

Getting Real(istic) About Non-proliferation

By Charles V. Peña | January 2006

Daryl Kimball contends that I and my former boss, Ted Galen Carpenter (vice president of defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute), are “like the Bush policy team” because we advanced “the proposition that aggressive and erratic regimes with nuclear weapons are a threat to their neighbors, while nuclear arsenals in the hands of stable, democratic, U.S. allies are not.”

I doubt that Kimball would disagree with the first part of the proposition. But there is no evidence that the Bush administration embraces the notion of allowing stable, democratic, U.S. allies becoming nuclear-armed countries. Here’s what we wrote in our article in the summer 2005 issue of *The National Interest*:

Members of the arms-control community have over the decades devoted at least as much time and energy to the possibility that stable, democratic, status quo powers such as Germany, Japan, Sweden and South Korea might decide to abandon the NPT [Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty] and develop nuclear deterrents as they have over the prospect that unstable or aggressive states might do so.

That misguided concern is not confined to the traditional arms control community, often considered to be more liberal. As the North Korean nuclear crisis evolved, some of the most hawkish members of the U.S. foreign policy community became terrified at the prospect that America’s democratic allies in East Asia might build their own nuclear deterrents to offset Pyongyang’s moves. For example, neoconservative luminaries Robert Kagan and William Kristol regarded such proliferation with horror: “The possibility that Japan, and perhaps even Taiwan, might

respond to North Korea’s actions by producing their own nuclear weapons, thus spurring an East Asian nuclear arms race ... is something that should send chills up the spine of any sensible American strategist.”

Kimball also says, “They [presumably referring to myself and Carpenter] suggest that the United States should extend its nuclear umbrella to guarantee the security of allies and clients, and not impede ‘peaceful states that want to become nuclear powers to deter unfriendly actors in their neighborhoods.’” The latter is certainly true, but we never advocated a policy of the United States guaranteeing the security of other countries via a nuclear umbrella. In fact we made the opposite point when we wrote: “Unsavory states as Iran and North Korea are well along the path to becoming nuclear powers while their more peaceful neighbors are hamstrung by the NPT from countering those moves. The result is that the United States must extend its nuclear umbrella, which places America at greater risk to guarantee the security of allies and clients.”

Now that I’ve set the record straight...

Kimball ultimately demonstrates the core problem of the arms control and nonproliferation community. He acknowledges that North Korea has withdrawn from the NPT, renewed production of plu-



onium, and claims to have produced nuclear weapons, and that Iran has secretly built facilities that can enrich uranium and continues to move forward with its efforts. The former is a clear failure of arms control and nonproliferation efforts while the latter is an impending failure. Yet his prescription is for the United States to “work with other states to reinforce and update the regime.” But if previous efforts have failed (or are failing), how is trying harder going to result in success? Indeed, this is Einstein’s definition of insanity: continuing to do the same thing and expecting different results.

First and foremost, it is important to recognize that interventionist U.S. foreign policy—under both Democratic and Republican administrations—has created a strong incentive for countries to acquire nuclear weapons as perhaps the only way to stave off possible U.S. military intervention. Carpenter and I wrote:

Consider the extent of U.S. military action since the opening of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The United States has engaged in nine major military operations during that period. Moreover, in his 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush explicitly linked both North Korea and Iran to Iraq (a country with which the United States was clearly headed to war) in an “axis of evil.” In the wake of the Bush Administration’s decision to engage in pre-emptive regime change in Iraq, it is hardly surprising that Pyongyang and Tehran concluded that they might be next on Washington’s hit list unless they could effectively deter an attack. Yet neither country could hope to match the conventional military capabilities of a superpower. The most reliable deterrent—maybe the only reliable deterrent—is to have nuclear weapons. In other words, U.S. behavior may have inadvertently created a pow-

erful incentive for the proliferation of nuclear weapons—the last thing Washington wanted.

We thus concluded that “those who cheered Washington’s military interventions—Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals—need to ask themselves whether increasing the incentives for nuclear proliferation was a price worth paying—because greater proliferation is the price we are now paying.”

But the problem with current arms control and nonproliferation thinking extends beyond the problem of needless U.S. military interventions. Kimball makes the argument that nuclear weapons are “inherent dangers . . . in the hands of any state,” which implies “national security” and “nonproliferation” are the same, i.e., the conventional wisdom that nonproliferation creates greater security. Yet the belief that all proliferation is equally threatening and dangerous illustrates the problem with the arguments over Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The arms control and nonproliferation community could not disagree with the Bush administration’s assertion that Iraq’s possession of WMD was a threat that required a response because to disagree would have meant admitting proliferation was an acceptable outcome. Instead, they were left to disagree about the evidence that Iraq was in violation of UN Security Council resolutions and the appropriate response.

However, the question never should have been whether Iraq had WMD or not, a contention which presumed that if Iraq did, then it was a threat. Rather, the fundamental question was: even if Iraq had WMD (however undesirable) was it a threat to the United States that could not be deterred? In other words, the imperative is national security, not non-proliferation.

The answer to this more relevant question is that there was no historical evidence of Iraq, or any

other rogue state, using weapons of mass destruction against enemies capable of inflicting unacceptable retaliatory damage. True enough, Hussein used chemical weapons against helpless Kurdish villagers and the Iranian infantry in the 1980s. But during the Gulf War in 1991, when Hussein had vast stocks of chemical weapons, he was deterred from using them against the Coalition and Israel by credible threats of obliteration. More to the point, even if Saddam Hussein managed to build a few atomic bombs, he would have been no more able to escape the reality of credible nuclear deterrence than the Soviet Union before him, or North Korea today.

