

**“AT ALL COSTS”:  
THE DESTRUCTIVE CONSEQUENCES OF ANTI-PROLIFERATION POLICY**

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In her campaign for president in 2008, Hillary Clinton, now U.S. Secretary of State, insisted that Iran must be kept from obtaining a nuclear weapon “at all costs.” However, it really doesn’t matter whether the bomb proliferates or not: proliferation has been of little consequence (except on agonies, obsessions, rhetoric, posturing, and spending), and no country that has possessed the weapons had found them particularly useful or beneficial nor have those who abandoned them suffered loss. This helps explain why alarmists have been wrong for decades about the pace of nuclear proliferation. Dozens of technologically-capable countries have considered obtaining nuclear arsenals, but very few have done so, and a chief reason seems to be that they have found them to be a foolish and wasteful expenditure. However, under the obsessive sway of worst case scenario fantasies, alarmed efforts to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons—particularly to Iraq and North Korea—have proved to be exceedingly costly, leading to more death than the explosions on Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. Nuclear proliferation, while not necessarily desirable, is unlikely to accelerate or prove to be a major danger, and one way to reduce the likelihood that errant regimes will seek nuclear arsenals is to stop threatening them constantly. In the end, it is incumbent upon those who advocate a Pearl Harbor-like attack on Iran to demonstrate that the rather innocuous history of nuclear proliferation over the last two-thirds of a century is irrelevant and that the regime there is daffier than the one in North Korea, less stable than the one in Pakistan, and more threatening than the ultimate rogue, China in 1964.

Over the decades, analysts of nuclear proliferation have separated themselves, or have been separated by others, into two camps.<sup>1</sup>

The alarmists or pessimists constitute the vast majority, occupying a prominent position in what Bernard Brodie once called "the cult of the ominous."<sup>2</sup> They argue that proliferation is a dire development that must be halted as a supreme policy priority. Of late alarmism has been sent into high relief by the apparent efforts by Iran to move toward a nuclear bomb capacity. It was in the campaign of 2008, that candidate Barack Obama repeatedly announced that he would "do everything in my power to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon—everything," and candidate Hillary Clinton insisted that Iran must be kept from obtaining a nuclear weapon "at all costs."<sup>3</sup> Neither bothered to tally what "everything" might entail and what the costs might be, and both continue to make the same kind of pronouncements now that they have become in charge of US foreign policy.

The other camp, quite tiny, consists of proliferation optimists who maintain that, on balance, a certain amount of proliferation might actually enhance international stability.

However, there is another possible approach to the proliferation issue that might be called irrelevantist. People in this near-empty camp stress two considerations:

First, it really doesn't bloody well *matter* whether the bomb proliferates or not: proliferation has been of little consequence (except on agonies, obsessions, rhetoric, posturing, and spending), and no country that has possessed the weapons has found them particularly useful or beneficial nor have those who abandoned them suffered loss.

Second, alarmed efforts to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons have proved to be exceedingly costly, leading to the deaths of more people than perished at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.

This paper evaluates these two considerations and, in that context, it then assesses the Iran case and the potentially self-destructive policies of Israel.

### **The incentives for, and the prospects of, proliferation**

Although we have now suffered through two-thirds of a century characterized by alarmism about the disasters inherent in nuclear proliferation, the substantive consequences of proliferation have been quite limited. Although the weapons have certainly generated obsession and have greatly affected military spending, diplomatic posturing, and ingenious theorizing, they have had little substantial impact on history since 1945.

#### **Value**

For the most part, the few countries to which the weapons have proliferated have found them a

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<sup>1</sup> Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed, Second Edition (New York: Norton, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Brodie, Escalation and the Nuclear Option (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 93.

<sup>3</sup> CNN, June 6, 2007.

notable waste of time, money, effort, and scientific talent. They have quietly kept them in storage, and haven't even found much benefit in rattling them from time to time.

Moreover, the weapons have not proved to be crucial status symbols. As Robert Jervis has observed, "India, China, and Israel may have decreased the chance of direct attack by developing nuclear weapons, but it is hard to argue that they have increased their general prestige or influence."<sup>4</sup> And, as Jennifer Mackby and Walter Slocombe note,

Undoubtedly some countries have pursued nuclear weapons more for status than for security. However, Germany, like its erstwhile Axis ally, Japan, has become powerful because of its economic might rather than its military might, and its renunciation of nuclear weapons may even have reinforced its prestige. It has even managed to achieve its principal international objective—reunification—without becoming a nuclear state.<sup>5</sup>

It is also difficult to see how nuclear weapons benefited their possessors in specific military ventures. Israel's presumed nuclear weapons did not restrain the Arabs from attacking in 1973, nor did Britain's prevent Argentina's seizure of the Falklands in 1982. Similarly, the tens of thousands of nuclear weapons in the arsenals of the enveloping allied forces did not cause Saddam Hussein to order his occupying forces out of Kuwait in 1990. Nor did possession of the bomb benefit America in Korea or Vietnam, France in Algeria, or the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. When planners have considered their use, there never seem to have been militarily compelling—or even minimally sensible—reasons to use the weapons, particularly because of an inability to identify suitable targets or ones that could not be attacked about as effectively by conventional munitions.<sup>6</sup>

Proliferation alarmists often maintain that nuclear weapons furnish a country with the capacity to "dominate" its area or engage in "nuclear diplomacy." But in the main, nuclear threats since 1945 have either been ignored or met with countervailing opposition, not with timorous acquiescence.

