

Nuclear 1914: The Next Big Worry

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The next use of nuclear weapons, if followed quickly by others, is nothing the United States or its closest friends could suffer lightly. Like Rome after it was repeatedly pillaged, Washington, even if not directly attacked, would find its authority immediately undermined. Powerless to stop nuclear attacks after having so long warned against them, the U.S. could soon find itself under assault. Assuming nuclear use begets nuclear use, what would follow could be the next dark ages.

An alternative (and sunnier) future would be one in which the U.S. and its allies can and do severely limit the use of nuclear weapons. The question is: What would this require? At a minimum, enough nations falling into line, either voluntarily or otherwise, to keep nuclear attacks at bay.

This is hardly a sure thing. Most nuclear-capable states are reluctant to provide information on their nuclear inventories, activities, and facilities, which is necessary to check nuclear proliferation or terrorism. As more states acquire nuclear weapons or become increasingly ready to do so, the inclination to share such facts is only likely to decline. Nuclear-capable states are unlikely to open up if it implicates them in proliferation or undermines their option to acquire nuclear weapons in the future.

The news of the last many months is depressingly instructive in this regard. More than a year after the first revelations about Iran's uranium enrichment program were made public, the U.S. and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) are still trying to drag information about A. Q. Khan's nuclear activities from the Pakistani government. First, Islamabad denied that any Pakistani ever shared nuclear technology with anyone. Then, after Iranian officials fingered Pakistan, the Pakistani government admitted that Dr. Khan had made some sales to Tehran. Then it was revealed that Dr. Khan and his subordinates sold plans, equipment, and bomb designs to Libya. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf had Dr. Khan arrested—but just as suddenly decided to grant the Pakistani scientist a pardon, praising him as a national hero. The U.S. and the IAEA are still anxiously trying to learn what exactly Dr. Khan sold and to whom. But so far, the Pakistani government has refused to allow either the U.S. or the IAEA to interview Dr. Khan directly.

It is not just Iran and Libya that benefited from Pakistani nuclear exports: Several other countries, including North Korea, Egypt, and perhaps even Brazil have received them as well. Brazil's case is unclear because its navy has put off allowing inspectors full access to the country's enrichment plant for nearly a year, for fear that IAEA officials might pinpoint the foreign sources of their imported enrichment equipment. Pakistan could be of immense help in this situation. But so far, it has done the bare minimum to clarify matters.

How successful might we be, then, in securing nuclear materials and facilities against terrorist theft or in tracking down nuclear terrorists in a world with more Pakistans and Brazils? If the past year of news is prologue, our prospects do not look good.

An Unsteady Balance

More speculative but every bit as chilling is how such nations might use their own nuclear capabilities against one another. Here, too, there is cause to worry. A key reason why is the amount of diplomatic entropy since the collapse of the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, there was a clear subordination of nations to one or another of the two superpowers' strong alliance systems. More important, the aim of the alliance in the West was to check or contain the efforts of the Warsaw Pact. The net effect was relative peace with only small wars. This system no longer exists.

Instead, we now have one superpower, the United States, with a growing but relatively weak alliance system being challenged by an increasing number of nuclear or nuclear-weapons-ready states. So far, the U.S. has tried to cope with the emergence of these independent nuclear powers by making them “strategic partners” (e.g., India and Russia) or “non-NATO allies” (e.g., Israel and Pakistan); or by fudging if a nation actually has attained full nuclear status (e.g., North Korea). There are limits, however, to what this approach can accomplish.

Such a weak alliance system, with its expanding set of loose affiliations, risks becoming analogous to the international system that failed to contain offensive actions prior to the First World War. Of course, unlike 1914, there is no power today that can rival the projection of U.S. conventional forces anywhere on the globe. But in a world with an increasing number of nuclear or nuclear-ready states, this may not matter. In such a world, the actions of just one or two states could check U.S. influence or ignite a war Washington could have difficulty winning.

Consider Taiwan. It tried to acquire nuclear weapons several decades ago. Now, with China constantly increasing its conventional missile and amphibious strength across the Taiwan Strait, Taipei could easily have cause to try to acquire nuclear weapons again. If it were to try, China would surely demand that the U.S. get Taiwan to cease and desist and threaten invasion if Taiwan did not. Taipei would probably stand down—but undoubtedly would try to condition its denuclearization on having the U.S. produce some clear signal of security support. Would the U.S. blink or back Taiwan? If it expressed support for Taiwan’s existence (perhaps with a forward U.S. naval deployment) and thereby defused Taiwan’s nuclear proliferation moves, could the U.S. cope with what undoubtedly would be a sharp, threatening response from Beijing? The point of this hypothetical is that even the slightest move by Taiwan to acquire nuclear weapons could overwhelm the strategic relationships Washington has built with China and other Asian nations over the last half-century to head off such wars.

