

## Nuclear Proliferation beyond Rogues

Set aside proliferation anxieties over North Korea, Iran, and even Iraq for a moment. Perhaps just as worrisome in the new international environment are states that chose to forgo the nuclear option in the past but could now revisit that decision and pursue a nuclear capability.<sup>1</sup> Identifying the potential catalysts that could lead these states to start a new round of proliferation should be elevated to become a critical new goal of U.S. intelligence collection and analysis, as well as preventive diplomacy, and a key factor in U.S. decisionmaking on issues ranging from national strategy to public diplomacy.

What could lead a traditionally nonnuclear nation to retreat from a well-established national identity in favor of an arsenal that includes weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the means to deliver them? Some of these countries—Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, and Syria—have flirted with the idea of acquiring nuclear weapons in the past, but in most cases, domestic dissent and not-so-subtle international pressure have collectively sufficed to dissuade them from acting.

Yet, each of these states has undergone wrenching domestic change in the past two decades or more. For many, the surrounding regional or larger international environment has become less certain and, in some cases, more ominous. For instance, discussion of a nuclear option was virtually unthinkable in Japan a decade ago; comments by two Japanese cabinet officials this past summer, however, epitomize the rising chorus of commentators both inside and outside of government that supports a less inhibited debate on Japan's potential security options and nuclear future. Japan's concerns over a rising and nuclear China, worries about other security problems in the

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*The Washington Quarterly* • 26:1 pp. 7–15.

Northeast Asian neighborhood, and deep anxieties over its prolonged economic slide have triggered a much more robust national conversation on present and future Japanese security dilemmas.

Any conclusion that a few errant comments and opinion pieces foreshadow imminent nuclear proliferation in any of the above-mentioned states would be a clear exaggeration. But when it comes to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, ruling out more careful examination of the

**Events of the last decade have dramatically weakened the nuclear taboo.**

factors and trends that might be resurrecting these decisions is imprudent. The reluctance to reconsider motivations that might trigger a nuclear domino effect among so-called responsible non-nuclear states is testament to the enduring taboo against discussing latent nuclear ambitions in polite company.

What specific concerns could lead a state to reconsider its pledge of nuclear abstinence? Perhaps the most worrisome single dimension of the new dynamics associated with potential pro-

liferation is the new and pervasive extent of U.S. influence and worries abroad about its potential uses. One of the often overlooked aspects of unparalleled U.S. power at this moment in history is the magnified implications of even the most modest redirection of U.S. policy and purpose. There has been ample commentary abroad about new U.S. international objectives and the increasing U.S. penchant to act alone over the objections of allies and friends. This tendency, coupled with worries about changes in U.S. strategic and military doctrine, has only exacerbated concerns. Although many Americans feel these worries are either exaggerated or unfounded, the escalation of negative rhetoric abroad over changes in U.S. policy and priorities has nevertheless been undeniable. Should tensions continue to increase, some states may consider the nuclear option to counter growing U.S. power and predominance.

The most likely road to nuclear development, however, would involve not one, but a confluence of factors interacting and reinforcing one another in complex ways. A list of distinct international and domestic issues that could lead to a reversal in a country's nuclear posture follows. Although no single feature of the new strategic landscape gives one great pause, the various ways multiple factors might accumulate and reinforce one another will account for many of the possible new dangers ahead.

For example, terrorism has existed forever, but never before with the simultaneous concentration of terrorist groups, the diffusion of information on bomb design, and the possibility of an abundance of unaccounted nuclear

material from the former Soviet Union. Furthermore, consider the ease with which Pakistan, for example, can develop a nuclear device with assistance from China and place it on top of a ballistic missile purchased from North Korea. The development of transnational trade in WMD and related technologies is a relatively new phenomenon that could exponentially increase the threat of nuclear proliferation.

## **Ten Factors to Make Nonnuclear States Think Again**

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The real risk today is that concerted international diplomacy and the architecture aimed at slowing, halting, or reversing nuclear proliferation might unravel. The discussion that follows lists 10 specific reasons that could lead nonnuclear nations to reconsider nonproliferation. Included are concrete examples of where and how each possibility might conceivably become a reality.

