



National Security Watch

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The Return of Nuclear Weapons: Threats, Proliferation and the United States

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In May and June of 1999, the world almost witnessed what four decades of superpower confrontation had failed to produce—a nuclear war. India and Pakistan, two nations with ancient hatreds and newly acquired nuclear weapons, came to blows yet again over the disputed province of Kashmir. This time, both states had a limited supply of atomic weapons, first tested a year before. Although the crisis was subsequently defused, just how close this conflict came to erupting into full-blown war is now coming to light.¹ The possibility of warfare between these two states is frightening not only because of the mere existence of nuclear weapons on both sides, but because of the inexperience of both sides with nuclear diplomacy, brinkmanship and theories of deterrence, as well as the lack of mature command and control systems. The possibility that two nuclear novices like India and Pakistan would “go nuclear” is far higher today than it was for the United States and the Soviet Union during the 1960s and '70s.

When the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union ended, most observers breathed a sigh of relief as the specter of nuclear war supposedly ended with it. Unfortunately, although the threat of global nuclear war has receded, nuclear weapons themselves have gained a new legitimacy. The nuclear club (the United States, Russia, Britain, France and China) has added India, Pakistan and probably Israel to its original five. Numerous states, including Iran, North Korea, Iraq and Libya, are in the process of acquiring or building weapons of their own, and others are considering it.

Nuclear weapons are viewed as the ultimate “big stick” for intimidating enemies, guaranteeing security, and for potentially countering the United States. The threat of a nuclear war between two states, or the United States confronting the possibility of having to deal with the consequences of a nuclear conflict, is far greater today than even ten years ago.

The Rebirth of Nuclear Utility

The “why” of nuclear weapons is really quite simple. They confer upon the owner a strength that makes up for weaknesses in conventional military, political or economic power. We are experiencing the rebirth of nuclear weapons as trump cards of choice. We must ask why this is so.

A Declining Global Power

A failing superpower can hold on to nuclear weapons as the last vestige of greatness. This is clearly demonstrated by Russia's increasing incorporation of nuclear weapons into its warfighting plans and doctrines. With the Russian armed services in such disarray and economic problems causing Russia's military technology to fall further behind that of the West, nuclear weapons are once again brandished as a sign of Russia's power. In late June and early July of this year, the Russian armed forces began to conduct military exercises with a strong nuclear component, including sending strategic bombers on mock raids of Iceland and Western Europe.² Russia is in effect mirroring the American massive retaliation doctrine of the 1950s.

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An Ascending Global Power

Opposite to Russia is a China that sees itself as the ascending world power, moving to balance the strength of the United States. Although the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the largest in the world, it is still largely a creature of the 1950s and '60s with extensive formations of light infantry and little mechanization. China also lacks fundamental power-projection capabilities or a modern air force and navy able to extend its reach into areas beyond its immediate periphery. Nuclear threats and missile diplomacy have made up for this conventional weakness when dealing with its adversaries. The Chinese nuclear force was designed primarily to deter Russia, which represented China's largest threat in the 1960s.

More recently, China has moved to modernize its nuclear forces with technology and knowledge covertly acquired from the United States, including the development of advanced tactical and neutron warheads for missiles derived from the American W-88.³ Since China lacks the conventional wherewithal to mount a cross-strait invasion of Taiwan, the PLA used its missiles and nuclear threats to bully Taipei in 1996 and may do so again. Threats were also used against the United States in 1996 when a PLA official suggested the nuclear destruction of Los Angeles if America intervened in the Taiwan Crisis. This demonstrated that Chinese willingness to use nuclear threats to "deter" American intervention must now be taken more seriously.

Local Powers/Regional Hegemons

In today's world of reborn regional and irredentist conflict, nuclear weapons can become a major trump card for smaller powers. The reason behind India's and Pakistan's developing and deploying nuclear weapons was an attempt to gain the upper hand in an ancient conflict or to negate the other side's advantage. The Indian government also saw nuclear weapons as a stepping stone to great power status.

In the Middle East/Persian Gulf, this dynamic has resulted in Israel's developing a nuclear capability as a final guarantor of survival in a hostile world; Iranian and Iraqi programs were designed to counter the Israeli nuclear weapons in turn. There is a possibility that Iranian nuclear acquisition, now thought of in terms of "when", and not "if," will prompt other regional states to launch their own programs.

In Northeast Asia, North Korea has launched its nuclear program in order to gain dominance over its neighbors in South Korea and Japan. America's attempt to peacefully halt the North Korean program under the Agreed Framework has met with limited success.⁴ North Korea may already possess enough fissile material to construct a few nuclear weapons; and the present status of its various enrichment and processing programs is unknown.

