Since the first nuclear explosion in 1945, day-to-day combat against strategic weapons proliferation has been conducted almost exclusively by specialists. This specialization has kept the fight refined but made victory elusive. What follows is a three-step corrective. First, if the fight against proliferation is ever to be won, senior policymakers and bureaucrats must recognize and overcome the limits of “traditional” nonproliferation. Second, they must see U.S. nonproliferation efforts as essential to sustain the recent wave of newly established liberal democracies, a trend that holds out the hope of pacifying international relations if it is not throttled by hostile regimes now acquiring strategic weapons. Finally, U.S. officials must commit themselves to conducting a long-term competition—not unlike that the United States waged against the Soviet Union—to keep potentially hostile, proliferating regimes from gaining any lasting advantage over the United States or its friends. This nonproliferation effort—a less desperate kind of Cold War—is what the United States should be promoting.

**OUR CURRENT QUANDARY**

As a policy matter, nonproliferation is being taken less and less seriously. Recent evidence of this was delivered last fall on Capitol Hill. In a puzzling display of nonpartisan politics, Congress exceeded a White House request to allow Pakistan to receive arms that the United States was withholding as part of a sanction against Islamabad’s nuclear weapons activities. To be sure, there were senators (13 Republicans and 32 Democrats) who thought granting this relief was a mistake. Islamabad, they noted, had repeatedly lied to the United States about not having a nuclear weapons program. Lifting so much of the nonproliferation sanction now, they warned, implied that its imposition never made sense in the first place. The majority in Congress, however, disagreed. Pakistan, they insisted, had suffered enough. The United States had to be realistic about Pakistan’s nuclear weapons capabilities. Besides, the arms sales might improve U.S.-Pakistan relations.¹

For the record, this was the first time that the new Republican Congress had ever exceeded a presidential request. Perhaps the only thing more peculiar was that few, if any, noticed: It was as if it were expected. In fact, Congressional insensibility to nonproliferation matters has become all too familiar. The White House’s reluctance to sanction China for nuclear and missile technology sales to Pakistan and Iran, for example, or to penalize Russia for its missile and nuclear technology transfers to Latin America, Iran, and the Middle East has generated little more than grumbling from Congress. Nor has it been much different with the president’s overly generous nuclear reactor deal with North Korea or his unprecedented decontrol of militarily significant U.S. computers. Consistently, Congress has said or done little.

**UNTENABLE REALISM**

Perhaps. But such “realism” seems odd, particularly coming from a Congress that seems so reluctant to send American forces in harm’s way. In fact, this approach is not just fatalistic, it is a loser. Consider what would have happened if we fought the Cold War this way. Congress and the president would have assumed that communism and its increased popularity were inevitable and followed the worst commercial instincts of America’s European and Asian allies by selling Russia the best of Western high technology. Then, as a hedge against the arms build up and adventurism that the Soviets might pursue, the

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United States would threaten Moscow with preemptive military strikes.

Clearly, the Cold War was neither waged nor won this way. Nor would it make sense to use this approach in fighting strategic weapons proliferation. After all, like communism, the spread of strategic weapons is hardly inevitable. In the last four years South Africa, Brazil, and Argentina all publicly renounced their nuclear weapons programs (South Africa actually destroying seven of the bombs it built); Taiwan’s and South Korea’s nuclear weapons efforts have been checked; and nearly all of these countries (except Brazil) still have their long-range rocket programs on hold.

More important, nonproliferation controls and sanctions, like Cold War strategic trade restrictions, can work. In fact, one of the reasons these nations have suspended their strategic weapons efforts is because of the delay and expense nonproliferation restrictions inflicted on these programs. Such controls will never be perfect, but they do help.

Finally, it is one thing to prepare for nuclear war and protect the country or to counter strike, and prevail if attacked. It is quite another, however, to launch preemptive strikes or wage preventative wars in vain hopes of eliminating threats. If “counterproliferation” means that the United States intends to solve its proliferation problems with preemptive “surgical” attacks, the Cold War—even with its Vietnams and Koreas—will soon seem a Zion of peace. In fact, the only thing such raids (and U.S. policy pronouncements supporting them) are likely to hit are Third World political nerves and U.S. alliance relations. Only a false sense of “realism” could ignore such realities.