## **Deterrence**

Although there are conceivable conditions under which nuclear weapons could serve a deterrent function, it is questionable whether they have yet ever done so. In particular, it is far from clear that nuclear weapons are what kept the Cold War from becoming a hot one.

The people who have been in charge of world affairs since World War II have been the same people or the intellectual heirs of the people who tried assiduously, frantically, desperately, and, as it turned out, pathetically, to prevent World War II, and when, despite their best efforts, world war was forced upon them, they found the experience to be incredibly horrible, just as they had anticipated. On the face of it, to expect these countries somehow to allow themselves to tumble into anything resembling a repetition of that experience—whether embellished with nuclear weapons or not—seems almost bizarre. The people running world politics since 1945 have had plenty of disagreements, but they have not been so

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 4. For an assessment of this issue, see Jacques E. C. Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 211-12.

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Mackby and Walter Slocombe, "Germany: A Model Case, A Historical Imperative," in Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn, and Mitchell B. Reiss, eds., *The Nuclear Tipping Point: Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), p. 210.

<sup>6</sup> For an extended discussion, see John Mueller, *Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al-Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), especially chs. 4 and 5.

obtuse, depraved, flaky, or desperate as to need visions of mushroom clouds to conclude that another catastrophic world war, nuclear or nonnuclear, win or lose, could be distinctly unpleasant.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, each leak from the archives suggests that the Soviet Union never seriously considered any sort of direct military aggression against the United States or Europe. Thus Robert Jervis: "The Soviet archives have yet to reveal any serious plans for unprovoked aggression against Western Europe, not to mention a first strike against the United States." Vojtech Mastny: "The strategy of nuclear deterrence [was] irrelevant to deterring a major war that the enemy did not wish to launch in the first place....All Warsaw Pact scenarios presumed a war started by NATO." Stephen Ambrose: "At no time did the Red Army contemplate, much less plan for, an offensive against West Europe." And George Kennan: "I have never believed that they have seen it as in their interests to overrun Western Europe militarily, or that they would have launched an attack on that region generally even if the so-called nuclear deterrent had not existed."<sup>8</sup>

As Kennan suggests, given the Soviets' global game plan stressing revolutionary upheaval and given their experience with two disastrous world wars, another such experience scarcely made any sense whatever. That is, there was nothing to deter.

## Pace

These considerations help explain why alarmists have been wrong for decades about the pace of nuclear proliferation. Dozens of technologically-capable countries have considered obtaining nuclear arsenals, but very few have done so, and a chief reason seems to be that they have found them to be a foolish and wasteful expenditure. Indeed, as Jacques Hymans has pointed out, even the supposedly optimistic forecasts about nuclear dispersion have proven to be too pessimistic.<sup>9</sup>

As part of this, it was assumed that nuclear weapons would continue to be important status—or virility—symbols and therefore that all advanced countries would want to have them in order to show how "powerful" they were. Thus Robert Gilpin concluded that "the possession of nuclear weapons largely determines a nation's rank in the hierarchy of international prestige."<sup>10</sup> In Gilpinian tradition, some analysts who describe themselves as "realists" have insisted for years that Germany and Japan must soon surely come to their senses and quest after nuclear weapons.<sup>11</sup>

Such punditry has gone astray in part because observers like Gilpin insisted on extrapolating from

<sup>7</sup> John Mueller, Quiet Cataclysm (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), ch. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Jervis, "Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?" Journal of Cold War Studies 3 (Winter 2001), p. 59. Vojtech Mastny, "Introduction," in Vojtech Mastny, Sven G. Holtmark, and Andreas Wenger (eds.), War Plans and Alliances in the Cold War: Threat Perceptions in the East and West (London and New York: Routledge, 2006). Stephen E. Ambrose, 1990. "Secrets of the Cold War," New York Times, December 27, 1990. George F. Kennan, "Containment Then and Now," Foreign Affairs 65 (Spring 1987), pp. 888-889. See also Robert H. Johnson, Improbable Dangers: U.S. Conceptions of Threat in the Cold War and After (St. Martins, 1994), p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Hymans, Psychology, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics (New York: Cambridge University Press 1981), p. 215.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Layne contended in 1993 that Japan by natural impulse must soon come to yearn for nuclear weapons: "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," International Security 17 (Spring 1993), p. 37. Three years earlier John Mearsheimer argued that "Germany will feel insecure without nuclear weapons": "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War," International Security 15 (Summer 1990), p. 38. Meanwhile, the Japanese and the Germans themselves continue uncooperatively to seem substantially uninterested. See Mackby and Slocombe, "Germany: A Model Case"; Kurt M. Campbell and Tsuyoshi Sunohara, "Japan: Thinking the Unthinkable," in Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn, and Mitchell B. Reiss, eds., The Nuclear Tipping Point: Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), pp. 218-253.

