

Early in the 1990s, pundits claimed that proliferation would prove to be little more than a passing fancy of security specialists and the Clinton administration. It didn't work out that way. Today, the problem is broadly seen as one of enduring importance for US national security and global stability in the post-Cold War era. Accordingly, we have worked for roughly a decade now to come to terms with the proliferation problem without the Cold War as context. As a community of policymakers and analysts, we have had a rough time doing so. We began with what we thought we knew, which turned out to be not enough. We reinvigorated traditional policy approaches, only to have to improvise and innovate as the world changed. Moreover, our community has steadily expanded, as the proliferation issue has begun to cut across an ever broader array of foreign and defense policy interests and as more and more people—many with very different backgrounds—have had to learn about the proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) weapons and their missile delivery systems.

The time is now ripe to stand back and attempt to draw some lessons. What have we learned about the problem? What have we learned about the necessary policy responses? How reliable are the political foundations of the effort to combat proliferation? Where are we headed over the next decade or so? The purpose of this viewpoint is to sketch out some preliminary arguments on these questions, in the hope that the exercise will stimulate broader debate.

#### WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED ABOUT THE PROBLEM?

A lot of the thinking about proliferation began with a bad premise: that today's proliferation problem is yesterday's proliferation problem. What's changed? And what hasn't?

The term "proliferation" first entered the public policy lexicon in the 1950s. The proliferation problem was the "N+1" problem, in Albert Wohlstetter's famous characterization, meaning the next incremental addition to the number of nuclear weapon states.<sup>1</sup> As the concern about

nuclear weapons programs in Iraq, Iran, North Korea, and elsewhere suggests, the N+1 problem remains central to the proliferation problem. But the matter is no longer nearly so straightforward.

The nuclear focus has long since given way to a much broader set of concerns. In the 1980s, chemical weapons emerged as weapons of proliferation

concern within a number of regions and at the global level. Biological weapons emerged as an additional concern in the 1990s. Medium- and long-range missile delivery systems are also spreading, both ballistic and cruise. Advanced conventional warfare systems or subsystems are widely traded on an international arms market that has been revolutionized over the last decade. These weapons and associated capabilities are of course distributed unevenly within and among regions.

Moreover, the nuclear subject is itself changing. The list of countries of proliferation concern no longer includes just those seeking strategic deterrents but also includes some countries with avowed hegemonic aspirations.

**VIEWPOINT:  
PROLIFERATION AND  
NONPROLIFERATION  
IN THE 1990S:  
LOOKING FOR  
THE RIGHT LESSONS**

by Brad Roberts

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rations and run by authoritarian if not megalomaniacal leaders. The problem of “loose nukes” and “instant proliferation” has also gained dramatic new prominence. There is also an increased concern with the diffusion of nuclear technologies, materials, and expertise, whether because of the collapse of the Soviet Union or the interest in nuclear energy in Europe, Asia, and the developing world (65 states now operate nuclear reactors). The latent nuclear weapons capabilities found in an increasing number of countries have also begun to attract attention.

A careful tally of the number of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)-armed states reveals that there is no historical inevitability to growth in their numbers. The number of chemically-armed states was high in World War I, ebbed in the inter-war period, inched up during the Cold War, grew quickly in the 1980s, and has begun again to ebb. The number of states actively pursuing biological weapons was high in World War II, low in the Cold War, also grew in the 1980s, and appears to have held steady since then. Over the last decade, the number of states actively seeking a nuclear weapons capability has been smaller than the number that have abandoned nuclear weapons and/or the associated development programs.<sup>2</sup>

But there *is* an historical inevitability to the latency phenomenon. Beneath the patterns of conventional and unconventional weapons proliferation is a much more substantial pattern of technology diffusion. Reflecting the globalization of the industrial revolution, this diffusion has been greatly accelerated by the emergence over the last couple of decades of a transnational economy in which technologies, materials, capital, and expertise flow rapidly across international borders, typically from firm to firm rather than from state to state. Many of these technologies and materials are dual-use in nature, meaning they have both civil and military applications. In fact, the number of civil technologies with military applications appears to be growing ever larger and includes today, for example, biotechnology, commercial observation satellites, and the Internet. Also increasingly available internationally are so-called enabling technologies that facilitate the production, integration, and use of weaponry.<sup>3</sup>

In short, more and more countries are acquiring the ability to produce strategic military capabilities. This potential to create long-reach weapons with the ability

to inflict mass casualties could supply these countries with great political leverage in time of war and crisis. These latent capabilities are strategic hedges. One of the least measurable indices of proliferation, but also one of the most important, is the degree to which states consciously develop those hedges so that they are in a position to compete successfully if they enter a disintegrating international environment that calls for rapid break-out.

Along with the proliferation of weapons and weapons capabilities to states has come a growing concern about their availability to sub-state and non-state actors—terrorists. The nuclear era has seen many purported extortionists, but no known instance of the use of an explosive device to generate fear in order to extract a political concession of some kind. Chemical and biological warfare agents also have been exploited by extortionists over the years, but only in the nefarious attacks of the Japanese sect Aum Shinrikyo have they been used to wound and kill in large numbers. Yet this seems likely to change. Technological advance, combined with technology diffusion, has put mass casualty attacks within reach of small groups and even individuals, including those without state sponsorship. The disincentives to such sponsorship have been high, but may be eroding as proliferation erodes the norms against such weapons.

