nuclear proliferator: the first state to declare its nuclear status following the NPT's limiting that power to the five original states. In response, Pakistan rapidly developed a nuclear weapon; both states successfully tested their nuclear devices in 1998 to international condemnation. Ten years later, the international community has come to grips with the nuclearization of the Indian subcontinent. Many see India as a power deserving nuclear status; but many fear Pakistan will retain its nuclear weapons as long as India remains its premier strategic threat.

In a rebuff to the established protocols of the NPT, in 2006 former President Bush signed a deal initiating cooperation between the US and India on the peaceful use of nuclear technology, giving India the benefits of the NPT without the price of obeying its strictures. This deal represents a tacit recognition of India's nuclear status. Pakistan has not received such an acknowledgement; none is likely in the near future, in part due to Pakistan's unstable domestic situation.

Iran

Although its nuclear program is officially for peaceful purposes, most observers suspect other motives. US and European spy agencies are unsure about Iran's progress toward the bomb; and even if they were sure, the Iraq war should serve as a constant reminder about the accuracy of "intelligence." Were Iran to acquire the bomb, the Gulf States would be put under immense pressure. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt probably have the technical ability to begin a nuclear weapons program and might very well do so in the face of an Iranian nuclear state. If the US and Europe did not act to prevent an Iranian nuclear weapon, Israel might preemptively strike Iran like it did in Iraq in 1981.

The most recent update on the status of Iranian nuclear capacity came with the February 2008 IAEA Report on the implementation of safeguard in Iran. The report claimed to clarify the extent of the Iranian program. Allegations about alleged weaponization studies remained unconfirmed. The allegations stem from a laptop smuggled out of Iran in mid-2004. The United States maintains, based on this information, that Iran halted an active nuclear weapons program in late 2003. However, the IAEA reports that it has "not detected the use of nuclear material in connection with the alleged studies."

IAEA—*The International Atomic Energy Agency, which seeks to promote the peaceful use of nuclear energy and inhibit the military use of nuclear technology.*

North Korea

North Korea is the world's most dangerous nuclear state, estimated to have about ten nuclear devices and the missiles with which to deliver them; Tokyo, Seoul, Beijing, (and soon, perhaps, Los Angeles?) are all within range. North Korean leader Kim Jong Il has an erratic record, and is known for making provocative statements. Worryingly, North Korea has little to lose from selling its technology and know-how abroad; its reclusive regime gains little from global stability and might prefer chaos. Contact between North Korea and other anti-American regimes or non-state groups could prove deadly.

Some hoped that the recent six-party diplomatic process would induce North Korea to renounce its weapons, but negotiations failed in April of 2009 and North Korea resumed its **nuclear enrichment**. Japan is most threatened by North Korea's nuclear program, and it has frequently led the charge for harsh responses in international forums. If it became clear that North Korean nuclear weapons were permanent Japan could easily—*easily*—complete a nuclear weapon. If Japan went nuclear, could South Korea (and Taiwan?...and Indonesia?) afford not to?

nuclear enrichment—*a process by which uranium is enriched, necessary for the development of nuclear weapons.*

Other Suspects

In the 1990s, Libya and Syria were mentioned as frequently as Iran and Iraq in the nuclear proliferation forum, but Libya gave up its nuclear program in 2003, though American officials were surprised at its advanced stage. Israel recently bombed an alleged nuclear site within Syria, although the circumstances are still very muddled. Israel never signed the NPT and is widely known to have about 100 nuclear weapons, but barring a major flare-up with Iran, Israel seems unlikely to use or transfer the technology.

Conclusion: The American Response

The current system of international nonproliferation is in disarray: Iraq, Iran, and North Korea have topped the international agenda for the past several years; India and Pakistan, two states that never joined the NPT, have nuclear weapons; and the number of groups that would inflict massive damage if given a nuclear device remains high. A new course is necessary. Some propose revising the NPT to toughen the inspections regime. This would be a step forward, but would it be enough? The Bush Doctrine of preventative war offers an alternative to traditional counter-proliferation, but its expediency has been tested in Iraq, and the option of military action for regime change has been largely put aside with regard to North Korea and, probably, Iran.

Still, many in the security community wish, in hindsight, that the military option had been exercised in North Korea in 1994, when the

initial evidence of the North's nuclear program was uncovered. Fourteen years of diplomacy later, Pyongyang has gained the bomb and developed increasingly long-range missiles, while America has become only less secure, the region less stable, and the international community less able to influence Kim Jong-Il's reclusive regime. In the final analysis, neither option, either diplomacy or military action, is itself sufficient; neither prevention nor reaction will be expedient in all cases.

Bibliography

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