NONPROLIFERATION, MOSTLY WITH A VENGEANCE

The problems with the latest in proliferation “realism,” however, hardly suggest that the traditional approach nations have taken against proliferation is all that sound. Indeed, the popularity of this new realism is itself a reaction to the overly idealistic views that have dominated traditional nonproliferation. For decades now, the arms control community has promoted its view of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as the way to address proliferation threats. As that community and now the White House see it, promoting the NPT’s requirements that nuclear weapons states disarm and share civilian nuclear technology with nations who pledge not to make bombs, is America’s best nonproliferation gambit. Yet, promoting this strategy—which administration officials have now endorsed for addressing all types of strategic weapons proliferation—can easily be worse than no strategy at all.

Consider what policies this perspective has produced toward North Korea. The president’s advisors boast of having kept North Korea from leaving the NPT and getting them to agree to dismantle several suspect nuclear facilities. This pride, however, ignores that our earlier preoccupation with getting Pyongyang to join the NPT is what allowed it to build these “peaceful” nuclear weapons facilities in the first place. Moreover, North Korea is still in violation of the treaty today and, according to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, has at least one bomb’s worth of material secreted away.2

These points should matter. Yet, instead of rethinking how the traditional NPT approach helped cause the North Korean crisis, U.S. officials simply employed it again in 1994 in hopes of keeping North Korea from leaving the treaty. How? By again shaping an NPT-based deal: in exchange for $4 to $6 billion in modern power reactor technology, the United States secured Pyongyang’s pledge not to make any more nuclear weapons materials in declared facilities and a promise that North Korea will allow international inspectors to look for the material it thinks North Korea has secreted away sometime after these reactors are near completion, five or more years from now.3

This approach to nonproliferation is not limited to things nuclear. Indeed, the United States is now trying to extend it to missile proliferation and the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). Announced in 1987, this export control regime was supposed to keep the number of nations with large missiles as small as possible by restricting missile technology transfers. Not any longer. In an effort to “universalize” its application and open the regime up to proliferating nations which were once its key targets, White House officials have chosen to expand the MTCR’s membership and liberalize previous trade restraints on “peaceful” rocket and drone technology.4

Instead of sanctioning Russia and Brazil last year for cooperating in the development of a “peaceful” nuclear-capable rocket, as U.S. law authorizes, the United States took a more “diplomatic” approach. The White House waived sanctions for both countries, sponsored
their immediate entry into the MTCR, and praised them for their professed commitment to international nonproliferation norms. Again, this “progress” came at a cost: those who worked on the space launcher project publicly emphasized that once completed, it could still be converted into an intercontinental ballistic missile overnight. Also, as late as the end of the Bush administration, this project’s top technicians were in Baghdad helping Saddam Hussein build rockets during Desert Shield and then went on to hock rocket expertise in Teheran. As for Russia, it still has not come clean on all of its violations of the MTCR (as suggested by the United Nations’ interception late last year of Russian rocket guidance systems destined for Iraq).

Administration officials, operating under the traditional NPT approach, find none of these facts particularly compelling. Instead, they insist that the United States must show that it is serious about making the MTCR less “discriminatory.” How? Give Russia and Brazil (and nations like them) an incentive to pledge their adherence to nonproliferation norms. Free up Western supplies of missile technology to them for “peaceful” purposes, admit them into the MTCR, and, coincidentally, make them exempt from missile proliferation sanctions under U.S. law.

The application of such policy logic is not limited to nations who claim to adhere to nonproliferation norms. The United States has also applied it to nations who are unlikely to adhere or even join the key nonproliferation regimes. Thus, in fall of 1995, the U.S. Department of Energy announced that it was going to lend nuclear reactor safety assistance to India to strengthen India’s commitment to nuclear safety and the “peaceful” use of nuclear energy. India, which has refused to sign the NPT, however, is currently using its “peaceful” nuclear power plants to make weapons materials.