Thus the full compass of the proliferation problem runs from N+1 to strategic latency and terrorism. The issue is what people in positions of authority choose to do with the war-making potential inherent in modern economies (or potentially available from certain states or profit-minded firms on the international market). How much latency will state leaders believe to be necessary? How close to the threshold of weaponization? How overt the posture? Although war-making potential is latent in any economy, the latency discussed here is unlike anything known before because of the relative ease and speed with which weaponry with strategic impact can be assembled and used.

## **WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED ABOUT POLICY RESPONSES?**

As a community of policy experts, we long for the days when everything we needed to know about policy was encompassed in the term nonproliferation—and when the only nonproliferation measure that seemed to matter was the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of

Nuclear Weapons (NPT). We have learned that the policy agenda is a good deal more comprehensive. We are beginning to learn that winning the proliferation battle means getting it more or less right in lots of different policy areas. We've learned also that there will be no quick fix and no quick victory. But we hope that there will be enough small ones to balance the losses. We have also begun to learn something about the specific functions of the major policy tools—treaties, export controls, and counterproliferation—in the current, post-Cold War era.

The NPT remains the cornerstone of the nonproliferation effort, along with associated restraints on the supply of nuclear materials and technologies. At the 1995 review conference of states parties, the NPT was given an indefinite extension, although not without a good deal of debate about whether a conditional extension might have been more helpful to accomplishing the treaty's various aspirations. The function of the NPT is to bind virtually every member of the international system into a legal obligation reflecting an anti-nuclear norm. Only a tiny handful of states remain outside the NPT. But there is also fundamental uncertainty about the durability of the political bargain it codifies between the have-nots and the haves, in which the former have forsworn nuclear weapons in the expectation that the latter will fulfill a promise to eliminate them in due course.

Nonproliferation has evolved as the problem has changed. The growing number of proliferation problems has resulted in an expanding set of export control regimes, such as the Australia Group to monitor the trade in materials and technologies sensitive from the point of view of chemical and biological weapons, the Missile Technology Control Regime, and the Wassenaar Arrangement, which is the successor to COCOM for managing international trade in sensitive materials more generally. In the rapidly globalizing trading system, such arrangements cannot function as simple supplier cartels. Even as they struggle to bring in new members, they have a hard time keeping pace with the steadily growing number of suppliers. Instead, they operate as clubs of like-minded states interested in seeing that the trading system's rules for the exchange of security-related items are honored, and in taking responsibility for monitoring compliance. Their participants are held together by perceptions of common interests.

Export controls are an essential feature of the nonproliferation system. Such controls are imperfect instruments and have many critics who see them as contrary to the goals of free trade and economic competitiveness. They cannot be relied upon to prevent especially willful and wealthy malefactors from gaining access, sooner or later, to banned items. But particularly on dual-use NBC materials and technologies, they have a number of positive functions vis-à-vis the proliferation problem. These are enumerated in Box 1.<sup>4</sup>

**Box 1. The Functions of Export Licensing Systems on Dual-Use Materials**

- (1) Export control regimes help to channel trade to legitimate, peaceful activities and away from illegitimate ones.
- (2) They impose delays and additional costs on detected weapon programs.
- (3) They create a level playing field for industry, by establishing an agreed set of rules applied under transparent national decisions.
- (4) They render patterns of trade transparent, thereby making it easier to monitor trade and identify malefactors.
- (5) They insulate industry from the political and economic risks of trade in highly sensitive areas.
- (6) They give industry the incentives and tools to police itself.
- (7) They symbolize and give meaning to the anti-NBC norm
- (8) They are a necessary part of implementing treaty commitments not to trade in sensitive materials and technologies with non-parties.

Arms control beyond the NPT also plays a role in meeting the proliferation challenge. Arms control is not a panacea. Not everyone signs up. Not everyone who signs up complies. Not all cheating is detected. Sometimes these shortcomings are indeed damning: the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) has been sorely tainted by revelations about continued noncompliance by Iraq and Russia, among others. But the nuclear, chemical, and biological disarmament regimes have obvious, useful nonproliferation functions, as do regional measures. These functions are enumerated in Box 2.

Counterproliferation is also an essential new tool of policy, one made necessary by the fact that nonproliferation and arms control have not fully prevented proliferation. Many international observers have leapt to

