

In the Eyes of the Experts

***Analysis and Comments on
America's Strategic Posture***



***Selected Contributions by the Experts
of the Congressional Commission on the
Strategic Posture of the United States***

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The Impact of Nuclear Posture
on Non-Proliferation

By Joseph Cirincione

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The nuclear posture and strategic decisions of nuclear-armed nations have a significant, often immediate impact on the nuclear acquisition decisions of other nations. A decision by a state to acquire nuclear weapons can trigger a similar decision in a rival state. Conversely, the commitment not to acquire or maintain nuclear weapons by one state or group of states can foster similar commitments regionally or globally.

This relationship was recognized in U.S. national intelligence assessment in the 1950s and 1960s and informed the U.S. decision to negotiate the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The new international norm established by the NPT and related agreements—that the world was moving toward the elimination of nuclear weapons—helped prevent, and in some cases reverse, the acquisition of nuclear weapons by new states.

Even as the nuclear-armed nations increased and improved their nuclear weapons in the 1970s and early 1980s the process of negotiation of new arms control treaties maintained the deterrent effect of the NPT. Nations and publics saw the arms race as a violation of the disarmament commitments and sought to bring the violating states back to the established norm. Negotiated reductions in U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals begun in the late 1980s appeared to reaffirm this norm and substantially enhanced non-proliferation efforts, including the successful extension of the NPT in 1995 and the decisions by Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan to give up the nuclear weapons inherited from the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The United States ended the negotiated reduction process in the early 2000s, and both the United States and Russia again emphasized the importance of modernizing and maintaining nuclear weapons and expanded their

use to additional non-nuclear missions. As some nations concluded that the nuclear-weapon states had no intention of eliminating their nuclear weapons, and as India and Pakistan seemed to win acceptance as new nuclear nations, the anti-proliferation impact of the NPT waned. When new states began to develop nuclear weapon technologies, the international cooperation needed to prevent this development became harder to muster.

Re-establishing the commitment to the elimination of nuclear weapons by the United States and other nuclear-armed states coupled with practical steps towards that goal would be a powerful barrier to the spread of nuclear weapons to other states. The interim report of the Commission correctly notes: "If the U.S. by its actions indicates to other nations that we are moving seriously to decrease the importance and role of nuclear weapons, we increase our chance of getting the kind of cooperation we need to deal effectively with the dangers of proliferation." As the Commission finds:

"What we do in our own nuclear weapon program has a significant effect on (but does not guarantee) our ability to get that cooperation. In particular, this cooperation will be affected by what we do in our weapons laboratories, what we do in our deployed nuclear forces, what kind of nuclear policies we articulate, and what we do regarding arms control treaties (e.g., START and CTBT)."

The historical record supports this conclusion.

Historic Linkage Between U.S. Nuclear Posture and Proliferation

Non-proliferation has been a declared part of U.S. national security strategy since 1945. From the beginning, officials recognized the linkage between U.S. nuclear posture and proliferation and detailed this linkage in successive official assessments.

In 1958, when only three countries had nuclear weapons, a now declassified National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), the first exclusively devoted to proliferation, noted:

"A U.S.-USSR agreement provisionally banning or limiting nuclear tests would have a restraining effect on independent production of nuclear weapons by fourth countries. However, the inhibiting effects of a test moratorium would be transitory unless further progress in disarmament—aimed at effective controls and reduction of stockpiles—were evident."¹

Specifically, the agencies concluded:

"In the interest of encouraging progress in disarmament among the major powers, there is popular support throughout most of the world for a ban on tests. Hence, a U.S.-USSR agreement provisionally banning or limiting tests would bring into play strong public pressures against testing by fourth countries, even though such countries might not initially be parties to the agreement."²

The test ban might not stop some countries from testing, such as France, said the report, "Nevertheless, popular pressure, among other reasons, would probably force the Government to postpone further tests." In the longer run, France would likely restrict its right to make weapons "only as part of an arrangement which required reduction of the stockpiles of the major nuclear powers."