In another case, in January 1996, the United States invited six Chinese nuclear engineers to come to the United States to study America’s most advanced light water reactor design. The idea, State Department officials explained, was to show the Chinese the potential peaceful nuclear benefits of adhering to nonproliferation norms. (U.S. law prohibits U.S. reactor sales to China until it adheres to the NPT.) The engineers, however, are likely to come from the same Chinese firm U.S. officials threatened to sanction for selling ring magnets to Pakistan’s nuclear weapons effort. Meanwhile, U.S. intelligence agencies have determined that China has been assisting Pakistan’s and Iran’s nuclear, chemical, and missile programs.

**AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH**

Should the United States abandon its enthusiasm for tying its nonproliferation policies to the NPT? If it means continuing to interpret the NPT the way U.S. officials currently are, then, the answer is “yes.” But an alternative is available. The United States could insist that the NPT and all other nonproliferation agreements be read to emphasize their primary intent to prevent strategic weapons spread rather than to promote international technological equality or U.S. nuclear disarmament.

It might well be diplomatic to indulge smaller nations’ complaints that the United States has not yet eliminated its nuclear arsenal or facilitated the “fullest possible exchange” of “peaceful” nuclear technology and hardware as called for under the NPT. But, it is a mistake to suppose that the United States must immediately commit to treaty-like obligations on these points to uphold its end of the nonproliferation bargain. In fact, the NPT only speaks of nuclear weapons states’ obligations to make good faith efforts towards arms reductions. It specifies that states have an “inalienable right” to develop nuclear energy only if they are “in conformity with” the treaty’s prohibitions against the “direct or indirect” transfer or acquisition of nuclear weapons.

This, in turn, suggests that NPT safeguards for “preventing diversion of nuclear energy from peaceful uses to nuclear weapons” ought to consist of more than what nations have currently agreed to. Effective safeguards should do more than have a good chance of detecting diversions; they should be effective and warn early enough to help prevent them. With militant, secretive nations, like Iran and North Korea, such safeguards are hardly possible. Nor is it feasible to safeguard certain strategic materials (e.g., plutonium and highly enriched uranium) or activities (e.g., enrichment or reprocessing) since these bring nations within hours or days of acquiring the very weapons that safeguards are targeted against. These dangerous materials and activities can be monitored. But this is not the same as safeguarding, which requires not just detection, but timely warning of a diversion—i.e., an alarm that goes off early enough to enable an outside party to intervene and block a military diversion from being completed.

Pretending that existing inspections meet this criteria
(when they clearly do not) might bolster the current NPT regime’s popularity but at the cost of spreading unsafeguardable nuclear technology. Indeed, given that the commercial use of nuclear weapons usable fuels is unprofitable and unnecessary for generating power,13 candor about the impossibility of truly safeguarding such materials and related facilities is essential. Such candor might upset nations such as Nigeria, Iran, and Indonesia, which like to emphasize the nuclear technology sharing and disarmament provisions of the NPT, but it would suggest a much sounder understanding of the treaty and make the NPT far more sustainable in the long-run.

These same points apply to missile technology. One might want the MTCR to allow freer commerce in missile technology among MTCR members (in order to give members a bonus for joining) or to suggest that the MTCR is only concerned about “offensive” or “unsafeguarded” missiles. But pursuing these lines of argument (as the U.S. government is currently doing) has little to do with the MTCR’s original intent and even less to do with preventing missile proliferation.

In fact, the MTCR’s guidelines are quite clear on the need to control any missile technology transfers—including those relating to “inoffensive” space launch vehicles, sounding rockets, target drone, and reconnaissance drones made either within or outside the MTCR—that could “contribute” to a “nuclear-capable missile.” Thus, the MTCR requires that all such transfers be considered “on a case-by-case basis” (whatever their destination or announced intent) and recommends a “strong presumption of denial.”14

As for safeguarding “peaceful” space launchers and drones, one might as well attempt to safeguard “peaceful” nuclear explosives. Indeed, large rockets and drones are the aerospace equivalent of such explosives. With a mere change in firing angles and guidance, rockets and drones can be converted to military use overnight. Instead of firing a rocket at 90 degrees for peaceful satellite launches, a 45 degree angle can be used to target one’s adversary. Similarly, large, high-endurance reconnaissance drones, programmed to loiter and then return home, can just as easily be programmed to strike enemy targets. Inspecting these unmanned systems might allow one to monitor their use but in no way would this be a safeguard (i.e., afford enough warning of a possible diversion to intervene and prevent possible military use).