### Box 2. The Functions of NBC Arms Control

- (1) Arms control agreements codify patterns of restraint among states currently committed to the non-possession of certain weapons; such codes play a domestic role as well, making treaty breakout by these states politically costly and thus unlikely.
- (2) They reduce the number of weapon states: the CWC and the NPT, for example, have provided a rationale for some states weakly committed to weapons programs to abandon them.
- (3) They restrain the military threat of residual arsenals, by limiting their size, sophistication, and integration with other military assets; these limitations may prove critical to the ability of aggressor states to utilize their illicit weapons capabilities to good military effect.
- (4) They help to depoliticize the debate about the hold-out states; when Libya or North Korea fails to sign a treaty, they self-select themselves as a target of efforts by signatory states to induce future compliance.
- (5) They help to focus compliance tools, such as inspections, on potential drop-outs from the regime; this helps to deter noncompliance.
- (6) They institutionalize preexisting norms against the use of these weapons and thus increase the capacity of the international community to extend those norms through concerted action; the CTBT is conspicuous as an example of a treaty that embodies a strong international prohibition against nuclear testing and that may have prolonged effect even if it never formally enters into force.
- (7) The multilateral arms control regimes are tools for building political and economic coalitions against hold-outs and drop-outs; the CWC for example obligates states parties to deny certain kinds of sensitive trade to non-parties. They are tools for building military coalitions against states whose noncompliance comes to be seen as particularly egregious; the UN Security Council's military actions against Iraq since 1991 have been justified in large measure by Iraq's failure to conform to self-accepted treaty obligations. They are helpful for legitimizing the punitive military action that may be deemed necessary in extremis; without such agreements, preemptive strikes by the United States and/or others against the weapons facilities of other states look to many like a form of vigilantism.
- (8) The multilateral treaty regimes are useful for tying together diverse international constituencies for common purposes; the erstwhile North, South, East, and West need opportunities to turn their sense of community into common action, or their differences seem likely to overwhelm their common interests.
- (9) Particularly for the United States, multilateral arms control mechanisms are useful for providing a mode of international engagement well suited to American temper and preferences; arms control is essentially a rule-based system that seeks to promote order through the preservation of shared values and to anchor US power in defense of common interests.
- (10) Arms control has proven useful for helping to manage major international transitions: the existence of the NP had much to do with achievement of the denuclearization of a number of former Soviet republics, and the treat on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) aided the achievement of a stable conventional balance in Europe as the Warsaw Pact collapsed.
- (11) These treaty regimes help to legitimize technology export controls and to extend them to all states parties; by creating a legal obligation to prevent banned trade in sensitive materials, they save the ad hoc coordinating groups from being nothing more than supplier cartels.

the conclusion that counterproliferation (CP) is aimed at developing counterforce attack capabilities, presumably to be employed by the United States in unilateral and punitive fashion—as its tool for policing those whom it deems rogues. This is a serious misunderstanding of counterproliferation, which is aimed at developing all of those special capabilities that will enable the US military to fight, survive, and win regional wars in which aggressors employ chemical, biological, and/or nuclear weapons. These include specific capabilities, such as active and passive defenses tailored to specific

chemical, biological, or nuclear threats, as well as more general ones, such as operational adjustments, regional security strategies, and, yes, counterforce. The functions of counterproliferation are enumerated in Box 3.

Implementing the counterproliferation agenda has required a sea-change in the thinking of the US military, which has not typically seen proliferation as a problem requiring an immediate and substantial reply. This has to do with the military's faith in its ability to improvise its way around tough but unanticipated problems—and

### Box 3. The Functions of Counterproliferation

- (1) CP aims to deter the use of NBC weapons by helping to neutralize their utility in attacks on US forces, or those of its friends and allies.
- (2) To the extent it deters the use of NBC weapons, CP also helps to deter their acquisition—if the aren't going to be helpful in war, why acquire them in the first place, especially if acquisition makes you a target of international sanctions a possibly preemptive attack
- (3) CP also helps to reassure US allies and other beneficiaries of US security guarantees, thereby providing another disincentive to proliferation.

in its ability to dominate any process of escalation. It also reflects a certain slowness—surprising in light of the wake-up call in the Persian Gulf War—in appreciating how aggressors might utilize NBC threats to weaken the domestic political will to prosecute a conflict or to coerce US coalition partners, or how they might utilize NBC attacks to put US forces in the terrible predicament of using nuclear weapons or losing. But the sea-change is underway.

This listing of the positive functions of these various tools of policy is aimed in part at stimulating debate. We've had to learn to think more broadly and strategically about the tools of policy—is this broad enough or even, perhaps, too broad? This listing might create the impression that these tools are cure-alls. This impression would be false. None of these tools is a panacea. There are no silver bullets in the fight against proliferation. One of the purposes of enumerating the positive functions of the policy tools is in fact to illuminate the rather substantial degree to which they depend upon one another. Indeed, *a major lesson that has emerged over the last decade is that these tools of policy not only complement one another but that their integrated pursuit is essential to their combined success.* How should we think about this integration?

Counterproliferation is essential to nonproliferation. Without it, aggressive states might well be emboldened to action, testing the proposition that killing thousands or millions will be useful to their aims, including deterrence of the United States. Without CP, the United States may be left with nothing better than a nuclear reply to an act of mass-casualty aggression—or the option of

“wimping out.” Either choice would be bad for future proliferation trends. CP is about finding other options. It is about making sure that regional aggressors cannot use NBC threats or attacks to break US security guarantees. It is also about having the means to ensure that the first real test of the utility of NBC weapons teaches the lessons we would desire—that such weapons cannot be used for purposes of aggression and that the use of nuclear weapons is tolerable, if ever, only in extremis for defense.

Nonproliferation and arms control are essential to counterproliferation. They are basically tools for cooperative threat management. They keep the number of states equipped with NBC weapons few, and their arsenals relatively small and poorly developed (as a result of the need to keep them underground, both figuratively and literally). CP capabilities that neutralize these threats are within reach of the United States. But if there were a collapse of these regimes and a broad diffusion of advanced NBC weaponry, the United States would have to retreat from CP to resume heavily reliance on deterrence by nuclear means. There would of course be repercussions. This is just the kind of world we want to avoid.

Arms control is essential to CP in another way. The treaty regimes reflect an agreed allocation of rights and responsibilities in association with a commonly elaborated norm. They tie American power to the defense of that norm. They help to legitimize the use of force by the United States (and others) to deal with aggressive states, by turning police actions into leadership obligations based on shared understandings. The alternative to leadership is vigilante justice, which is to say putting America outside of the norms, laws, and institutions created by the international community to deal with aggression. This is antithetical to Americans' common understanding of their nation's mission. It is also simply unworkable, in a system where other states can readily cast off US leadership by delinking their interests from Washington-based guarantees and institutions.