The Utility of Nuclear Weapons When Dealing with the United States

One of the perceived lessons from Desert Storm by regional powers was that one should not take on America if one does not have nuclear weapons.⁵ Even a few weapons might be sufficient to level the playing field. Although the threat of retaliation remains at the heart of American deterrence theory, the possibility exists that holding a single American city hostage might deter the United States from intervention in less-than-vital interests.

The counter to fighting with the United States is negotiating with it. In this respect, the development, or the threat of development, of nuclear weapons has proven to be a profitable stance for leveraging the United States. North Korea may already possess functioning nuclear weapons, yet the Agreed Framework negotiations provided U.S. aid, money and assistance in constructing "safe" nuclear power reactors in exchange for North Korean abandonment of its atomic program. Today, the Agreed Framework is all but dead, but North Korea still uses its nuclear and ballistic missile development programs to leverage more food aid and money from the United States, South Korea and Japan.

The United States and the New Nuclear World

The U.S. response to the new world of nuclear proliferation has so far been less than successful. Current nonproliferation efforts are centered around international treaties and regimes such as the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and technology-control regimes. Unfortunately, these treaties and regimes offer little in the way of deterrence beyond difficult-to-enforce sanctions.

The recently completed Deutch-Specter Commission Report has identified some of the shortfalls of the current approach and has urged the government to move from a strategy of nonproliferation to one of counterproliferation. The report demonstrates the need to reorganize the U.S. government for counterproliferation. It makes several excellent suggestions, such as setting up a point man for countering proliferation and a more active approach to dealing with those trying to acquire the weapons, rather than focusing on a system of technology control or international convention.⁶

Besides the detailed recommendations of the Deutch-Specter Report, there are other ways the United States might prepare for the new nuclear world at the beginning of the 21st century:

- ◆ **Improvements in Theater and National Missile Defense:** The Rumsfeld Report clearly demonstrated that potential adversaries would acquire ballistic missiles, possibly nuclear-tipped, capable of threatening the continental United States sooner rather than later.⁷ Theater ballistic missile and limited national missile defenses must be perfected, to provide the United States with a viable defense when dealing with nations such as China or a nuclear North Korea that have or are developing limited strike capabilities.
- ◆ **Reform to Nuclear Warfighting Doctrine:** For American nuclear deterrence to work in tomorrow's world, old concepts of proportional response and limited nuclear warfighting require review. An enemy might not believe that the United States will decimate their entire country in retaliation for a single nuclear strike and would be more apt to attempt such a limited strike. A future President will need practical options in a nuclear crisis, such as countering the 1996 Chinese threats to target Los Angeles. And potential enemies must know that those U.S. nuclear options exist and are credible.
- ◆ **Improvements in Homeland Defense and Consequence Management:** Civil Defense, having languished under the Mutually Assured Destruction doctrine when faced with tens of thousands of incoming weapons, should now be reviewed. Besides reducing the effect of a limited nuclear strike by an opponent, our only form of deterrence against covert use of nuclear weapons by a state or nonstate actor is preparation. The Reserves and National Guard will have major roles to play in consequence management and improvements to our homeland defense to counter a calculated nuclear strike on an American city.

Conclusion

Contrary to many hopes, nuclear weapons did not disappear after the Cold War. Even if we wanted to, we cannot un-invent the technology to build them. Instead, nuclear arms are enjoying a renaissance as nations struggle to gain advantage in the emerging "New World Order." Although we can hope America will never again face the prospect of a nuclear Armageddon, we have work to do to avoid a Hiroshima on American soil. The new world of nuclear weapons will demand new approaches to counterproliferation, preparations, diplomacy and military action—when warranted to protect the American people.

Endnotes

1. See John Lancaster, "Kashmir Crisis was Defused on Brink of War." *The Washington Post*, 26 July 1999, p. A1.
2. Dana Priest, "Russian Bombers Make Iceland Foray; US Jets Intercept 2 Planes Near NATO Ally; Moscow Defends Exercises," *The Washington Post*, 1 July 1999, p. A1.

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3. For information regarding Chinese nuclear developments based on American technology, see the report of the Select Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives (Cox Committee), *U.S. National Security and Military Commercial Concerns with the Peoples Republic of China*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, May 1999.
4. Agreed Framework for resolving North Korean Nuclear issue, signed 21 October 1994 by representatives of the united States and the democratic People's Republic of Korea..
5. General K. Sundarji, former Indian Army Chief of Staff, reportedly endorsed missiles and weapons of mass destruction for establishing a "minimum deterrent" to discourage "U.S. bullying" and "possible racist aggression from the West." Quoted in the Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report: Near East and South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-199), 14 October 1992.
6. Commission to Assess the Organization of the Federal Government to Combat the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (Deutch-Specter Commission), *Combating Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 14 July 1999, Executive Summary.
7. Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States (Rumsfeld Commission), *Report of the Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 15 July 1998, Executive Summary.