Similarly, international agreements would help deter Japan from acquiring weapons, even if it were close to nuclear capability, as "not only the public but the government as well would welcome any agreement which promised to be effective...although they would be reluctant to accept restriction greater than those accepted by other fourth countries, notably Communist China."³

International agreements had their limits, the NIE noted, "The Chinese Communists probably would not be deterred from nuclear weapons production by a limited disarmament agreement, except insofar as they might be prevented by Soviet adherence and Soviet withholding of assistance from China for development of a weapons program."⁴

Subsequent NIEs reaffirmed this linkage. The first assessment done during John F. Kennedy's presidency, in September 1961, reviewed the capabilities of 14 countries believed capable of developing an operational nuclear weapon but noted that having the capability "does not answer the question whether they will actually do so."⁵ The decision to go ahead with a program "will depend on a complex of considerations both domestic and international."⁶

Domestic considerations in addition to technical capabilities include cost, security requirements, the desire to increase prestige, and domestic opposition to a program. International factors include the nature of relations with other states and the international security climate. Significantly, the estimate found:

"The prospect of an agreement among the major powers for a nuclear test ban, for example, especially if it were viewed as a forerunner to broader disarmament steps, would undoubtedly strengthen force opposed to the spread of nuclear capabilities. Growing pessimism as to the likelihood of any realistic disarmament agreement could in some cases (e.g., Sweden, India) tend to undermine opposition to the acquisition of a national nuclear capability."⁷

These early NIEs were as concerned with the nuclear weapon decisions of U.S. friends and allies as they were about potential adversaries. They

remind us that the proliferation problem has never been confined to hostile states. The considerations many allies had then apply to considerations U.S. allies have today.

The 1961 NIE examined each specific case, judged France and Israel as likely to develop weapons (France had tested in 1960, Israel would have a bomb by 1968), and found other likely cases were significantly dependent on international disarmament efforts.

Specifically, Sweden would be technically capable of making a nuclear weapon by 1963.

“If at that time the international climate appeared to be calm, especially if positive steps toward disarmament had been agreed upon by the major powers—or there were reasonable hopes that one would materialize—it is unlikely that the Swedes would decide to undertake a nuclear weapons program. In the absence of such reassuring factors and especially if other countries had already decided to produce nuclear weapons, the pressure to initiate a nuclear weapons program would probably grow sharply.”⁸

India, the estimate said, would be under great pressure to develop a nuclear weapon if China exploded a nuclear device, “even so, we believe India would not decide to devote its nuclear facilities to a weapons program unless its leaders were firmly convinced that no broad disarmament agreements were possible...”⁹

Overall, the agencies judged seven nations capable of developing nuclear weapons as unlikely to do so in the next few years, but warned, “These attitudes and views could change in the coming years with changing circumstances, e.g., if it became increasingly clear that progress on international disarmament was unlikely...”¹⁰

Gilpatric Committee Concludes Weapon States Must Lead by Example

In January 1965, President Johnson’s Gilpatric Committee on Nuclear Proliferation report concurred with the sentiment of the earlier NIEs: “It is unlikely that others can be induced to abstain indefinitely from acquiring nuclear weapons if the Soviet Union and the United States continue in a nuclear arms race.”¹¹

The first page of the report recommended:

“The Committee is now unanimous in its view that preventing the further spread of nuclear weapons is clearly in the national interest...[T]he United States must, as a matter of great urgency, substantially increase the scope and intensity of our efforts if we are to have any hope of success. Necessarily, these efforts must be of three kinds:

- (a) negotiation of formal multilateral agreements;
- (b) the application of influence on individual nations considering nuclear weapons acquisition, by ourselves and in conjunction with others; and
- (c) example by our own policies and actions.¹²

The Committee detailed necessary steps, including tougher export controls, stricter safeguards on civilian nuclear programs and increased budgets for the IAEA, and acknowledged the importance of the participation by the Soviet Union in efforts to stop proliferation.

It warned: "Lessened emphasis by the United States and the Soviet Union on nuclear weapons, and agreements on broader arms control measures must be recognized as important components in the overall program to prevent nuclear proliferation."¹³

Its number one recommendation stressed the importance of multilateral agreements:

"Measures to prevent particular countries from acquiring nuclear weapons are unlikely to succeed unless they are taken in support of a broad international prohibition applicable to many countries."¹⁴

These agreements should include a global non-proliferation agreement (President Johnson concluded the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1968 and President Richard Nixon secured its ratification in 1970); nuclear free zones, particularly in Latin America and Africa (both have such treaties in effect today); and a comprehensive test ban (concluded in 1996, but yet to enter into force).

After specific recommendation for policies towards individual nations and increased safeguards, the Committee concluded:

"If we are to minimize the incentives for others to acquire nuclear weapons, it is important that we avoid giving an exaggerated impression of their importance and utility and that we stress the current and future important role of conventional armaments."¹⁵

Disarmament Part of a Web of Restraints

While progress toward disarmament is an important factor, no assessment ever found that it was the only factor. NIEs usually included a web of issues influencing individual national decisions on nuclear weapon programs. A December 1975 estimate summarized:

"Threshold-crossers' decisions will be strongly affected by what happens in the whole complex web of international relations—North-South disputes, East-West relations, economic, technological and military developments."¹⁶

As noted above, the main reasons that states acquire nuclear weapons are: security, prestige, domestic politics, and to a lesser degree, technology and economics. The reasons states do not develop nuclear weapons can be grouped into the same set of factors: security, prestige, domestic politics, technology, and economics.