Arms control is also essential to nonproliferation. It helps to legitimize the export licensing systems of supplier nations, by establishing them as a normal part of treaty implementation. It codifies the common interests upon which coalitions are built to deal with particular compliance problems.

Given the rising interest in possible terrorist use of NBC weapons, there has also been a burgeoning discussion of the utility of responses to the state problem for the non-state problem. Here too some key parameters have emerged. These are enumerated in Box 4. None of this is to argue that the political, military, and economic tools developed for the proliferation problem are the first line of defense against mass-casualty terrorism. Indeed, they cannot be relied upon to deter or defeat such terrorist attacks, or to cope with the consequences. But they are complementary and that is the point here.

These then are the basic policy tools—nonproliferation, arms control, and counterproliferation, and to a growing extent counterterrorism. But there are many others that the United States can utilize on its own or with like-minded partners. These include security guarantees to allies in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East; a

willingness and ability to lead international coalitions to deal with particularly egregious instabilities; foreign aid and some arms sales to insecure states; and positive and negative assurances with regard to nuclear weapons. Taken collectively, this is the kit into which the United States and its friends and allies reach when trying to cope with the proliferation challenges of both the moment and the long term.

We have also learned something about how these tools are supposed to be brought together in some coherent fashion. We used to ask: “what is the optimal balance among these tools?” We’ve learned the answer: “it depends.” The proliferation problem has become so complex that there is no one best mix of those tools. It is useful to conceive of three categories of states to which these tools are directed in different ways.

#### **Box 4. The Contributions of Counterproliferation, Nonproliferation, and Arms Control to the Fight Against NBC Terrorism**

- (1) The passive defenses, medical counters, and other protection capabilities against chemical and biological attack developed in the counterproliferation domain offer technologies, techniques, and expertise of use to those concerned with countering CBW terrorism.
- (2) Improvements to the capabilities associated with discovery, targeting, and attacking production and storage facilities being developed in the counterproliferation domain ought also to have a deterrent effect on those decisionmakers considering the possible transfer of weapons of mass destruction, or other forms of assistance, to terrorists.
- (3) Arms control treaties, nonproliferation agreements, and other such measures codify international norms against the use of certain special categories of weapons deemed particularly morally repugnant by peoples around the world. (They codify the norm—they do not create it.) Such norms constrain certain categories of terrorist groups from pursuing NBC capabilities.
- (4) Some arms control treaties, such as the CWC, require implementing legislation by states parties, part of which criminalizes individual engagement in activities that the state has forsworn. These provide a legal basis for prosecuting individuals or groups acquiring chemical and biological weapons.
- (5) Such measures oblige states parties not to assist others to acquire banned capabilities.
- (6) Arms control treaties require that states parties formalize control over sensitive materials and technologies and build the mechanism to monitor and control trade in them. This helps to ensure that these materials and technologies are not readily acquired by terrorist entities.
- (7) Ad hoc coordinating mechanisms such as the Australia Group and the Nuclear Suppliers Group, which help countries to fulfill their treaty obligations, are a venue for exchanging sensitive information about the mis-uses of sensitive materials and technologies.
- (8) Each state’s control over its NBC assets is reinforced by the necessity of being prepared to submit to international inspections.
- (9) Those inspections also add a measure of transparency to national programs that is helpful in detecting or tracking down diversion to terrorist entities.
- (10) The arms control regime also reinforces a web of multilateral anti-terrorism conventions that are essential to the tracking down and punishment of terrorist organizations and their members.
- (11) In the biological domain, the BWC also helps provide the legal and normative basis for enhanced international efforts to monitor outbreaks of infectious disease, which will help the international community identify acts of biological terrorism and do the forensic work essential to finding the perpetrator.

One category consists of states with the ability but not the will to acquire weapons of mass destruction or to engage in arms races with neighbors. The latent capabilities of these states should be very much in the mind of the policymaker. All have unexploited NBC weapons capabilities. Among these are many “repentant proliferants” (in Sandy Spector’s term) that have abandoned strategic weapons or their development programs (e.g., South Africa, Argentina, Brazil, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan). These countries are rightly a focus of proliferation concern for a number of reasons. Only one is the ease with which disinterest might again become interest. Many receive transfers of militarily sensitive technology, and some are conduits for further trade. These states are also essential to the promulgation of international norms about weapons and war and the functioning of multilateral regimes reflecting those norms. Without their participation in the effort to combat proliferation, the response to proliferation will be limited to a few countries, mostly those of the developed world, with deleterious consequences.

A second category consists of the states committed to weapons programs. As noted earlier, this category of states is not actually growing in number. The number of nuclear weapon states has actually declined in recent years, while the number of possessors of biological weapons appears to have stabilized. The number of chemical possessors especially has begun to decline, as states such as India, South Korea, and others have declared programs under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and made plans for their destruction. Of course, the weapons capabilities of many existing proliferators are growing both quantitatively and qualitatively.

A third category consists of those states with weapons or weapon development programs but not driven by aggressive ambitions or fears of being victimized by those who are aggressive. This category includes some states with ambitious development programs as well as those that have paused at certain thresholds related to weaponization, serial production, or declaratory policy and that now face basic policy decisions about the continued evolution of national military capabilities. Think of this group as the dabblers.