### **U.S. UNILATERALISM: INTERNATIONALIST OR ISOLATIONIST?**

Perhaps the most important ingredient in a new international calculation of the attractiveness—or perceived necessity—of acquiring nuclear weapons is the question of potential changes in U.S. policy, both doctrinal and attitudinal. The perceived U.S. penchant for unilateral action, manifest in the 2002 National Security Strategy's departure from traditional approaches to deterrence, preemption, and preventive war, could take two directions, leading to profoundly different reactions by the international community.

If U.S. actions are seen as only advancing U.S. security concerns, confidence in the entire U.S. approach to global responsibility could well erode. Current U.S. security commitments in Europe and Japan are still grounded in the viability and consistency of the U.S. nuclear umbrella, but questions about the U.S. commitment to security alliances and partners are sharply on the rise. An isolationist United States, acting only to protect its own interests, will cause many to reevaluate the U.S. commitment to the nuclear umbrella. In addition, nations throughout Asia and Europe are continually concerned about the U.S. preoccupation with domestic issues and the potential for the United States to withdraw substantially from its global roles and responsibilities. In an effort to hedge against rising U.S. unpredictability, other countries could conceivably develop nuclear arsenals to fulfill regional and international security goals.

If U.S. unilateral actions are seen as necessary to cope with perceived international security threats, however, such efforts could, ironically, calm concerns of friends and allies that the United States is unwilling to tackle

tough security problems. Strong action against North Korea, for example, might well provide a measure of reassurance to Asian friends, most notably Japan and South Korea, that the United States will maintain the status quo and sustain the U.S. nuclear umbrella. The United States must be careful, however, to balance a tough stance and international norms, as even subtle changes in nuclear doctrine and deployments can have dramatic, unintended consequences among U.S. allies and friends.

### **WEAKENING THE TABOO AGAINST NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION**

Since a nuclear bomb was dropped on Nagasaki in August 1945, the world has not witnessed the use of a nuclear device in anger. In fact, contrary to predicted trends, nuclear proliferation seemed actually to slow during the Cold War, with China being the last state to go nuclear, in 1964. Events of the last decade, however, have dramatically weakened this nuclear taboo, with India and Pakistan both detonating multiple nuclear devices in May 1998 (without long-term diplomatic or economic consequences) and further developing their nuclear arsenals since then. The subsequent U.S. strategic embrace of India has left some with the perception that U.S. resolve against nuclear proliferation is weakening, leading more states that have contemplated a nuclear agenda in the past to discount former fears of U.S.-led international isolation and opprobrium. Some critics see India's current high standing in Washington as a signal actually encouraging other potential nuclear states on the brink to take that next fateful step.

Previous U.S. administrations—both Republican and Democratic—have made the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) a centerpiece of U.S. strategy designed to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. More recently, however, the United States appears to have deemphasized the importance of adherence to NPT protocols in its international diplomacy. Indeed, there has been a much greater focus on increasing U.S. counterproliferation capabilities, particularly military ones, rather than seeking to bolster international nonproliferation regimes, as represented by the NPT. Devaluing this nuclear taboo may serve to remove one of the most important factors deterring a country's entry into the nuclear club.

### **NUCLEAR ROGUES**

One of the primary reasons for seeking to block various states, such as Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, from achieving nuclear status has long been the concern about how such a capacity would affect neighboring states. A rogue state's successful acquisition of a nuclear weapon could trigger a range of potentially destabilizing regional responses, including the further prolifera-

tion of nuclear weapons beyond the rogue state and the prospect of exacerbated regional rivalries. This central concern has been one of the driving factors behind U.S. diplomacy in the recent past, including the protracted negotiation of the Agreed Framework with North Korea in 1994. This issue is also arguably one of the animating features behind the “axis of evil” phrase in the president’s State of the Union address and the harder U.S. line toward Iraq, Iran, and North Korea—all states seeking to acquire, or which have already begun to develop, nuclear weapons.

U.S. approaches to countering rogue-state proliferation range from more intensive efforts at diplomacy to threats of the use of force. Nevertheless, the underlying goal is the same: to prevent an unsavory regime from acquiring the mantle of new nuclear power. Another consistent, bipartisan consideration in U.S. non-proliferation policy has been how one rogue state’s step toward proliferation might impact subsequent regional politics. Policymakers realize the impact could be great, particularly in Asia and the Middle East, where nuclear and nonnuclear states barely maintain an uneasy coexistence. For example, the acceleration of nuclear capability by North Korea might quickly lead to calls for considering the nuclear option in Japan and South Korea, heighten tensions with an already nuclear-armed China, and destroy the tenuous balance of power in the region. The domino effect could reach farther, upsetting regional relations with the United States, Russia, and South Asia. In short, a nuclear rogue could be the quickest path to worldwide proliferation.