**BEYOND NONPROLIFERATION: A DEMOCRATIC WAVE?**

Certainly, reforming our current nonproliferation policies to reflect these realities is overdue. Existing nonproliferation agreements and laws can be reinterpreted to do this and need to be if only to prevent these regimes from making matters worse. Yet, clarifying what is truly safeguardable and making nonproliferation sanctions and regime membership criteria tougher are hardly sufficient to prevent determined nations from acquiring strategic weapons.

Ultimately, the only protection against such proliferators is to get them to change their minds about needing such weapons in the first place. Such conversions may seem idealistic but they have happened before and are likely to keep happening. Countries that once had active nuclear weapons programs—like South Africa, Argentina, and Brazil—have put them on hold. Why? As these nations became more democratic, their militaries’ ability to make costly weapons covertly waned, as did the threats these nations perceived from their neighbors.

Additional democratic conversions of this sort are likely. Consider the trends: Although it took all of recorded history to produce the 30 democracies existent in 1960, it took only another 30 years to produce an additional 30. This tendency, in part is driven by economics. Indeed, there is a strong correlation between countries’ earned (not accidental, e.g., oil, or illegitimate, e.g., pilfered) per capita income, which has risen dramatically in the last 40 years, and their probability of being or becoming democratic. As earned per capita incomes have risen, so have the number of democracies. What will the world look like in the next 30 years? The income gap between developed and underdeveloped nations will continue to close, educational and health standards will rise, and at least another 15 nations should become democratic.15

Will this reduce the threat of war? Critics say “no,” that the world’s liberalization does not guarantee its pacification, that the roots of national antagonisms are too deep, emotionally and historically. They even argue that democratic nations, such as Germany and Japan, may turn against the United States. Perhaps, but it is difficult to believe that the Germany and Japan of the 1930s have much to do with these nations today. Indeed, one of the few benefits of World War II was destruction of the so-
cial climate that made Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany possible. All things being equal, then, democratic nations—Germany and Japan included—are far less likely to go to war against other liberal states.¹⁶

Yet, things are rarely equal. Japan and Germany could remilitarize, but not out of ambition so much as out of fear of the possible exceptions to the democratic trend like China, North Korea, Russia, and radical Islamic nations. These “exceptions” are worrisome. As per capita incomes rose in the 1970s and 1980s in Iran and Iraq, militant hostility to Western nations and liberalism increased and shows no signs of abating. Moreover, the correlation between income and democracy seems to be generally negative among Arab Islamic states.¹⁷

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) is also a worry. Although incomes are rising and fueling a trend towards democracy that should be realized by 2015, for the next decade or so there is no guarantee that China’s prosperity will moderate its behavior as the old regime clings to power.¹⁸ Indeed, if anything, many analysts see China as one of America’s and its allies’ most likely military competitors. Nor can the Chinese State Committee’s non-proliferation pledges be taken very seriously. China may define its security interests in a fashion that is at odds with those of the United States and its allies. As a result, it does not view its export of what it calls “defensive” missiles to Pakistan and Iran as a proliferation threat.

Similarly, The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) is unlikely to observe nonproliferation norms. U.S. officials have asked it to adhere to MTCR guidelines, but it still sells SCUDs to Syria and Iran. As for nuclear activities, it is constantly threatening to resume production of nuclear weapons materials at known facilities unless it gets its way in continuing negotiations for two modern U.S.-designed power reactors.¹⁹ And the DPRK still prefers to intimidate South Korea with military maneuvers rather than sit down and negotiate peaceful unification.