For the first category of states, the weapons-disinterested ones, nonproliferation and arms control measures have primary utility, especially in blocking retrograde developments in the repentant states. For the second

category, the weapons-committed ones, counterproliferation has a primary utility in deterring the use of NBC weapons where possible and punishing it where necessary. Nonproliferation and arms control may be helpful for uncovering illicit programs or isolating recalcitrant states. For the third category, the contingent proliferator, the fullest set of tools seems necessary to both dissuade and reassure.

And what about the goals of policy? What have we learned? Political measures such as arms control and disarmament aren’t going to rid the world of nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons. But they can help to get some countries out of the business while also inhibiting the emergence of new possessors—and forcing most of the rest to keep their bombs in the basement, which has a desirable effect in terms of inhibiting the residual threat, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Military planners are learning to appreciate the value of these restraints. We have also learned that counterproliferation can help to reduce reliance on nuclear threats to deter attack with chemical and biological weapons, can dissuade some folks from thinking that NBC weapons are cheap and reliable counters to US military power, and can reassure US allies about the viability of US security guarantees. But counterproliferation cannot eliminate all of the vulnerabilities to US forces, allies, and interests posed by NBC proliferation. My own best guess is that a reasonable goal for the next decade or two is a pattern of proliferation not substantially different from the pattern of the last decade or two—some ebb, some flow, but no wholesale change and no deep unsettling of a world in which regional conflicts appear for the moment ascendant over major power conflicts.

In short, our understanding of the means and ends of policy has shifted a great deal over the last decade. But we still call it nonproliferation, or if you are in the US defense community, threat reduction. Because names matter in American politics, a new and better name for overall strategy is needed. I have elsewhere proposed antiproliferation, as a notion that captures the spirit of opposition while encompassing a growing array of policy tools.<sup>5</sup>

## THE DOMESTIC POLITICS OF STRATEGY

The last decade has also raised a question about whether the political basis exists in Washington to pur-

sue a comprehensive, coherent, focused antiproliferation strategy. In sharp contrast to growing agreement about proliferation's salience is the growing disagreement about what to do about it. Debates about the various instruments of policy are getting sharper. Those debates reflect also-growing dissent about the ends of policy. Some believe we can still fight and win the nonproliferation battle, while others argue that it's long past time to toss in the towel and prepare more seriously for the messier world to come. The steady percolation of domestic debate about the various tools of antiproliferation hints at an important underlying fact—the domestic political foundations of the larger effort have grown weaker in the years since the end of the Cold War, not stronger. On balance, the critics of individual components of the antiproliferation agenda have done a better job of advancing their agendas than the supporters. Unfortunately, much of what passes for debate between critics and supporters is merely the construction and demolition of straw men.

Let's just stipulate that none of the tools of policy work as well as we would like. Tools of policy are only that—instruments to be used, well or poorly, by government officials. The policymaker is already well accustomed to the fact that there are no panaceas in public policy—what he or she needs is more tools in the kit, rather than fewer, for the task of cobbling together responses to an ever-expanding set of problems and a shrinking resource pool. With its excessive digressions to demolish straw-man arguments, the debate has paid too little attention to how these tools are brought together to deal with specific problems. In short, it has missed the synergies among them.

The spring 1997 Senate debate on ratification of the Chemical Weapons Convention offered a revealing glimpse into just how much a new climate of opinion dominates the debate about the instruments of antiproliferation. It demonstrated a growing willingness to exploit national security issues for short-term domestic political advantages, the strong influence on the new Right of the old vanguard of the 1970s-vintage Committee on the Present Danger, confusion about the standards by which to gauge arms control interests in the current era, misunderstanding about what international leadership entails and how it is exercised, and a desire for panaceas. Many seem to believe that we can start from scratch in the effort to deal with proliferation, or that the United States simply can dictate to the rest of

the world how international regimes should come together and operate. Others seem to believe that a retreat into Fortress America could actually succeed in isolating the country from war and violence abroad.

Some on the US political scene appear nostalgic for nonproliferation as conducted during the Cold War. They are animated by a particular vision of America—willing to carry a big stick, to browbeat our allies and partners into following courses conceived in Washington, and to punish those whom we deem rogues. Yet others are animated by the old mantras of arms control, which praise its virtues with nary a view of its flaws and which equate counterproliferation with aggressive pre-emption. Others are animated by a vision of American vulnerability—and care little about proliferation other than the ballistic missile aspect. An increasing body of opinion—inside and outside Congress—subscribes to the view that it simply isn't actually very important to try to “solve” the proliferation problem, with the argument that interstate war isn't the problem and sub-state violence is, implying that NBC terrorism and not proliferation should be the focus of policy.

The chemical treaty ultimately passed. With its entry into force, more than half a dozen proliferators have now come forward with plans to destroy their chemical arsenals. But the ratification process was a vivid reminder of the weak commitment of the United States to the multilateral treaty process and of its episodic interest in the effective functioning of those regimes. The CWC itself is politically wounded and future administrations are likely to have a difficult time gaining congressional support for dealing with various implementation challenges. A cadre of congressional opponents continues to work against the CWC in the hope that, by bringing about its collapse and failure, they will curtail what they see as a strong drift to nuclear disarmament. Some are motivated by the view that all arms control is a delusion and a sell-out of the national interest.