the wrong cases. A more pertinent prototype would have been Canada, a country that could easily have had nuclear weapons by the 1960s, but declined to make the effort.<sup>12</sup> In fact, over the decades a huge number of countries capable of developing nuclear weapons have neglected even seriously to consider the opportunity—for example, Canada, Norway, and Italy—while Brazil, Argentina, South Korea, Libya, and Taiwan have backed away from or reversed nuclear weapons programs, and South Africa, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan have actually surrendered or dismantled existing nuclear arsenals.<sup>13</sup>

Some of this is no doubt due to the hostility of the nuclear nations, but even without this, the Canadian case seems to have proven to have rather general relevance. As Stephen Meyer has shown, there is no “technological imperative” for countries to obtain nuclear weapons once they have achieved the technical capacity to do so.<sup>14</sup> Insofar as most leaders of most countries have considered acquiring the weapons, they came, like Canada, to appreciate several defects: the weapons are dangerous, distasteful, costly, and likely to rile the neighbors. If one values economic growth and prosperity above all, the sensible thing seems to be to avoid the weapons unless they seem vital for security.<sup>15</sup>

### **The costs of alarmist nonproliferation policies**

Nuclear weapons seem, then, have done little to determine actual historical events, and they have not been necessary to deter a major war either during or after the Cold War—at most, they have been extra insurance against unlikely calamity. The danger they present has, however, been noticed, indeed obsessed over, and they have had a tremendous influence on our agonies since 1945.<sup>16</sup> Among the consequences has been an obsessive effort to prevent or channel nuclear proliferation, and it is this effort, not the proliferation itself, that has inflicted severe costs.

In this tradition, Graham Allison argues in influential book, Nuclear Terrorism, that “no new nuclear weapons states” should be a prime foreign policy principle, and he goes on to pronounce it to be no less than a “supreme priority” that North Korea be stopped from joining the nuclear club.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Joseph Cirincione labels nonproliferation “our number one national-security priority.”<sup>18</sup> While there is nothing wrong with making nonproliferation a high priority, it ought to be topped with a somewhat higher one: Not killing hundreds of thousands of people in the service of worst case scenario imaginings. And, in fact, the obsessive bipartisan quest to control nuclear proliferation—particularly since the end of the Cold War—has sometimes inflicted major costs on innocent people.

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the relevance of the Canadian case, concluding from it that the issue of nuclear proliferation—then often known as the “Nth country problem”—was approaching “a finite solution,” see John Mueller, “Incentives for Restraint: Canada as a Nonnuclear Power,” Orbis 11 (Fall 1967), pp. 864-84. For some prescient early commentary on this, see Richard N. Rosecrance, “International Stability and Nuclear Diffusion,” in Richard N. Rosecrance (ed.), The Dispersion of Nuclear Weapons: Strategy and Politics (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), pp. 293-314.

<sup>13</sup> William M. Arkin, “The continuing misuses of fear,” Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, September/October 2006, p. 45. Mitchell Reiss, Bridled Ambition: Why Countries Constrain Their Nuclear Capabilities (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995). T.V. Paul, Power versus Prudence: Why Nations Forgo Nuclear Weapons (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Stephen M. Meyer, The Dynamics of Nuclear Proliferation (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984). See also Hymans, Psychology, pp. 2-12.

<sup>15</sup> On this point, see also Hymans, Psychology.

<sup>16</sup> For an extended development of this theme, see Mueller, Atomic Obsession, especially ch. 5. For a review of the book that missed the point, see Campbell Craig, “Book Review: Atomic Obsession,” Critical Studies in Terrorism 4 (April 2011), 115-17.

<sup>17</sup> Graham Allison, Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe (New York: Times Books, 2004), ch. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Cirincione, “Cassandra’s Conundrum,” National Interest, Nov./Dec. 2007, p. 15.

## Iraq

The war in Iraq, with deaths that may run well over a hundred of thousand—greater than those inflicted at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined—is a key case in point. It was almost entirely sold as a venture required to keep Saddam Hussein's pathetic regime rogue state from developing nuclear and other presumably threatening weapons and to prevent him from palming off some of these to eager and congenial terrorists. It is far from clear what Saddam Hussein, presiding over a deeply resentful population and an unreliable army (fearing overthrow, he was wary about issuing it bullets), could have done with a tiny number of bombs against his neighbors and their massively armed well-wishers other than seeking to stoke his ego and to deter real or imagined threats. He was, then, fully containable and deterrable.<sup>19</sup>

Nonetheless, in his influential 2002 book, The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq, Kenneth Pollack continually cited the dangers of what would happen if Saddam were to acquire nuclear weapons. He fully recognized the costs of the war he advocated, costs that he felt might cause thousands of deaths and run into the tens of billions of dollars.<sup>20</sup> But war would be worth this price, concluded Pollack, because with nuclear weapons, Saddam would become the "hegemon" in the area, allowing him to control global oil supplies. Indeed "the whole point" of a war would be to "prevent Saddam from acquiring nuclear weapons."<sup>21</sup> The nuclear theme was repeatedly applied by the administration in the runup to the war, most famously, perhaps, in National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice's dire warning about waiting to have firm evidence before launching a war: "We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud." And as the Defense Department's Paul Wolfowitz has pointed out, nuclear weapons, or at any rate weapons of mass destruction, was the "core reason" for the war.<sup>22</sup>