Another case of increasing interest is that of India and Pakistan. The U.S. recently made Pakistan a non-NATO ally and is in the midst of making India a strategic partner. Washington’s professed aim is to bolster stability between these two nations. But how would the U.S. view Pakistan if another attempt on President Musharraf’s life proved successful and Pakistan fell under Taliban control? At that point, a number of things would likely occur. Immediately, the political stock of the nation’s current hero, Dr. Khan, would rise; indeed, there has already been talk about him succeeding Musharraf under such circumstances. If Dr. Khan didn’t succeed Musharraf, someone sympathetic to Dr. Khan surely would. In any case, a Talibanized Pakistan could be counted on to work more closely with its ideological allies in the front lines in Kashmir against India and with Saudi Arabia. Riyadh—a financial backer of Pakistan’s nuclear activities—is now investigating how it might acquire nuclear weapons in the likely case that Iran continues on its current nuclear course. Meanwhile, senior Pakistani military officials sympathetic to the Taliban have already suggested that Pakistan could legally base some of its nuclear warheads on Saudi soil as long as they remained under Pakistani control; a Taliban-dominated Pakistan might well implement this idea in order to achieve strategic depth for any future conventional conflict with India. If a Talibanized Pakistan ignited another war with India, China would diplomatically side with Pakistan, and the U.S. would side with its strategic friend India. This would appear to create a balance. But if Pakistan thought it could count on Saudi missiles armed with Pakistani warheads to counter any Indian aggression, would Islamabad recognize this balance and be deterred? Again, the point of this hypothetical is that a little nuclear proliferation—in this case, from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia—could undo a considerable amount of American diplomacy and might well tip the balance toward dragging Washington into war.

This set of observations suggests that nuclear terrorism, *per se*, may no longer be our biggest worry. Instead, the greater danger would be that with more nuclear and nuclear-ready states, the coalitions needed to check or undo nuclear terrorist efforts will be too few to be effective and the willingness of countries to toy with mortal strategic combat too great for existing efforts to keep them in check.

States' insufficient interest in fighting nuclear terrorism and their interest in strategic combat, moreover, may be mutually reinforcing. As states fail to do what's needed to stem nuclear terror, more will sense the weakness of large powers and thus be more inclined to risk nuclear brinkmanship themselves. This, in turn, would tend to reduce the willingness of nuclear-capable states to open up their own nuclear activities in order to ferret out possible terrorist schemes or proliferation networks.

Can Proliferation Be Stopped?

This is not good news, but it's hardly inevitable. Three things, in particular, could improve matters greatly.

First, much more can be done to reduce the production and accessibility of weapons-usable plutonium and uranium. Terrorists seeking to explode a nuclear device needn't acquire very much material: The crudest nuclear mechanism would only require 60 kilograms of highly enriched uranium, divided into two pieces, with one dropped upon the other from a height of as little as ten feet. A plutonium bomb would require more sophistication, but Dr. Khan has made such devices easier to build by making a workable engineering design much more widely available. Even if such bombs had only a one-kiloton yield—a fraction of the explosive power of the bombs used on Japan in World War II—the effects on a densely populated city would be terrible. A recent analysis of such an attack by the Natural Resources Defense Council, in which a one-kiloton bomb was used in San Francisco, resulted in estimates that 26,000 people would be killed and another 10,000 would be injured—casualties an order of magnitude greater than the deaths on September 11.

In the United States and Russia alone, there are tens of thousands of bombs-worth of highly enriched uranium and weapons-grade plutonium stored as surplus. Meanwhile, nearly 40,000 weapons-worth of weapons-usable civilian plutonium is being stored in Europe, India, and Japan. As President Bush has pointed out, *none* of this material or the means to make it is necessary to produce nuclear energy, and *all* of it can bring nations within days of having nuclear weapons of their own. Fortunately, safer nuclear fuels, unsuitable for weapons, are readily available; an effort to use them is urgently needed and imminently doable.