Each driver for acquiring nuclear weapons has a matching barrier. That is, states decide not to build nuclear weapons—or, in some cases, give up weapons they have acquired or programs that they have started—because they decide that the security benefits are greater without nuclear weapons, that prestige is enhanced by non-nuclear-weapon status, because domestic politics convince leaders not to pursue these programs, or because the technological and economic barriers are too significant to overcome.

An effective non-proliferation policy will minimize the drivers and maximize the barriers. A recent example of this approach is found in the 2007 NIE on Iran. The assessment concluded, “Tehran’s decisions are guided by a cost-benefit approach rather than a rush to a weapon irrespective of the political, economic, and military costs.” It found that “some combination of threats of intensified international scrutiny and pressures, along with opportunities for Iran to achieve its security, prestige, and goals for regional influence in other ways,” might convince Tehran to halt its nuclear program.¹⁷

The United States on its own or through its alliances could influence some of these factors in the case of Iran or other states. But the global non-proliferation regime has proved a formidable barrier. Since the signing of the NPT, many more countries have given up nuclear weapon programs than have begun them.

In the 1960’s, 23 states had nuclear weapons, were conducting weapons-related research, or were actively discussing the pursuit of nuclear weapons. Today, only 10 states have nuclear weapons or are believed to be seeking them.¹⁸ Before the NPT entered into force, only six nations abandoned indigenous nuclear weapon programs that were under way or under consideration: Egypt, Italy, Japan, Norway, Sweden, and West Germany. Since then, Argentina, Australia, Belarus, Brazil, Canada, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Libya, Romania, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Switzerland, Taiwan, Ukraine, and Yugoslavia have all abandoned nuclear weapon programs or nuclear weapons (or both). Now North Korea, Iran, and Pakistan are the only three states in the world that began acquiring nuclear capabilities after the NPT entered into force and have not ceased their efforts.

This regime will crumble if the consensus built on disarmament and non-proliferation commitments is not restored.

Conclusion

History has borne out U.S. assessments of the essential connection between controlling existing arsenals and preventing new ones. These previous national estimates can assist today's officials in efforts to apply the same logic to current threats.

The Commission's interim report recognizes this connection but does not include a finding on this issue. The report notes in its narrative, "The fact that other states possess nuclear weapons continues to affect decisions about the needed U.S. strategic posture." The reverse is also true: The fact that the U.S. and other states possess nuclear weapons continues to affect other states' decisions about nuclear strategies.

The interim report's Finding 10, that "Other nations are unlikely to eliminate their nuclear weapons just because the United States does so," is true, but they are also unlikely to eliminate their weapons if the United States does not. A negotiated process of nuclear reductions and restraints has proven to be an essential element for convincing states to limit or eliminate their weapons and weapon programs.

The Commission should find that the commitment by the United States and other nuclear-armed nations to eliminate nuclear weapons and to take practical, immediate steps towards that goal will improve U.S. security and substantially enhance prospects for preventing the acquisition of nuclear weapons by new states and by terrorist groups.

1 Director of Central Intelligence, "National Intelligence Estimate 100-2-58," 1 July 1958 (Approved for release July 2004), p. 2.

2 *ibid.*, p. 17.

3 *ibid.*

4 *ibid.*

5 Director of Central Intelligence, "National Intelligence Estimate Number 4-3-61," 21 September 1961, p. 5.

6 *ibid.*, p. 5.

7 *ibid.*, p. 5.

8 *ibid.*, p. 8.

9 *ibid.*, p. 9.

10 *ibid.*, p. 9.

11 President's Task Force on Preventing the Spread of Nuclear Weapons (Gilpatric Report), 21 January 1965, Washington, DC, p. 7.

12 *ibid.*, p. 2.

13 *ibid.*, p. 5.

14 *ibid.*, p. 7.

15 *ibid.*, p. 20.

16 Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence, Office of Political Research, "Eight Years Later: New 'Threshold States' Research Study, 'Managing Nuclear Proliferation: The Politics of Limited Choice,'" December 1975.

17 National Intelligence Council, "Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities," November 2007, Washington, DC, p. 7.

18 The 10 countries known to have nuclear weapons or believed to be seeking them are, in order of acquisition: United States, Russia, United Kingdom, France, China, Israel, India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Iran.