Introduction

Take a look around: North Korea, Israel/Palestine, Iran, India/Pakistan; each of the world’s major hotspots share a single unifying strain. It isn’t terrorism—the threat is potentially much more dire. A terrorist attack using conventional high-explosives can kill at most only a few thousand; horrifying, to be sure, but manageable. By contrast, a nuclear strike on a major metropolitan area would kill—literally—millions.

The History of Nuclear Weapons

Background

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 grappled to find ways of dealing with the horror we have unleashed upon ourselves. Many find the existence of nuclear weapons to be anathema to continued human survival. Various arguments are made for their elimination, that nuclear arms are immoral, strategically impractical, or that the risk of an accident, though slim, is simply too terrible. The Cold War era push for arms control resulted from these arguments. While admitting that the use of nuclear weapons would be devastating, the response from the right has argued that the best way to ensure non-use of nuclear weapons is through deterrence, the principle that no state will use nuclear weapons if they know that nuclear weapons will be used upon them in response.

During the Cold War, the logic of nuclear weapons was discussed ad infinitum, to ends that probably have 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. In its day, the threat of nuclear war was omnipresent.

The end of the Cold War has changed the way we understand nuclear weapons. No serious observer expects, even contemplates, nuclear warfare between any of the great powers. But the images of the 1950s and 60s, of schoolchildren hiding under their desks in a bomb drill, still shape the present-day perspective of nuclear weapons. By and large, Americans supported the 2003 Iraq war due to concerns over the Iraqi nuclear program, and statesmen from both parties list Iran and North Korea as first-tier security threats. As long as nuclear weapons remain a major issue in international affairs, deciding who possesses them and who does not will be of paramount importance.

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

Signed in 1968, the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) has been the cornerstone of the international anti-proliferation agenda; few 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 to maintain those weapons and bars any non-nuclear states from seeking nuclear weapons. However, the treaty allows, indeed 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 each state abides by its treaty responsibilities.

After nearly forty years, the success of the NPT is yet unclear. Since 1968, five other states (India, Pakistan, Israel, North Korea, and South Africa, the latter having dismantled it program) have acquired nuclear weapons; proliferation has certainly occurred. Nevertheless, IAEA inspections have proven a useful tool for verifying states’ intent with regard to their nuclear programs.
Responses to Proliferation

The failures of the NPT have been twofold: the current inspection provisions are not robust enough to ensure that rogue states do not develop extensive nuclear programs; and the treaty does little to address non-state actors like terrorist groups. Three case studies follow: The Iraq War, Nunn-Lugar, and A.Q. Khan.

The Iraq War

The case of Saddam Hussein, for so long the poster boy for proliferation initiatives gone wrong, proved to be, ironically, an example of the NPT’s success. American forces in Iraq quickly realized that the IAEA inspections regime was, in fact, effective in stopping Saddam from getting the bomb. This apparent success masks a larger failure—for whenever a war is fought over proliferation issues, it represents a failure of the spirit of international non-proliferation initiatives, if not the letter of the NPT. Rightly or wrongly, the Bush Administration felt threatened by the 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 NPT could not guarantee 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 spread of high technology, a strategy based on halting the spread of nuclear weapons is becoming increasingly difficult. The Bush Doctrine sought to realign America’s policy toward treating rogue regimes, rather than proliferation, as the key security issue. Notably, President Bush seems to be adopting a different tactic 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; a sort of mini-Cold War. 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 Saddam’s regime fell, the U.S. military interviewed Iraqi leaders 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 certainly wrong. Was he even rational? And if not, would deterrence have worked? It’s a question that is hopelessly hypothetical and yet of central importance.

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 due to fears of military attack, after the end of the USSR, the Russian nuclear arsenal became a security threat because it was so poorly defended. 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 unused WMD.

It is exceedingly difficult to measure the success of a program like Nunn-Lugar; only a nuclear catastrophe could demonstrate its failure. Proponents cite impressive statistics on the number of nuclear components or deployment systems that have been dismantled, which certainly reduces the likelihood of a security threat coming from former Soviet arsenals. 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.