The passing of consensus about the role of arms control in US national security strategy is hardly limited to the Congress. Few in Washington seem to believe that arms control is anything other than a vestige of the Cold War; Senator Helms is hardly alone in the view that the United States spends too much time and money on arms control. This translates into a disinterest in exploring how arms control might contribute to the management of new, post-Cold War problems of international secu-



riety, as well as an unwillingness to expend political capital to implement existing measures effectively.

Counterproliferation has not been selected out for criticism in the way that arms control and nonproliferation instruments have. Yet there too the political foundations are not deep. The fact that nonproliferation advocates have come to tolerate counterproliferation as consistent with their aspirations (although this is more true in the United States than abroad, where the debate is only now being joined) has not translated into the political consensus necessary to sustain major new funding for counterproliferation capabilities. Counterforce capabilities remain anathema to many, largely because they hint of preemption and raise questions about whether America intends to wage punitive wars to enforce its nonproliferation goals.

None of this is to say that the Clinton administration has failed to take proliferation seriously. Candidate Clinton campaigned in 1992 on a promise to raise the policy salience of proliferation across the board and his administrations have made good on this promise. At State, the regional and political-military bureaus have begun to address the problem in more concerted fashion. At Defense, the Counterproliferation Initiative has been set in motion and the Defense Threat Reduction Agency stood up. The administration has worked hard to extend the NPT, update export controls, implement Cooperative Threat Reduction, and craft strategies for proliferation problem cases in Ukraine, North Korea, and elsewhere. It also deserves credit for hammering out consensus within federal agencies that nonproliferation and counterproliferation are self-reinforcing.

But this is not the same as building durable political foundations. Rare is the moment that the administration has gotten out in front of the debate about any particular antiproliferation tool. Its own disinterest in the CWC, for example, helps to account for the fact that more than five years passed between US signature and US ratification, and for the fact that the United States is in substantial technical violation of its treaty obligations well after ratification. In this as in so many other areas, the administration has not effectively communicated to interested Republicans its progress on counterproliferation or its reformulation of the nonproliferation and arms control agendas. Its interests have been tactical—to gain congressional consent for specific actions or measures—rather than strategic. It has not offered a clear vision of

how the various pieces of antiproliferation come together to secure long-term US interests, and of how they must evolve to do so.

Will the next electoral cycle remedy the problem? Perhaps. Observing the public's continued high concern about weapons of mass destruction and their proliferation,<sup>6</sup> the candidates might knit together some careful positions on these issues, hone their strategies through debate, and through victory at the voting booth build the measure of consensus necessary to sustain a strategy. But perhaps not. Candidates may opt instead to exploit specific issues for short-term tactical gain, and ideologues may come to dominate platform writing and subsequent policy appointments, thus strengthening those who would nibble at pieces of the strategy and deepening executive-legislative gridlock. Those who believe in democratic renewal will hope for the best. But they will have to struggle with the residue of acrimonious debate about specific tools of policy that is the legacy of the 1990s.

## THE INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL CONTEXT

As domestic political factors bear on the ability of policymakers to pursue a coherent, long-term, integrated antiproliferation strategy, so too do international political factors. On the proliferation subject especially, US policy seems to attract an interest abroad that it does not attract at home. Foreign observers scrutinize US statements and actions for what they seem to imply about America's view of itself in its "unipolar moment." Many believe that US resistance to proliferation signals a disinterest in the wider world except as a potential threat to US power and prestige. Some also believe that it signals a US commitment to preserve the current distribution of power among states, leaving itself as top dog.

If this is true, ask friends and allies abroad, how just or durable is the resultant world order likely to be? How long can the United States play the role of a status quo power, given its history as a power committed to a revolutionary notion of politics and its alternating temptations of isolationism and messianic engagement? Both friends and adversaries fear a capricious United States, unfettered in its unipolar moment and thus free to intervene willy-nilly to remake the world in its own image. This fear is stoked by Cold War-level defense investments by the United States aimed at maintaining conventional and nuclear superiority. Which America is

reflected in the antiproliferation effort—the conservative one resistant to change, the revolutionary one committed to progressive international change, or an assertive America, willing to use force to project its values abroad?

Many countries participate in the global treaty regimes in part in order to negotiate roles, responsibilities, and the distribution of power in the emerging international system—and to engage the United States in this process. But few in America have joined this international debate, either because they see others' doubts and fears of the United States as insulting, or because it is easier to debate the tools of policy rather than the ends of strategy. Especially our allies, but also many of the new democracies, marvel at the apparent disdain of the United States for these regimes and for these debates at just that moment when the liberal economic and political order seems finally to be arriving on the world stage. They are fearful that America will come to be seen as the emperor with no clothes, one which has lost sight of its singular identity and of how its power and influence are exercised. Most give the United States the benefit of the doubt, believe that it is a benign and reliable power with enduring international responsibilities consonant with its interests and capacities, and await the passing of domestic uncertainty about its world role. NATO's out-of-area action in Kosovo has rung an alarm bell for some, however—especially in China. Moreover, all too often the United States has made life difficult for its foreign supporters, with actions that convey complacency with its singular influence or contempt for those who doubt US leadership credentials.

### LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

These political factors suggest that the battle against proliferation over the next decade will play out not just at the tactical level—where the outcome will depend on how well policymakers apply and integrate the various tools of policy—but at the strategic level, in response to Washington's leadership more broadly.