Finally, there are Russia and Ukraine. Here the problem is structural poverty still driven by too many state subsidies, little or no government protection of civil liberties or private property, a generalized contempt for upholding contracts or law, far too much organized crime and capital flight, and very unstable currency. With so many strategic weapons and related production centers and technology and so much disorder and destitution, Russia and Ukraine cannot help but pose proliferation risks.

A MORE COMPETITIVE STRATEGY IS NEEDED

These exceptions are significant and are unlikely to go away anytime soon. The question is, “what should the United States do about them?” From a nonproliferation standpoint, the United States has generally presumed that the worst proliferators can be persuaded somehow to adhere to international norms of good behavior. Thus, the United States and France insisted on frequent international inspections of Iraq’s “peaceful” nuclear program in the late 1970s and demanded that Algeria join the NPT when, in 1991, it was caught secretly constructing an unsafeguarded Chinese reactor. The United States took a similar approach with North Korea, Russia, and China when they were caught violating their nonproliferation pledges: It got these nations to promise not to repeat their errant behavior and then offered them access to more Western strategic technology.

Such bargaining has been the rule in the 1990s, save for two exceptions—Iraq and Iran. The United States has insisted that internationally safeguarded strategic technology be denied to these nations along with financial credits that might enable them to become fiscally independent. The premise in these cases is that Iran’s and Iraq’s current governments are untenable, but until they give way to more peaceable regimes, the United States should do nothing to fuel their offensive ambitions.

Given Iran’s and Iraq’s political, financial, and military weaknesses and the West’s relative economic strengths, this strategy may work. More important, it suggests the kind of long-term effort that the United States and its friends should be attempting elsewhere. Instead of stressing America’s relative weaknesses in its fight against proliferation—its diplomatic inclination to court and make agreements with its enemies and commercial disinclination to impose stiff export controls or trade sanctions—the United States should leverage its superior market economy, high technology, and successful democratic politics to contain and transmute the worse proliferation threats.²⁰

What would this mean in the case of North Korea? Instead of trying to keep North Korea from renouncing its membership in the NPT (by pumping a dying tyrannical regime with oil and political recognition), the West might try to unify the Korean Peninsula on terms acceptable to the South. This effort would take time and money but no more initially than the decade and billions planned
to be spent merely to keep North Korea from making more nuclear weapons materials. More important, unlike the defeatist strategy the United States is now pursuing, a peaceful offensive aimed at unification is a contest in which the United States and its Asian friends hold the economic and political winning cards. After all, both North and South Korea claim they favor unification, but all the North has to offer to accomplish this are threats of war. South Korea, on the other hand, has the borrowing power to rebuild the North and political and economic systems that are far more attractive than communism.

With Russia, the United States might recalibrate its strategic threat reduction efforts, which are consolidating nuclear materials under the former Soviet General Staff’s control, and begin to focus more on the twin dangers of remilitarization and leakage. Indeed, if the United States is truly concerned about loose Russian nukes, leaving growing amounts of nuclear weapons materials under Moscow’s weak (but increasingly nationalistic) control is, at best, a provisional answer. Here, as Brian Chow of RAND has suggested, the United States should appeal to Moscow’s desire for superpower recognition by offering jointly to remove proportionate amounts of U.S. and Russian (and, perhaps later, other nations’) nuclear materials to agreed neutral locations where they might be monitored effectively to prevent theft and or quick remilitarization.21

As for China, U.S. officials must stop despairing that any reaction to Beijing’s proliferant behavior (other than American appeasement or inattention) will jeopardize Sino-U.S. relations and, instead, focus on the kind of peaceful Chinese foreign policy it wants. Indeed, the United States should see China’s proliferation transgressions as early opportunities to shape Sino-U.S. security relations through the selective curtailment (and assuming improved behavior, the expansion) of financial and high-technology cooperation. Such targeted denials of high finance and technology should be tailored to demonstrate to Beijing that proliferation is simply not worth the cost. Such sanctions would be relatively cheap for the United States to impose but costly to the Chinese to endure.