For their part, Democrats have derided the war as "unnecessary," but the bulk of them only came to that conclusion after the United States was unable to find either weapons or weapons programs in Iraq. Many of them have made it clear they would support putatively preemptive (actually, preventive) military action and its attendant bloodshed if the intelligence about Saddam's programs had been accurate.<sup>23</sup>

However, the devastation of Iraq in the service of limiting proliferation did not begin with the war in 2003. For the previous thirteen years, that country had suffered under economic sanctions visited upon it by both Democratic and Republican administrations that were designed to force Saddam from office (and, effectively, from life since he had no viable sanctuary elsewhere) and to keep the country from developing weapons, particularly nuclear ones. The goals certainly had their admirable side, but the sanctions proved to be a necessary cause, as multiple studies have concluded, of hundreds of thousands of

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<sup>19</sup> See Mueller, Atomic Obsession, p. 133.

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack, The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq (New York: Random House, 2003), p. xiv. Added to this, Pollack estimated, would be another \$5 to \$10 billion over the first three years for rebuilding (p. 397).

<sup>21</sup> Pollack, Threatening Storm, pp. 335, 413, 418.

<sup>22</sup> <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0305/30/se.08.html> Saddam Hussein's nuclear weapons potential was also used by the George H. W. Bush administration as an argument to gain support for going to war against Iraq in 1991 after it was discovered that the nuclear argument polled well. John Mueller, Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 118. Contrary to earlier reports that the Iraqis were five to ten years from making a bomb, said the administration, they might be able to do so within one year. For the argument that Iraq was very far from having a workable bomb in 1991, see Jacques E. C. Hymans, Achieving Nuclear Ambitions: Scientists, Politicians and Proliferation (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> On this issue, see also Arkin, "Continuing misuses of fear."

deaths in the country, most of them children under the age of five—the most innocent of civilians.<sup>24</sup>

### North Korea

The costly alarmist perspective on atomic proliferation is also evident in policies advocated by Allison and many others toward North Korea. Should diplomacy fail, Allison proposed in 2004, a Pearl Harbor-like attack should be launched even though potential targets had been dispersed and disguised and even though a resulting war might kill tens of thousands in the South.<sup>25</sup>

Members of the Bush administration, perhaps because they had become immersed in their own anti-proliferation war in Iraq, were able to contain their enthusiasm for accepting Allison's urgent advice, and North Korea has since become something of a nuclear weapons state. In 2004 Allison had sternly insisted that such an outcome would be "gross negligence" and would foster "a transformation in the international security order no great power would wittingly accept." We are now in position, then, to see if his alarmist predictions have come true: a North Korean bomb, he declared, would "unleash a proliferation chain reaction, with South Korea and Japan building their own weapons by the end of the decade" (that is by 2009), with Taiwan "seriously considering following suit despite the fact that this would risk war with China," and with North Korea potentially "becoming the Nukes R' Us for terrorists."<sup>26</sup>

The same mentality was shown by decision-makers in the Clinton administration in 1994. The United States never actually sent troops into action in its confrontation with North Korea at that time, but it certainly edged threateningly in that direction when a US National Intelligence Estimate concluded that there was "a better than even" chance that North Korea had the makings of a small nuclear bomb. This conclusion was hotly contested by other American analysts and was later "reassessed" by intelligence agencies and found possibly to have been overstated. In addition, even if North Korea had the "makings" in 1994, skeptics pointed out, it still had several key hurdles to overcome in order to develop a deliverable weapon.<sup>27</sup>

Nonetheless, the Clinton administration was apparently prepared to go to war with the miserable North Korean regime to prevent or to halt its nuclear development.<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, it moved to impose deep economic sanctions to make the isolated country even poorer (insofar as that was possible), a

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Garfield, Morbidity and Mortality Among Iraqi Children from 1990 to 1998 (South Bend, IN: Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame, 1999). John Mueller and Karl Mueller, "The Methodology of Mass Destruction: Assessing Threats in the New World Order," Journal of Strategic Studies 23(1) March 2000, pp. 163-87. Matt Welch, "The Politics of Dead Children," Reason, March 2, 2002, pp. 53-58. Pollack, Threatening Storm, pp. 138-39. Mohamed M. Ali, John Blacker, and Gareth Jones, "Annual mortality rates and excess deaths of children under five in Iraq, 1991-1998," Population Studies 57 (2003), pp. 217-26. Andrew Cockburn and Patrick Cockburn, Out of the Ashes: The Resurrection of Saddam Hussein (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), ch. 5. For the argument that high estimates of a half-million or more are likely exaggerated due in particular to regime manipulation, see Michael Spagat, "Truth and death in Iraq under sanctions," Significance, September 2010, 116-20.

<sup>25</sup> Allison, Nuclear Terrorism, pp. 165-71.

<sup>26</sup> Allison, Nuclear Terrorism, p. 166. In 1995 Allison had suggested that "we have every reason to anticipate acts of nuclear terrorism against American targets before this decade is out." Graham Allison, "Must We Wait for the Nuclear Morning After?" Washington Post, April 30, 1995.

<sup>27</sup> Don Oberdorfer, The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 307. Selig S. Harrison, Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and U.S. Disengagement (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 213.