Second, we must be willing to act on first indications and early intelligence. Consider the A. Q. Khan network. We knew about some of the key actors there, not weeks ago, not years ago, but *decades* ago. We did not pursue what we knew. Many of the same names that are part of the present proliferation problem appeared in the 1981 book *The Islamic Bomb*—the first names have sometimes changed, but the last names remain the same, as one generation has passed on the business to the next. For more than two decades, those who were engaged in helping Pakistan secure the bomb, and who worked with Dr. Khan to help him distribute this knowledge, were not questioned about their activities. Given the ease with which a nuclear weapon can now be made—requiring less time, money, and manpower than ever before—we no longer have the luxury of waiting to act.

Third, more should be done to raise the political and economic costs of acquiring nuclear arms or coming within weeks of doing so. The most important thing is to start reading the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty properly. It calls for the sharing of nuclear technology, but only in conformity with the treaty's prohibitions against doing anything to encourage or assist nonweapons states in getting nuclear weapons. President Bush is one of the very few American presidents (the others being Presidents Ford and Carter) to try to spell out what "in conformity" means.

On February 11, 2004, the president laid out seven worthy proposals that would restrict or reduce the number of nations making weapons-usable plutonium or uranium. These proposals deserve greater support both within the U.S. and internationally. They include: taking direct action against proliferation networks using the same techniques we use to fight terrorism; strengthening the laws and international controls that govern proliferation; expanding efforts to keep dangerous materials out of the wrong hands; preventing countries like North Korea and Iran from producing weapons-grade nuclear material while pretending to work only on

peaceful, civilian nuclear energy programs; and taking measures to make the IAEA stronger, more legitimate, and more decisive.

Several additional steps should be taken to sustain the president's proposals. First, we should view additional large civilian nuclear projects—including nuclear power and desalinization plants, large research reactors, and regional fuel-cycle centers—as illegitimate under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty if they are not privately financed or approved after an open international bidding process against less risky alternatives. This would not only spotlight countries, like Iran, that refused to allow non-nuclear energy alternatives to compete openly to supply their electrical power needs. It would also discourage the U.S. and allied governments from building large nuclear commercialization projects and subsidizing nuclear power with billions of dollars, as was proposed in last year's energy bill.

Second, we should get as many declared nuclear weapons states as possible formally to agree not to redeploy nuclear weapons onto any other state's soil in peacetime and not to tolerate any other nation's attempt to do so. This could help thwart rumored schemes to have Pakistan legally transfer nuclear weapons under its control to Saudi Arabia, or North Korea's threat to transfer nuclear weapons to other states. It also could help establish restraints over nuclear weapons states that have not signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (India, Pakistan, and Israel) and allow the United States to get credit for what it has already begun to do—withdraw its unnecessary overseas basing of obsolete tactical nuclear weapons.

Finally, we should encourage the United Nations to adopt a set of country-neutral rules against any nation that the IAEA and the United Nations Security Council do not clearly find in full compliance with the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. Rather than wait for either of these bodies to find a specific country in clear violation of the treaty and then impose particular sanctions—something these bodies are increasingly loath to do—the U.S. and its allies should spell out in advance the minimal steps to be taken against any country not clearly in full compliance. This recommendation would reverse the present dynamic, by making it the default position of the IAEA and the Security Council to encourage complying members to take action against states that defy the rules.

A New Pillar

These additional measures may seem ambitious. But they build on what President Bush and our allies have been doing—namely, working to establish a third major security pillar to international relations. Two pillars dominated the last four centuries of international politics. The first pillar is freedom of commerce, which gave rise to a common international usage against piracy. The second pillar is the humane treatment of people, which produced an international common usage against slave-trading. These pillars have justified a significant number of wars and alliances, and have powerfully shaped modern international relations.

What remains to be done, and urgently, is to create a third pillar pertaining to the further spread of strategic arms, particularly nuclear weapons. Just as piracy and slave-trading can only operate outside the protection of international law, so must the illicit trade of nuclear weapons-related goods be considered out of bounds. Ultimately, this will entail a major reorientation of international affairs.

This task won't be easy. The alternative to moving in this direction, though, is far grimmer—slipping into the kind of chaos that prevailed in 1914, when a single anarchist's bullet set off a series of strategic wars that nearly snuffed out Western civilization. With nuclear weapons all around or on the ready, this is hardly a condition that anyone, even the strongest of nations, can sanely entertain.

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