**D**eclining states may well consider the nuclear option as an equalizer.

### **ESCALATING RIVALRIES BETWEEN NUCLEAR AND NONNUCLEAR STATES OR TERRITORIES**

Existing or historic tensions between neighboring nations could lead one or more states to reconsider the value of developing a nuclear capability. For example, China’s economic growth and military expansion trouble Japan, and historic tensions have reemerged in the region. China’s unambiguous nuclear status, combined with Japan’s nonnuclear posture, accentuates the high level of anxiety in Tokyo. Furthermore, tension between China and Taiwan is mounting, threatening to lead to an arms race with greater potential for conflagration over time.

A similar dynamic between certain east or central European states and Russia is also easily conceivable (if unlikely), should President Vladimir Putin’s ambitious opening to the United States fail or conservative elements in Moscow reemerge and rekindle long-running tensions on the continent.

According to this scenario, a bullying Russia might intimidate either an aspiring or a newly minted member of NATO, spurring that country to seek a nuclear card in the regional competition as the ultimate deterrent to Russia's misbehavior.

### **CONVENTIONAL FORCE IMBALANCES**

A nation's desire to achieve a balance of military power with its neighbors is another possible incentive for adopting a pro-nuclear stance. In Korea, for instance, considerable concern existed for a long time that an increasing conventional military capability in the North could present an overwhelming and destabilizing challenge to the democratic government in the South. Concerns about an enduring and widening gap in conventional forces on the Korean peninsula have eased somewhat with the chronic problems plaguing the North, but conventional imbalances have been a key trigger in driving nuclear innovations elsewhere. At the height of the Cold War, similar concerns existed that the conventional might of Warsaw Pact member countries threatened the stability and security of Western Europe. This imbalance in battlefield forces in Europe directly led to the development of tactical nuclear weapons for the European theater. In this context, the nuclear capability of NATO forces was seen as the great equalizer that would enable Western Europe to face off against the far superior conventional might of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact (at least on paper).

Currently, the increasingly militarized relationship between China and Taiwan across the Taiwan Strait has sparked similar concerns. China's seemingly inexorable buildup of a conventional arsenal of fighter planes, medium-range ballistic missiles, naval assets, and expeditionary forces suggests a worrisome trend. Many fear that, at some point in the future, absent external assistance, Taiwan could become vulnerable to a conventional onslaught by the mainland. For this reason, Taiwan has considered a nuclear alternative at points in the past but was dissuaded through quiet pressure from Washington. An increasing conventional imbalance and any sense of alienation or lack of support from Washington could cause Taiwan's leaders to reconsider such an approach.

### **AN ACT OF CATAclysmic TERRORISM**

Much has been written about the national and global implications of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. Certainly, there is heightened vigilance regarding new domestic threats inside industrialized democracies and elsewhere. The ways in which an increase in domestic terrorism can lead to larger systemic insecurity, however, have re-

ceived less attention. The logical response to greater homeland security challenges is for each country to tighten borders, intensify intelligence and situational awareness, and increase cooperation with the United States and other leading states, not to seek the development of nuclear weapons. Yet, one cannot fully dismiss some potentially illogical or, more precisely, unforeseen responses to wider and more frequent domestic attacks on a global scale.

In such an environment, states might reconsider their nuclear position, viewing nuclear capability as a psychological assurance for its citizens as well as a viable deterrent against external threats, particularly in the face of rogue regimes' support of nonstate actors. The potential interaction between groups such as Al Qaeda and rogue states with nuclear ambitions has not been lost on many U.S. allies and friends, and states could potentially regard a nuclear capability as a deterrent to being targeted by this collusion of terrorists and rogue states. A manifest increase in threats to homeland security alone is probably not enough to trigger nuclear recalculation, although heightened anxiety over domestic vulnerability to external threats, coupled with other troubling domestic or foreign trends, could trigger a country to reassess its nuclear options more broadly.