<sup>28</sup> Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, pp. 308, 316. On this issue, see also James Fallows, "The Panic Gap: Reactions to North Korea's Bomb," National Interest, Winter 1994/95, pp. 40-45.

measure which garnered no support even from neighboring Russia, China, and Japan.<sup>29</sup> It also moved to engage in a major military buildup in the area. So apocalyptic (or simply paranoid) was the North Korean regime about these two developments that some important figures think it might have gone to war on a preemptive basis if the measures had been carried out.<sup>30</sup> A full-scale war on the peninsula, estimated the Pentagon, not perhaps without its own sense of apocalypse, could kill 1,000,000 people including 80,000 to 100,000 Americans, cost over \$100 billion, and do economic destruction on the order of a trillion dollars.<sup>31</sup> A considerable price, one might think, to prevent a pathetic regime from developing weapons with the potential for killing a few tens of thousands—if they were actually exploded, an act that would surely be suicidal for the regime.

In the next years, floods and bad weather exacerbated the economic disaster that had been inflicted upon the country by its rulers. Famines ensued, and the number of people who perished reached hundreds of thousands or more, with some careful estimates putting the number at over two million.<sup>32</sup> Food aid was eventually sent from the West, though in the early days of the famine in particular, there seem to have been systematic efforts to deny the famine's existence in fear that a politics-free response to a humanitarian disaster would undercut efforts to use food aid to wring diplomatic concessions on the nuclear issue from North Korea.<sup>33</sup>

### **Other costly consequences of the anti-proliferation obsession**

The nonproliferation focus has also exacerbated the nuclear waste problem in the United States. In the late 1970s, the Carter administration banned the reprocessing of nuclear fuel, something that radically reduces the amount of nuclear waste, under the highly questionable assumption that this policy would reduce the danger of nuclear proliferation.

Nonproliferation efforts worldwide also hamper worldwide economic development by increasing the effective costs of developing nuclear energy—sometimes even making them prohibitive for some countries. As countries grow, they require ever increasing amounts of power. Any measure that limits their ability to acquire this vital commodity—or increases its price—effectively slows economic growth and reduces the gains in life expectancy commonly afforded by economic development.<sup>34</sup> In addition, because nuclear power does not emit greenhouse gases, it is an obvious potential candidate for helping with the problem of global warming, an issue many people hold to be of the highest concern for the future of the planet.

Moreover, anti-proliferation efforts can be counterproductive in its own terms. As Mitchell Reiss observes, “one of the unintended ‘demonstration’ effects” of the American anti-proliferation war against

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<sup>29</sup> Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, p. 318.

<sup>30</sup> Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, p. 329. See also Derek D. Smith, Deterring America: Rogue States and the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 70-71.

<sup>31</sup> Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, p. 324. See also Harrison, Korean Endgame, pp. 117-18.

<sup>32</sup> Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, p. 399. Andrew S. Natsios, The Great North Korean Famine (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001), p. 215.

<sup>33</sup> Natsios, Great North Korean Famine, pp. 147-48.

<sup>34</sup> The Non-Proliferation Treaty specifically guarantees to signing nonnuclear countries “the fullest possible exchange of technology” for the development of peaceful nuclear power. However, as Richard Betts points out, this rationale has been undermined by the development of a “nuclear suppliers cartel” which has worked to “cut off trade in technology for reprocessing plutonium or enriching uranium,” thereby reducing the NPT to “a simple demand to the nuclear weapons have-nots to remain so.” Richard K. Betts, “Universal Deterrence of Conceptual Collapse? Liberal Pessimism and Utopian Realism,” in Victor A. Utgoff (ed.), The Coming Crisis: Nuclear Proliferation, U.S. Interests, and World Order (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2000), p. 70n.



Iraq "was that chemical and biological weapons proved insufficient to deter America: only nuclear weapons, it appeared, could do this job."<sup>35</sup>

### Iran

There was little developed critical discussion in the runup to the anti-proliferation war against Iraq with only a few exceptions.<sup>36</sup> The Obama administration is notable for the apparent absence of anybody in high foreign policy office who clearly and publicly opposed the war on Iraq before George W. Bush launched his invasion. However, due in considerable part to the subsequent disastrous experience in that enterprise, a fairly healthy debate is now taking place about the wisdom and consequences of launching a Pearl Harbor-like military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

Among the considerations:

- Following from the previous discussion, if the rattled and insecure Iranian leadership is lying when it repeatedly says it has no intention of developing nuclear weapons or if it undergoes a conversion from that position (triggered perhaps by an Israeli airstrike), it will find, like all other nuclear-armed states, that the bombs are essentially useless and a very considerable waste of time, effort, money, and scientific talent.