Instead of threatening to cut off “Most Favorited Nation” status—an act that would hurt many U.S. retailers—more selective actions might be considered. When Beijing threatens to sell missile technology to Iran and Pakistan or to “test” missiles off Taiwan’s coast, the United States must be willing early on to target the specific Chinese aerospace firms involved and let U.S. contractors cooperate with Taiwan on missile defenses (thus, demonstrating the United States’ resolve to increase its security ties with Taiwan if China persists in threatening it militarily). Similarly, when Beijing threatens to sell dangerous nuclear technology to Pakistan and Iran, the United States should highlight existing U.S. law, which encourages halting U.S. nuclear commerce and military assistance, and ask France and Germany to forego new nuclear contracts with China until these matters are resolved. Also, given the Chinese military’s need for foreign capital, Beijing (and the People’s Liberation Army) should be extremely sensitive to any moves that might lower China’s credit rating or access to U.S. financial markets.

In the case of India and Pakistan (where the United States has far less commercial activity than in China), a truly competitive strategy should attempt to do more than merely penalize bad proliferation behavior; it should use America’s powerful economic influence to foster Indo-Pakistani commerce. Such commerce is critical for peace. Indeed, political extremists have been able to dominate Indo-Pakistani disputes precisely because a moderator of economic intercourse is virtually absent. A debate on opening commerce to India is currently being waged in Pakistan; the United States should not be neutral. Just as the United States should be willing to penalize Pakistan’s attempts to expand its nuclear and missile arsenal, it should encourage efforts to increase economic comity by making it easier for Pakistan and India to secure international and private U.S. loans. Such positive incentives are far more likely to foster peace in concert with affording or denying one or both sides military assistance than working the later alone.

Of course, none of this is meant to suggest that the United States should abandon its efforts to defend against proliferation. The United States must do all it can to limit the damage strategic weapons might inflict on its land, forces, or operations. Indeed, providing for such defenses has been part of U.S. military planning since the use of chemical weapons in World War I. Also, once war has begun, knocking out an adversary’s strategic capabilities is a logical way to limit such harm.

At the same time, military defenses (including counter offensive capabilities) are rarely perfect and are never strategies themselves. This is doubly true in combating weapons of proliferation concern: These arms, by definition, are weapons against which we lack adequate military countermeasures. The idea that U.S. forces can
neutralize or “counter” such weapons with surgical preemptive strikes, leak-proof defenses, or foolproof electronic or optical spoofing is simply naïve. Indeed, defending or launching counter offensive strikes against strategic weaponry are less prescriptions for victory than they are for avoiding the pain of defeat. To be truly competitive against proliferation, the United States and its friends must do more than fend off the worst. They must be willing to engage in the type of long-term competition that produced the U.S. victory over the Soviets.

This more serious competition is the one the United States has yet to join, and it is understandable why. No one wants enemies. Certainly, when one speaks of competitors, most diplomats mistakenly assume that any nation, so described, must be a foe. Yet, the United States competes with friends and allies in a variety of ways peacefully (trade and cultural wars, etc.) all the time. With whom does the United States need to compete to curb proliferation? Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, should get priority, along with China and Russia (particularly the military and organized crime entities within) if they continue to proliferate.

A LESS DESPERATE, LESS SIMPLE COLD WAR?

What is at least as important as whom the United States and its friends target in their fight against proliferation is the need to make this fight a part of a calmer, long-term effort to promote liberal democracy. Like the strategy of containment that the United States pursued in hopes that the Soviets’ inherent weaknesses and contradictions would give way to a more peaceable regime, the United States now needs to commit to several long-term competitions.

Progress here, however, presumes that senior politicians will choose to engage in the day-to-day proliferation battles currently being waged unassisted by nonproliferation specialists. Until these officials’ mistaken NPT mantra is corrected, U.S. nonproliferation efforts are more likely to encourage proliferation than stop it. Progress also requires that U.S. policymakers have a larger vision of victory than merely preventing strategic weapons from spreading: Nonproliferation must not only be effective in blocking or deterring specific transfers, it must help protect liberal democracies. Indeed, only when the fight against strategic weapons proliferation is tied properly to this larger effort will the dangers of traditional nonproliferation and the pitfalls of the latest flawed realism be avoided.