**What domestic political developments might provoke the pursuit of nuclear weapons?**

### **INHERITANCE AND SUDDEN REGIME CHANGE**

The leadership of a nonnuclear state could also unexpectedly inherit nuclear capabilities, leading to a reconsideration of their former nonnuclear status. For example, a sudden collapse of the North Korean regime and the unification, actual or virtual, of the Korean peninsula might lead to a situation where the South Korean government inherits a nuclear capability it might be reluctant to relinquish, depending on regional dynamics and rivalries. In a precarious environment, regional anxieties could trigger a regime in Seoul to reconsider its former nonnuclear position and accept any potential negative regional ramifications.

The case of nuclear inheritance has some precedence in the international arena, as in the case of South Africa, where the black majority government inherited a surreptitious nuclear capability from the previous white-controlled regime. In this instance, Nelson Mandela's government chose to accept the decision of the outgoing administration to relinquish its nuclear capability rather than seek to preserve it or declare it openly. There is a distinction between the two cases, however: South Africa was and is the domi-

nant state in the surrounding region, whereas the Korean peninsula is surrounded by larger powers and nuclear states.

### **REGIME PESSIMISM**

States in decline often suffer from a kind of societal insecurity over future economic and security shortfalls. Such anxiety could well trigger national consideration of nuclear options to forestall the heightened vulnerability

**Concerns over U.S. policy are, and will continue to be, the single most decisive factor.**

that naturally accompanies decline. Just as failing or slipping states have historically sought to wage preventive war against rising and competitive states in the international system, declining states may well consider the nuclear option as a relatively cost-effective and technically achievable equalizer that could prevent the state's descent into oblivion or trial by rising regional rivals. This complex societal dynamic of "regime pessimism" is currently in play among virtually all

the states in the Middle East, and some might even argue in Japan as well. Countries that once aspired to international greatness or at least a level of prominence but that now fear irrelevance or worse might regard nuclear weapons as a way to provide not only a psychological hedge but potentially a strategic one.

### **DOMESTIC POLITICAL CHANGES IN A POTENTIAL NUCLEAR POWER**

Countries that have previously chosen to renounce nuclear weapons have generally also implemented greater transparency throughout their national security and scientific agencies as part of the country's general move toward greater democratization. The kinds of domestic political developments that might provoke the pursuit of nuclear weapons, however, are less clear. India's populist political movements no doubt played a role in the administration's decision to test a nuclear weapon in 1998, and the influence of Pakistan's military was similarly decisive in its internal deliberations about nuclear development over the course of the last decade.

The important factor here is that not only regional and international developments drive potential proliferation. Domestic political upheaval and bureaucratic politics can also have an overriding and potentially decisive influence on the fateful decision to move down the nuclear path. Secretive atomic power agencies or ministries, the national security ap-



paratus, and military organizations are all key domestic variables in the complex decisionmaking surrounding nuclear choices.

### **A RELATIVELY UNCOMPLICATED NUCLEAR HISTORY**

A country's prior experience with nuclear politics, weapons, or energy cannot be overlooked when considering the potential for nuclear breakout. For instance, the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the close of World War II still cast an enormous shadow over contemporary Japan's position on nuclear matters. Only the most extraordinary international circumstances could override the strong domestic opposition and uproar that would no doubt follow any Japanese decision to consider formal nuclear status. One must appreciate the depth of preconceived public attitudes surrounding nuclear power and weapons to understand how political choices are framed inside a particular country. In some cases, these domestic currents are significantly more influential than the strategic circumstances or the regional challenges facing a particular country.

### **Responsible Nuclear Analysis**

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None of these conditions should be taken as necessarily indicative of an impending breakout on the part of any currently nonnuclear country. Indeed, perhaps most notable about the international environment in this respect is how few countries have openly reconsidered earlier decisions to forgo nuclear capabilities. Nevertheless, appreciating the particular influences that affect national calculations regarding a country's nuclear status is important.

Misgivings and concerns over the long-term direction of U.S. global strategy and nuclear policy are, and will continue to be, the single most decisive factor guiding the direction of would-be proliferators—both rogue and responsible. Washington holds in its hands the power to determine how the future of nuclear nonproliferation will play out. Whether this is a blessing or a burden is yet to be determined.

### **Note**

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1. See Mitchell Reiss, *Without the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