- If Iran does develop nuclear weapons under present conditions, the process, contrary to intelligence exaggerations persistently spun out, will likely take years or even decades. For example, it was in March 2010 that Doyle McManus conveyed the information that "Most experts now estimate that Iran needs about 18 months to complete a nuclear device and a missile to carry it," although it needed to overcome "technical bottlenecks, the exposure of secret facilities and equipment breakdowns."<sup>37</sup> Hymans, unlike the "experts" McManus consulted, goes much deeper, stressing the administrative difficulties of developing a bomb. These require "the full-hearted cooperation of thousands of scientific and technical workers for many years." The task is "enormous," and

the key driver of an efficient nuclear weapons project has not been a country's funding levels, political will, or access to hardware. Rather, the key has been managerial competence. Nuclear weapons projects require a hands-off, facilitative management approach, one that permits scientific and technical professionals to exercise their vocation. But states such as Iran tend to feature a highly invasive, authoritarian management approach that smothers scientific and technical professionalism. Thus, it is very likely that Iran's political leadership—with its strong tendency toward invasive, authoritarian mismanagement—has been its own worst enemy in its quest for the bomb.<sup>38</sup>

- Iran scarcely has a viable delivery system for nuclear weapons.<sup>39</sup>

- Although the ravings of Iran's president Ahmadinejad can be distinctly unsettling, he does not

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<sup>35</sup> Mitchell B. Reiss, "The Nuclear Tipping Point: Prospects for a World of Many Nuclear Weapons States," in Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn, and Mitchell B. Reiss, eds., The Nuclear Tipping Point: Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), p. 12.

<sup>36</sup> Among them: John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "Iraq: An Unnecessary War," Foreign Policy, January/February 2003, pp. 50-59; John Mueller (in debate with Brink Lindsey), "Should We Invade Iraq?," Reason, January 2003.

<sup>37</sup> Doyle McManus, "What if Iran gets the bomb? Many now argue that containment, not a military strike, is the best way to deal with Tehran's nuclear ambitions," Los Angeles Times, March 21, 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Jacques E. C. Hymans, "Crying wolf about an Iranian nuclear bomb," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, January 17, 2012. See also Hymans, Achieving Nuclear Ambitions.

<sup>39</sup> Richard L. Garwin, "Evaluating Iran's missile threat," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, May/June 2008, p. 40.

have final control of the military, is in considerable disrepute within Iran because of economic difficulties and, while distinctly hostile to the state of Israel, apparently meant his remark, routinely translated as calling for Israel to be "wiped off the map," to mean that the state of Israel should eventually disappear from history, not that its Jewish population should be exterminated.<sup>40</sup> The United States and western Europe lived for decades under a similar sort of threat from the Soviet Union which possessed an impressive arsenal of nuclear weapons and was explicitly dedicated to overthrowing their form of government and economy. For example, from time to time Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev would casually point out how few of his nuclear bombs would be required to annihilate France or Britain. And the theologians in the USSR endlessly explained how Western democracy and capitalism were inevitably destined to vanish by the inexorable forces of history—which they were ideologically committed to nudge along.

- If Iran does develop nuclear weapons, it will most likely "use" them in the same way all other nuclear states have: for prestige (or ego-stoking) and to deter real or perceived threats.<sup>41</sup> Historical experience strongly suggests that new nuclear countries—even ones that once seemed to be hugely threatening like Communist China in the 1960s—have been content to use their weapons for such purposes.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, as Thomas Schelling suggests, deterrence is about the only value the weapons might have for Iran. Such devices, he points out, "would be too precious to give away or to sell" and "too precious to waste killing people" when they could make other countries "hesitant to consider military action."<sup>43</sup> Actually, in the wake of the Iraq disaster, Iran scarcely needs nuclear weapons for deterrence. It can credibly deter an invasion by the ever-threatening Americans simply by maintaining a trained and well armed cadre of a few thousand troops dedicated to, and capable of, inflicting endless irregular warfare on the hapless and increasingly desperate and ridiculous invaders. The Iranians may not yet have grasped this new reality, but perhaps in time they will.

- The leadership of Iran, however hostile and unpleasant in many ways, does not consist of a self-perpetuating gaggle of suicidal lunatics. Thus, as Schelling suggests, it is exceedingly unlikely Iran will ever give them to a substate group like Hezbollah to detonate—particularly on a country like Israel—not least because the nonlunatics in charge would fear that the source of the weapon would be detected by nuclear forensics inviting devastating retaliation.

- An Iranian bomb is unlikely to trigger a cascade of proliferation in the Middle East. Although Cirincione holds that a nuclear Iran could readily be deterred from using a nuclear weapon against their neighbors or the United States, and although he discounts the likelihood that it might "intentionally give a weapon to a terrorist group they could not control," he is set off on an extravagant alarmist fear cascade envisioning "a nuclear chain reaction where states feel they must match each other's nuclear capability."

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<sup>40</sup> For a discussion of the "map" issue, see Ethan Bronner, "Just How Far Did They Go, Those Words Against Israel?" *New York Times*, June 11, 2006, p. 4-4. Jonathan Steele, "Lost in translation," *Guardian* (London) Comment is free..., June 14, 2006 [commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/jonathan\\_steele/2006/06/post\\_155.html](http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/jonathan_steele/2006/06/post_155.html)2006.

<sup>41</sup> For the conclusion that these would be Iran's sole motivations, see Colin Dueck and Ray Takeyh, "Iran's Nuclear Challenge," *Political Science Quarterly* 122 (Summer 2007), p. 195.