The pertinent quandary is that if deterrence works, not only is it an argument against the necessity to use military force but it is also an argument against an imperative for a successful non-proliferation regime. This is not to say that a non-proliferation mechanism is undesirable, just that it may not be necessary as an imperative of national security.

While in the general sense it might be true that fewer nuclear weapons in the world (and fewer countries with nuclear weapons) may be a good thing, such logic is not necessarily absolute. A different paradigm for analyzing proliferation would be to assess the consequences of proliferation on a case-by-case basis rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach.

Unfortunately, for too many arms control and non-proliferation advocates, anything less than absolute prevention of acquisition of nuclear weapons, technology and materials is unacceptable. Thus, they focus on trying to induce India and Pakistan to sign on to the NPT in a “hope against experience” effort to convince those countries to give up their nuclear capabilities. Yet there is some evidence that nuclear weapons have actually had a stabilizing effect on Indian-Pakistani relations, which runs

counter to non-proliferation expectations. For example, does the fact that both India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons prevent violence related to the Kashmir dispute from erupting into war between the two countries?

Similarly, both the Bush administration and the arms control community are focused on dismantling North Korea’s nuclear program and stripping that country of its few weapons. But it may not be possible (or realistic) to put the genie back in the bottle. So instead of a vain attempt to prevent countries from keeping the nuclear weapons they already have, a more pragmatic arms control and non-proliferation approach might be to create incentives and disincentives that limit the size and scope of a country’s nuclear weapons program and arsenal so that it is not a direct threat to the United States. Admittedly, this is a less than perfect solution. But U.S. security would be better served by acknowledging reality and making the best of that reality, rather than embarking on a Quixotic quest for perfection that is not likely to be obtained.

Kimball correctly recognizes the potential threat that a nuclear-armed state might “decide to sell nuclear material, or decide to sell its know-how to a terrorist organization” to make the case for the conventional wisdom that preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons to countries de facto prevents the transfer of weapons to terrorists. Indeed, this was the rationale used by the President Bush to disarm Iraq, including using military force if necessary. The president argued that Hussein could give his WMD to terrorists who would then attack the United States: the smoking gun in the form of a mushroom cloud. Therefore, the only way to prevent the possibility of WMD terrorism was to rid Iraq of its WMD or its ruler who was seeking to acquire WMD, including nuclear weapons.

Such an argument was certainly plausible, but the question was whether it was likely. The Bush administration was never able to make a convincing case. Saddam Hussein was known to support anti-Israeli Palestinian terrorist groups, including Hamas, but he never gave chemical or biological weapons to those groups to use against Israel, a country he hated as much as the United States. The alleged connection between the regime in Baghdad and the Ansar al-Islam group supposedly affiliated with al Qaeda seemed more like a contradiction. Ansar al-Islam was a group of radical Isalmist Iraqi Kurds seeking to establish an independent Islamic state in northern Iraq. In contrast, Hussein sought to exert more control over the independence-minded Iraqi Kurdish population by “Arabacising” predominantly Kurdish northern Iraq by transplanting loyal Sunnis and giving them positions of power and prestige. Despite such allegations, although there were known contacts between al Qaeda and Iraq over a number of years, there is no evidence of collaboration. In fact, Osama bin Laden viewed Hussein as an apostate Muslim ruler and referred to his regime as an “infidel regime.”

Regardless of the Bush administration’s weak case that Iraq would transfer WMD to terrorists, the logic of its argument creates a conundrum for those who believe that preventing proliferation of nuclear weapons to countries also prevents the transfer of such weapons, or materials or technology, to terrorists. The only way out of this corner for the arms control and non-proliferation community is a willingness to explore “failed” nonproliferation efforts as an acceptable (but undesirable) outcome, but still develop successful ways to prevent nuclear weapons from falling into the hands of terrorists. What becomes the criteria, then, for determining whether a nuclear-armed state is also a terrorist risk? Does having known ties to terrorist groups automatically make a country an unacceptable risk? Does it matter what terrorist groups a government

is linked to? Even if a particular regime is considered a state-sponsor of terrorism, does that necessarily mean that the regime would provide nuclear weapons to terrorists? What are the incentives and disincentives for any country to give nuclear weapons to terrorists?

As the title of our article indicated, Carpenter and I argued that the new security environment requires us to rethink non-proliferation. But doing so means asking questions—such as the ones posed above—that the arms control and nonproliferation community may find uncomfortable because the answers are likely to fall outside the traditional paradigm of arms control and nonproliferation thinking. Yet—as Kimball’s article illustrates—they are more comfortable sticking to their knitting, even if the sweater they are knitting is the wrong size and color, and they are in denial about the world that is confronting them.

Perhaps inadvertently Kimball has stated the primary reason why the arms control and nonproliferation community is living in a fantasy world: “The NPT commits all member states, including the five original nuclear weapons states—the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China—to pursue and eventually achieve nuclear disarmament.” But this is wishful thinking, at best. The U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal serves as a powerful deterrent against any country to directly attack the United States and it would be foolhardy to give up such a capability.

Moreover, the NPT is a false bargain. Why should non-nuclear countries—especially those that feel threatened by the possibility of U.S. military intervention, to forestall threats that have not yet materialized—forego pursuing a capability they don’t have in exchange for the nuclear-armed powers’ promise to give up a capability they already have? If you believe that the nuclear powers will disarm,

then I have a bridge in Brooklyn to sell you. It is puzzling that Kimball recognizes this dilemma—“a growing number of states do not believe that the five original nuclear-weapon states intend to fulfill their NPT-related nuclear disarmament commitments”—but does not grasp what it means.

In the final analysis, the arms control and nonproliferation community is afflicted with the same disease as the neoconservatives: they see the world the way they wish it to be rather than the way it is. Instead of such wishful thinking, they need to get real(istic).

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