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Proliferated Nonsense

by Ted Galen Carpenter

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It's been a really bad springtime for arms-control activists who want to see a nuclear-free world. First, when the UN Security Council criticized North Korea's test of a long-range ballistic missile in early April, Pyongyang used that response—toothless though it was—as a pretext to withdraw from the six-party talks on its nuclear program. Later that month, Iran announced a breakthrough in its uranium-enrichment efforts, boasting that it was now running seven thousand centrifuges. And just this week, credible media reports indicate that Pakistan is rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal.

Yet while the trend is unmistakably in the direction of more, not fewer, nuclear powers, the arms-control community is devoting ever more time and resources to the goal of “global zero”—the abolition of nuclear weapons. That obsession is a fascinating and maddening detachment from reality.

It is not even clear that abolishing nuclear weapons would produce an unambiguously beneficial result. Perhaps it is only a coincidence, but the six and a half decades since the dawn of the atomic age constitute the first extended period since the emergence of the modern state system in the seventeenth century that no major wars have occurred between great powers. Many historians conclude that the principal reason the cold war did not turn hot was because both Moscow and Washington feared that a conventional conflict could easily spiral out of control into a nuclear conflagration. It is at least a worrisome possibility that the elimination of nuclear weapons could inadvertently make the world safe for new great-power wars. And given the destructive capacity of twenty-first-century conventional weapons, such wars would be even more horrific than the two bloodbaths in the twentieth.

But even if global zero did not produce such a perverse outcome, the goal is simply unattainable. It is improbable enough that the United States, Russia, Britain, France and China would be willing to relinquish their arsenals. It is a much bigger stretch to believe that such countries as Israel, India and Pakistan would do so. And it is bordering on fantasy to expect such wannabe nuclear powers as North Korea and Iran to abandon their aspirations.

All of those countries embarked on nuclear programs because of acute regional and extra-regional security concerns. Israel worries about the huge demographic edge enjoyed by its Islamic neighbors, and the prospect that the Jewish state's edge in conventional military capabilities will gradually erode. Pakistan worries about the growing economic and military power of its larger neighbor, India. New Delhi, for its part, not only distrusts Pakistan, but frets about China's geostrategic ambitions. All of those countries regard their nuclear arsenals as their ace in the hole, guaranteeing not only their regional status, but in some cases their very existence. They are highly unlikely to relinquish such a tangible insurance policy in exchange for paper security promises from the United Nations or any other source.

The incentives are at least as strong for Iran and North Korea to join the ranks of nuclear-weapons powers. As a Shiite country, Iran is surrounded by hostile Sunni neighbors—as well as its arch-nemesis, Israel. Tehran also has reason to fear the United States. Iranian leaders see how Washington has treated nonnuclear adversaries since the end of the cold war. If the U.S. mugging of Serbia didn't convey the message sufficiently, Iran had a ringside seat to the ouster of Saddam

Hussein's regime. It was not a manifestation of paranoia for the Iranian leadership to conclude that the only way to prevent Iran becoming the next item on Washington's regime-change agenda was to develop a nuclear deterrent. North Korea appears to have reached a similar conclusion.

Of course, other factors—including national pride and prestige—have played relevant roles in the decision of various countries to become, or seek to become, nuclear powers. But the security concerns appeared to be paramount.

Unfortunately, the emergence of even one nuclear-weapons state in a region creates a greater likelihood that others will follow suit. India's nuclear program made it inevitable that Pakistan would go down the same path. Israel's arsenal likely figured in Tehran's calculations. If Iran continues its nuclear ambitions, it is highly probable that Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other countries in that region will decide on a similar course. North Korea's de facto nuclear status creates pressures on Japan, South Korea and Taiwan to abandon their own commitment to remain nonnuclear. The promise of the U.S. nuclear shield may restrain those ambitions for a time, but it requires considerable optimism to believe that it will do so over the long term.

Instead of pursuing the chimera of global zero, the arms control community needs to focus on attainable goals in a world in which proliferation is becoming an unpleasant reality. Getting the United States and Russia to drastically cut their bloated nuclear arsenals is one such goal. So, too, is an effort to induce India and Pakistan to adopt more explicitly defensive nuclear doctrines, and in the case of Pakistan, to improve the security of its arsenal. It may be possible—although it is more of a long shot—to persuade Iran to refrain from weaponizing its nuclear program, thereby reducing the incentive of its worried neighbors to build their own deterrents. An effort to reduce Pyongyang's temptation to become the global supermarket for the sale of nuclear technology has at least some prospect of success.

Even those more limited and practical goals will require patient, creative diplomacy by the United States and other countries. We are entering a more dangerous era, and there is no policy panacea.

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