<sup>42</sup> John Kennedy reportedly considered a Chinese nuclear test "likely to be historically the most significant and worst event of the 1960s." William Burr and Jeffrey T. Richelson, "Whether to 'Strangle the Baby in the Cradle,'" *International Security* 25 (Winter 2000/01), p. 61. Actually, that designation should probably go instead to Kennedy's decision to send American troops in substantial numbers to Vietnam largely to confront the Chinese "threat" that was seen to lurk there.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, Nobel Prize Lecture: "An Astonishing Sixty Years: The Legacy of Hiroshima." [nobelprize.org](http://nobelprize.org), December 8, 2005, [nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/economics/laureates/2005/schelling-lecture.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/economics/laureates/2005/schelling-lecture.html)

This, he concludes, "could lead to a Middle East with not one nuclear-weapons state, Israel, but four or five," and that "is a recipe for nuclear war."<sup>44</sup> However, if Iran does develop nuclear weapons and brandishes them to intimidate others or to get its way, it will likely find that those threatened, rather than capitulating to its blandishments or rushing off to build a compensating arsenal of their own, will ally with others (including conceivably Israel) to stand up to the intimidation—rather in the way they coalesced into an alliance of convenience to oppose Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.<sup>45</sup>

• In the end, it is incumbent upon those who advocate a Pearl Harbor-like attack on Iran to demonstrate that the rather innocuous history of nuclear proliferation over the last two-thirds of a century is irrelevant and that the regime there is daffier than the one in North Korea, less stable than the one in Pakistan, and more threatening than the ultimate rogue, China in 1964.

### **Israel: the potential for self-destruction**

The concern inspired in Israel by some of the fulminations of Iran's current president, a populist windbag whose tenuous hold on office has been enhanced by foreign overreaction to his windbaggeries, is understandable. But it does not necessarily lead to wise policy, even for Israel. I am not a fan of worst case scenarios. However, one that may be worthy of consideration concerns the danger that, stoked into a state of hysteria by an obsession over atomic weapons in the hands of Iran, Israel could essentially destroy itself—that is, cease to exist as a coherent Jewish state—without a single Iranian bomb ever being developed.<sup>46</sup>

In recent years, there have been extreme apprehensions in Israel about atomic annihilation at the hands of Iran, and these have sometimes inspired a sense of despair and desperation—and in many quarters a loss of hope.<sup>47</sup> As Ian Lustick points out,

The Israeli definition of the threat posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran is existential and desperate. Apart from the fact that this is precisely the image of Iran that Ahmedinejad and his allies are seeking to create, it is worth noting that once defined in this manner, there is no limit on the measures Israelis can imagine justified in taking against it. After all, when survival is perceived to be at stake, there is neither need nor rationale for thinking about consequences or about how to calibrate the use of force to foster positive outcomes or reduce the political fallout of military action. More generally, military options to eliminate the threat can be discussed with no attention to their long-term consequences for peace in the region.

In this, Lustick notes the striking application in Israeli thinking of "the primitive, but overwhelming psychological and mythic power of the Holocaust. Israelis seems haunted by the specter of catastrophic destruction that Ahmedinejad has so skillfully associated with Iran's ambiguous but apparently vigorous

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<sup>44</sup> Cirincione, "Cassandra's Conundrum," pp. 16-17. Cirincione has much company. As Potter and Mukhatzhanova observe, "Today it is hard to find an analyst or commentator on nuclear proliferation who is not pessimistic about the future. It is nearly as difficult to find one who predicts the future without reference to metaphors such as proliferation chains, cascades, dominoes, waves, avalanches, and tipping points." However, after considerable study and research on the issue, they finally became "convinced that the metaphor is inappropriate and misleading, as it implies a process of nuclear decisionmaking and a pace of nuclear weapons spread that are unlikely to transpire." William C. Potter and Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova, "Divining Nuclear Intentions," *International Security* 33 (Summer 2008), p. 159.

<sup>45</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "Containing rogues and Renegades: Coalition Strategies and Counterproliferation," in Victor A. Utgoff (ed.), *The Coming Crisis: Nuclear Proliferation, U.S. Interests, and World Order* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2000), pp. 191-226.

<sup>46</sup> See also John Mueller and Ian S. Lustick, "Israel's Fight-or-Flight Response," *National Interest*, Nov./Dec. 2008, pp. 68-71.

<sup>47</sup> Benny Morris, "Israel's unhappy birthday," *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 2008.

attempt to become a nuclear power," and dire analogies with the 1930s and Hitler's Germany are constantly drawn by commentators from the political left as well as right.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Yossi Klein Halevi and Michael Oren observed in early 2007 that "Military men suddenly sound like theologians when explaining the Iranian threat." And some of their ponderings have been downright spooky:

Ahmadinejad's pronouncements about the imminent return of the Hidden Imam and the imminent destruction of Israel aren't regarded as merely calculated for domestic consumption; they are seen as glimpses into an apocalyptic game plan. Ahmadinejad has reportedly told his Cabinet that the Hidden Imam will reappear in 2009—precisely the date when Israel estimates Iran will go nuclear.<sup>49</sup>