A.Q. Khan

The father of Pakistan’s nuclear weapon, A.Q. Khan, is also the world’s most dangerous agent of nuclear proliferation. Details of this web of nuclear sales are murky, but it is certain that A.Q. Khan participated in, and perhaps developed, a network that included North Korea, Pakistan, Iran, and Libya, a who’s who of rogue states. 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, A.Q. Khan’s network highlights the importance of nuclear weapons. Each state undertook enormous risk in dealing with others to develop their nuclear program, a risk the state would only undertake if it 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 A.Q. Khan network operated highlights the difficult of counter-proliferation. In the absence of U.N. sanctions, sovereign states can
generally act as they wish, making it exceedingly difficult
to monitor a state’s nuclear program, and even more diffi-
cult to act if a state begins developing nuclear weapons. In
the absence of a ‘smoking gun’, the application of mili-
tary force is usually not an option, making diplomatic and
law-enforcement techniques the only options. In the end,
these responses succeed in putting a halt to A. Q. Khan’s
nuclear network, but only after years of damage had
already been done.

Regional Snapshots

India-Pakistan

India is in many ways the world’s original nuclear
proliferator, the first state to declare its nuclear status be-
side the five nuclear powers. In response, Pakistan rap-
idly developed a nuclear weapon and both states success-
fully tested their nuclear devices in 1998 to international
condemnation. Eight years later, the international commu-
nity has come to grips with the nuclearization of the sub-
continent. Many see India as a power deserving nuclear
status, and 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, President Bush signed a deal initiating cooperation
between the U.S. and India on the peaceful use of nuclear
technology, giving India the benefits of the NPT without
the price. More importantly to the study of proliferation,
this deal represents a tacit recognition of India’s nuclear
status. Pakistan has yet to receive such an
acknowledgement.

Iran

Although its nuclear program is ostensibly for
peaceful purposes, most observers suspect other motives.
The Iranians have made much progress, with some west-
ern intelligence sources estimating that Iran could go
nuclear within five years, although the Iraq War should
serve as a constant reminder about the accuracy of intel-
ligence estimates. Were Iran to go nuclear, the Gulf States
would be put under immense pressure. Saudi Arabia prob-
ably has the technical ability to begin a nuclear weapons
program.

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,
and Beijing are all within range. North Korean leader Kim
Jong-II has an erratic record, and is known for making
provocative statements like the missile test on July 4th,
2006. Worryingly, North Korea has little to lose from sell-
ing its technology and know-how abroad; its reclusive
regime gains nothing from global stability and might pre-
fer chaos. Contact between North Korea and anti-Ameri-
can terrorists could prove deadly.

Some hope that the current six-party diplomatic
process will induce North Korea to renounce its weapons,
but negotiations have been stalled and show little sign of
life. 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 complete a nuclear weapon. If Japan went
nuclear, could South Korea (and Taiwan?...and Indone-
sia?) afford not to?

Other Suspects

In the 1990s, Libya and Syria were mentioned as
frequently as Iran and Iraq, but Libya gave up its nuclear
program in 2003, though American officials were surprised
at its advanced stage. Syria no longer seems intent on
developing a weapons program; perhaps Bashar al-Assad
learned his lesson from the Iraq War. Israel never signed
the NPT and is widely assumed to have about 100 nuclear
weapons, but barring a major flare-up with Iran, Israel seems
unlikely to use or transfer the technology. Their conven-
tional superiority over any realistic enemy makes the use
of nuclear weapons unnecessary; to transfer the technol-
ogy would alienate their most important ally, the US.

Conclusion

The American Response

The current system of international nonprolif-
eration is in disarray: Iraq, Iran, and North Korea have
topped the international agenda for the past 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 proliferation, but its expediency has been tested in Iraq.

Still, some in the security community wish, in hindsight, that the military option had been exercised in North Korea in 1994, when the initial allegations of their nuclear program were raised. Twelve years of diplomacy later, Pyongyang has gained the bomb and developed increasingly long-range missiles, while America has become only less secure. In the final analysis, neither option, either diplomacy or military action, is itself sufficient; it is clear that neither prevention nor reaction will be expedient in all cases.

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