Because the proliferation challenge comes at an awkward moment in American politics, there is reason to be concerned. Because this is a time of inward focus, seeming disinterest in world affairs, public ennui, and a new willingness to exploit national security issues for domestic political benefit, the United States may not prove ready for what is after all a test of basic national capaci-

ties. It is a test of America's ability to conceive a complex problem clearly, and to build consensus about it. It is a test of our ability to balance and pursue a comprehensive strategy, and to protect it from erosion around the edges. It is a test of our ability to stay focused for the long haul, and to do so without over-emphasizing the problem. It is a test of our ability to utilize the full gamut of our political and economic power, and to know when—and when not—to use our hard power. And it is a test of our leadership's ability to define a long-term antiproliferation role consistent with national expectations and capacities.

The Cold War shows that the United States has the capacity to pass such tests. US history also suggests that the most difficult test may be the last—finding a role consistent with national expectations and capacities. What kind of a power is the United States in its unipolar moment? People inside the beltway tend to be terribly impressed with America's status as “the world's only superpower.” This is repeated like a mantra in Washington, as a kind of self-reassurance that America is free to ignore the perturbations of an unstable world. Measured in military terms, that may well be true, although aggressors have been and will likely continue to be emboldened by the view that while our power is great, our will is weak. But are we a nation made strong primarily by splendid conventional weapons and nuclear supremacy? Do we see ourselves as a nation content with the status quo, whose power is used solely for national and not common purposes? Or are we still a nation whose strength derives from a particularly moral view of the world and of our role in it, and our willingness to lend political prestige to the achievement of some larger good?

The proliferation challenge is thus a test not just of the sophistication and diligence of US policy but the quality of America's vision and wisdom. In this sense, it is the quintessential post-Cold War challenge—one that raises fundamental questions about both the emerging world order and the American place in it. Without good answers to those questions, the antiproliferation effort is doomed to be a rearguard action, one that may enjoy future tactical victories but ultimately suffers strategic defeat, as the order that it is intended to serve is frittered away because we cannot figure out what the order is good for. Given the latent potential for wildfire-like proliferation, the eclipse of US power and the passing of the current order could be startlingly sudden. By

2010, we could live in a world as different from today's as today's is from the world of the Cold War. If Washington fails to reconcile the new politics of proliferation with its long-term interests and thus loses the fight against proliferation, it is likely to pay a large price—a price it has hardly begun to conceive, and much more than “just” blood and treasure.

### WHAT'S AT STAKE?

This brings us then to the question of what is at stake in the effort to combat proliferation. There are two standard answers to the question of what's at stake: human lives, and stability.

NBC weapons are weapons of mass destruction—all of them, though in different ways. The most deadly of these weapons systems can kill millions—and much more quickly than conventional weaponry (though it too is capable of killing millions). A regional war employing mass destruction as a matter of course could cause suffering and death unknown in human experience. Such a war would cast a harsh light on the argument now in vogue that landmines, small arms, even machetes in the hands of drunk young men are the real weapons of mass destruction. Strictly from the perspective of limiting the effects of war, then, the world community has an interest in preventing the emergence of an international system in which the possession and use of NBC weapons is accepted as normal and customary.

The stability argument relates to the unintended consequences associated with acquiring weapons of mass destruction. It focuses on the weapons-acquiring state and its neighbors and the risk of war that grows among them, including both preemptive and accidental wars. Although it is an old truism that proliferation is destabilizing, it is not always true—not where the acquisition of strategic leverage is essential to preservation of a balance of power that deters conflict and that is used to create the conditions of a more enduring peace. But those circumstances have proven remarkably rare. Instead, the risks associated with the competitive acquisition of strategic capabilities have typically been seen to outweigh the perceived benefits to states that have considered nuclear weapons acquisition. Argentina and Brazil, for example, like Sweden and Australia before them, have gotten out of the nuclear weapons business because

they see no reason to live at the nuclear brink even if living there is within their reach.

But the standard answers don't really take us very far into this problem any more. To grasp the full stake requires a broader notion of stability—and an appreciation of the particular historical moment in which we find ourselves. It is an accident of history that the diffusion of dual-use capabilities is coterminous with the end of the Cold War. That diffusion means that we are moving irreversibly into an international system in which the wildfire-like spread of weapons is a real possibility. The end of the Cold War has brought with it great volatility in the relations of major and minor powers in the international system.

What then is at stake? In response to some catalytic event, entire regions could rapidly cross the threshold from latent to extant weapons capability, and from covert to overt postures, a process that would be highly competitive and risky, and which likely would spill over wherever the divides among regions are not tidy. This would sorely test Ken Waltz's familiar old heresy that “more may be better”<sup>7</sup>—indeed, even Waltz assumed proliferation would be stabilizing only if it is gradual, and warned against the rapid spread of weapons to multiple states. At the very least, this would fuel NBC terrorism, as a general proliferation of NBC weaponry would likely erode the constraints that heretofore have inhibited states from sponsoring terrorist use of these capabilities. Given its global stature and media culture, America would be a likely target of some of these terrorist actions.

What kind of catalytic event might cause such wildfire-like proliferation? The possibilities are not numerous and thus we should not be too pessimistic, although history usually surprises. One catalyst could be a major civil war in a large country in which NBC weapons are used. Another catalyst might be a crisis in which NBC weapons are used to call into question the credibility of US security guarantees. Such a crisis would have far-reaching consequences, both within and beyond any particular region. If the threat of the use of such weapons is sufficient to dissuade the United States from reversing an act of aggression, or if their use is successful in defeating a US military operation, there would be hell to pay. How, for example, would Japan respond to a US decision not to seek to reverse NBC-backed aggression on the Korean peninsula? How might NATO partners respond to a collapse of US credibility in East Asia?