The long term negative consequences for Israel from an attack on Iran nuclear facilities either by Israel or by the United States could surpass those that developed even from such ill-advised ventures as Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon and its government-induced policy to encourage settlement in occupied territories. And the casualties inflicted by an attack on Iran by direct action and by its "collateral damage" (including, potentially, induced nuclear radiation) could conceivably be considerable. Moreover, the results would most likely be counterproductive. Israel's highly touted air strike against Iraq's nuclear program in the Osirak attack of 1981, as Dan Reiter and Richard Betts have pointed out, actually caused Saddam Hussein to speed up his nuclear program 25-fold while decreasing its vulnerability by dispersing its elements—a lesson Iran has also learned.<sup>50</sup>

The existential danger for Israel in all this arises not so much from Iran's capacity or potential capacity to do harm—though judicious and balanced concerns about that danger are, of course, justified—as from the consequences of the hype, at once apoplectic and apocalyptic, over the prospective Iranian bomb. The problem is that, if the hysteria persists, a considerable, and increasing, number of Israelis may be led to conclude that, since there is no way really to guarantee that Iran will never be able to obtain a bomb, the situation is hopeless, that Israel is ultimately doomed, and that it is best to live elsewhere—in a place where one can bring up children free from nuclear fears.

"There is nothing more regular in Jewish history and myth than Jews 'returning' to the Land of Israel to build a collective life," observes Lustick, "except for Jews leaving the country and abandoning the project." And "so far, in the twenty-first century," he continues, "more Jews have left than have arrived," noting a survey indicating that only 69 percent of Jewish Israelis say they want to stay in the country.<sup>51</sup> He also cites a 2007 poll indicating that one quarter of Israelis were considering leaving the country, including almost half of all young people.<sup>52</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg points to another survey finding that 44 percent of Israelis say they are ready to leave if they could find a better standard of living elsewhere, and notes that "the emigration of Israel's most talented citizens is a constant worry of Israeli

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<sup>48</sup> Ian S. Lustick, "Abandoning the Iron Wall: Israel and 'the Middle Eastern Muck'," Middle East Policy, August 2008.

<sup>49</sup> See also Yossi Klein Halevi and Michael B. Oren, "Israel's Worst Nightmare," The New Republic, January 30, 2007. For later, but similar, apocalyptic visions, see Ari Shavit, "The Bomb and the Bomber," New York Times, March 21, 2012.

<sup>50</sup> Dan Reiter, "Preventive Attacks against Nuclear Programs and the 'Success' at Osirak," Nonproliferation Review 12 (July 2005), pp. 355-71. Dan Reiter, Preventive War and Its Alternatives: The Lessons of History (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2006), pp. 4-6. Richard K. Betts, "The Osirak Fallacy," National Interest, Spring 2006, pp. 22-25. Moreover, as Hymans also stresses, the reactor the Israelis bombed was not even capable of producing weapons-grade fissile material. Achieving Nuclear Ambitions.

<sup>51</sup> Efraim Inbar and Ian Lustick (in debate), "Israel's Future: The Time Factor," Israel Studies Forum 23 (Summer 2008), pp. 6, 10.

<sup>52</sup> Lustick, "Abandoning the Iron Wall."

leaders."<sup>53</sup>

If Iran does develop something of an atomic arsenal, it will likely find, following the experience of all other states so armed in the "nuclear age," that the bombs are essentially useless and a very considerable waste of money and effort. On the other hand, there is some danger that in pursuing its current hysterical policy toward Iran's as yet limited (and legal) atomic program, in wallowing in its atomic obsession, Israel will scare itself into extinction.

### Conclusion

It would certainly be preferable that a number of regimes never obtain nuclear weapons. Indeed, if the efforts to dissuade the Iran from foolishly launching a nuclear weapons program succeed, they would be doing it a favor—though, quite possibly, the Iranians won't notice.

The handful of countries to have acquired nuclear weapons seem to have done so sometimes as an ego trip for current leaders, and more urgently (or perhaps merely in addition) as an effort to deter a potential attack on themselves: China to deter the United States and the Soviet Union, Israel to deter various enemy nations in the neighborhood, India to deter China, Pakistan to deter India, and now North Korea to deter the United States and maybe others.<sup>54</sup> Insofar as nuclear proliferation is a response to perceived threat, it follows that one way to reduce the likelihood such countries would go nuclear is a simple one: stop threatening them.

"It is dangerous," muses Hymans aptly, "to fight smoke with fire."<sup>55</sup> Nuclear proliferation, while not necessarily desirable, is unlikely to accelerate or prove to be a major danger. And extreme policies based, however logically, on worst case fantasies about proliferation need careful reconsideration.<sup>56</sup> They can generate costs far higher than those likely to be inflicted by the potential (and often imaginary) problems they seek to address.

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<sup>53</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, "Unforgiven," *Atlantic*, May 2008, p. 40.

<sup>54</sup> Hymans puts prime emphasis on ego with the added proviso that only when the ego in charge has a conception of national identity that can be considered to be what he calls of the "oppositional nationalist" variety, will the country really try to get nuclear weapons. Hymans, *Psychology*. For somewhat related findings, see Etel Solingen, *Nuclear Logics: Contrasting Paths in East Asia and the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). See also the discussion in Potter and Mukhatzhanova, "Divining Nuclear Intentions."

<sup>55</sup> Hymans, *Psychology*, p. 225.

<sup>56</sup> The phrase "worst case fantasies" is Bernard Brodie's: "The Development of Nuclear Strategy," *International Security* 2 (Spring 1978), p. 68.