

FORWARD by Richard Betts

Proliferation of dangerous weapons has been a problem for American foreign policy for many years, at least since the first and worst case of proliferation—the Soviet acquisition of nuclear capability in 1949. For most of the time, however, the issue was never near the top of the policy agenda. Either it appeared to be just an element of the overall cold war competition, in which policymakers were preoccupied with other threats, or it seemed to be disjoined from that competition and was a lower priority for that reason.

The first cycle of concern, peaking in the 1960s, was mainly about the diffusion of nuclear capability within the two blocs of the East-West conflict. France and China, not small third world countries, were the proliferants that caused the most distress. Worried speculation about potential proliferants centered on developed countries such as the Federal Republic of Germany and Japan. The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) was in large part a response to that perceived danger.

The second cycle occurred in the 1970s, during the period both of détente between the superpowers and the energy crisis. Concern then focused primarily on the danger that the spread of nuclear power for generating electricity in underdeveloped countries would lead to the spread of capabilities for building weapons to governments that would otherwise be unable to do so. In contrast to those countries that were the main source of attention in the 1960s, these nations were not tightly integrated in the cold war alliance systems.

Throughout these earlier periods of concern, however, events usually moved more slowly than anticipated. Surprisingly few countries that had capabilities or incentives for acquiring independent capabilities for mass destruction actually did so. Many countries seemed to realize that trying to get such weapons could bring more trouble than they were worth.

In the 1990s, we are now in the third cycle. Although it is possible that we might continue to be happily surprised by a modest pace of proliferation, there are significant reasons to see the problem in a different light this time around. One difference is technological: ongoing modernization throughout the world steadily diffuses expertise in or access to science, engineering, information systems, and sources of supply. Barriers to proliferation erode slowly and are still far from insignificant, but over time the erosion becomes telling.

The biggest difference, however, is political: the end of the cold war, which solved old security problems in some places but created new ones in others. It also produced messy uncertainties like the huge “loose nukes” problem of keeping the vast pool of weapons, materials, and trained scientists in the former Soviet Union under control. Not least of all, it relieved American strategists of their main preoccupation—the worldwide struggle with Soviet power—thus allowing them to make proliferation a much higher priority on the security agenda.

In terms of immediate national security, it is not hard to argue now that proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons is the top priority problem for the United States. No superpower or great power currently threatens important US interests. This happy situation may change in the future, but until then, the threats to American interests are mainly peripheral or indirect. Significant threats to home territory—the core issue for any national security policy—are now most likely from weapons of mass destruction smuggled in by radicals who see the United States as their enemy. No other country’s conventional military forces are currently strong enough or properly positioned to pose the danger of defeat to US conventional forces in a confrontation abroad. The one thing that could do so would be a nuclear or biological capability. Overall, Americans have good reason to feel more secure than they did during the cold war. At the same time, they also have good reason to see the spread of weapons of mass destruction as the principal security problem they face at present.

The volume that follows calls attention to many of the novel issues that mark the current phase of concern, such as proliferation of modern systems apart from nuclear weapons themselves (for example, cruise missiles or space reconnaissance) that might enhance the threats posed by such weapons. Rather than spreading itself thin and surveying everything, as so many books on this subject do, it also focuses in depth on the most important current cases—North Korea and Iran.

The collection also offers new interpretations about long-standing questions, such as the evolution and function of the NPT. It addresses the various issues in particularly lively and useful ways, with punch and

directness, but without the polemical passion that characterized much campaigning against proliferation in the past. For example, rather than presenting a single brief on the North Korean nuclear threat, the book offers contrasting assessments by Walter Slocombe, Victor Gilinsky, and Paul Wolfowitz. On satellite export controls, it features a debate between Brian Dailey and Edward McGaffigan.

There is none of the arid detachment here that marks some academic writing on the subject. The book focuses on the question in terms of issues and implications for US policy—not slippery global perspectives. In some respects, such as the effects of weapons of mass destruction that can transcend borders (radioactive fallout, epidemics from biological warfare, ecological damage, and so forth), proliferation is indeed a collective global problem. In many other respects, however, it is a conceptual mistake to think of the problem primarily as undifferentiated and worldwide.

Profound effects on the global ecosystem are less likely from the first post-Nagasaki use of nuclear weapons and become more probable only when the parties using them have large numbers to unleash. For a long time, the main danger will be the use of limited numbers of low-yield weapons by weak states against each other. If the weapons are a threat in those terms, they will be a specific rather than a generalized threat—a threat because they might blow up in some country in particular. Some countries are more likely to suffer than others. Moreover, although the spread of awesome weapons may threaten many countries, it will also benefit others (such as those who consider their security or political leverage enhanced by possessing them). The effects of proliferation, in short, will not be uniform. That, in turn, underlines the point that strategies for combatting proliferation will have to be varied and attuned to particular cases.

Although more realistic and hardheaded in its approach than much antiproliferation literature of earlier times, this volume does not indulge in the unorthodox and blithe optimism about the consequences of proliferation that became fashionable in the past decade among some theorists, such as Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer. The book is forthrightly in the mainstream of opposition to proliferation and the search for practical, policy-relevant approaches to dealing with it. That combination of strategic realism and policy orientation is the right one—and rare enough that it highlights the usefulness of this collection.

Proliferation is a new priority but an old issue. Some strategists are discovering it for the first time. So it is not surprising that to some seasoned observers, much current literature on the subject seems to reinvent the wheel. This book does not. Readers interested in fresh approaches to the problem that could, at any time, turn into the principal crisis facing American foreign policy will do well to turn to this volume.

Richard K. Betts
New York, New York
January 1996