This stake isn't just America's stake. Any country whose security depends to some extent on a regional or global order guaranteed by Washington has a stake in preventing such wildfire-like proliferation. This is truest of America's closest security partners, but it is true of the many small and medium-sized states that depend, to some degree, on collective mechanisms for their security. It seems reasonable to expect that many of these states would respond to a loss of US credibility and to the fear of greater regional instability by moving up the latency curve. If they were also to cross the threshold to weapons production, the international system would have a hard time coping. It seems likely that such proliferation would cause the collapse of nonproliferation and arms control mechanisms. This, in turn, would precipitate a broader crisis of confidence in the other institutions of multilateral political and economic activity that depend on some modicum of global stability and cooperation to function.

The consequences could be very far-reaching. These international mechanisms and institutions have been a primary means of giving order to an anarchic international system. The United States, in particular, has found them useful for exercising influence and power. *What's at stake, then, is the international order built up over the last half century*—the multilateral institutions of economic and security governance, the patterns of cooperation among states, and the expectations of a more orderly future. This is an order that the United States played a central role in creating and sustaining. It is built largely on American-style liberal political and economic values. It is run by and through formal and informal institutions that operate according to rules Washington helped formulate. This is an order backed by US security guarantees in those regions where the threat of interstate war remains real and system-threatening—and more generally by collective security principles safeguarded at the United Nations by the United States, among others. Were it to unravel, the world would change fundamentally.

Would such a crisis actually play out in this way? A catalytic event might well have the opposite effect to the one described here: it could well galvanize the international community into strengthening the institutions of multilateral cooperation, assuming that the United States is willing and able to reenergize its commitment to their leadership. Let us hope so. Moreover, there may be no such catalytic event. Instead, and in the absence of

reinvigorated leadership of the antiproliferation effort, we may see something more subtle but no less destructive, and that is a growing number of states that move up the latency curve without also formally abandoning their treaty obligations, creating a dangerously misleading fiction in the form of an extant legal regime with little or no impact on the behavior of states.

But let us also set aside the complacent assumption that the current distribution of NBC assets is somehow fixed in perpetuity—or that a radical erosion of the current order would not have serious consequences. Among many US policymakers and analysts, there is still great resistance to the notion that the collapse of the antiproliferation project would have far-reaching implications. Most analysts seem to believe that international politics would then proceed much as they do today. Perhaps some partial collapse would have this effect—some further loss of credibility of one or two instruments of arms control, for example, might not actually precipitate the collapse of the treaty regime. But if wildfire-like proliferation somehow comes to pass, it seems likely that a lot would be up for grabs in international politics. Basic relations of power would be in great flux. New coalitions would form, with new forms of competition among those seeking to lead them. American influence abroad could be eclipsed—and quite rapidly. Americans might like to believe that, in such a world, they could retreat into a Fortress America. Whether others would allow us this luxury is very much an open question, especially if America's retreat occasions some particular pain on their part that motivates them to seek revenge. And even if the United States somehow remained secure, many long-time US friends and allies, and millions of civilians in conflict-prone regions, might not.

## CONCLUSIONS

This survey of the last decade suggests that we have learned a good deal about proliferation and the policies and strategies for combating it. The problem itself has grown much more complicated, especially if one begins to take seriously states' latent capabilities. The policy agenda has also grown more complex, as the need for comprehensive and integrated approaches has increased.

But we should also have learned that the political foundations essential for the long-term success of the antiproliferation effort are not deep, whether domesti-

cally or internationally. This is still a problem that cries out for leadership. As the United States enters the 2000 presidential electoral cycle, let us hope that a debate about the means and ends of policy will bring into better focus the essential ingredients of leadership for whom-ever the American people elect to the executive and legislative branches. If it doesn't work that way, the second post-Cold War decade could well see developments in the NBC proliferation domain that dramatically unsettle the world order we have known—developments that will lead many to question whether “the world's only superpower” is in fact an emperor with no clothes.

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Wohlstetter, “Nuclear Sharing: NATO and the N+1 Country,” *Foreign Affairs* 39 (April 1961). See also Brad Roberts, “Rethinking N+1,” *National Interest*, No. 51 (Spring 1998), pp. 75-80, from which some of the following argumentation is drawn.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the phenomenon of states moving away from nuclear weapons capabilities, see Leonard S. Spector, “Repentant Nuclear Proliferants,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 88 (Fall 1992), pp. 3-20, and Mitchell Reiss, *Bridled Ambition: Why Countries Constrain Their Nuclear Capabilities* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Moodie, “Beyond Proliferation: The Challenge of Technology Diffusion,” *Washington Quarterly* 18 (Spring 1995), pp. 183-202.

<sup>4</sup> See also Brad Roberts, “Export Controls and Biological Weapons: New Roles, New Challenges,” *Critical Reviews in Microbiology* 24 (1998), pp. 235-254.

<sup>5</sup> Brad Roberts, “From Nonproliferation to Antiproliferation,” *International Security* 18 (Summer 1993), pp. 139-173.

<sup>6</sup> *American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy 1999*, Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, Spring 1999. See also John E. Reilly, “Americans and the World: A Survey at Century's End,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 114 (Spring 1999), p. 99.

<sup>7</sup> Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1995).